

In the Cold of the Night

A Fan Fiction Story

Written by Blackn'blue

Based on the television series Star Trek: Enterprise

Rating: PG-13

(Violence, Adult Language, Rampant Sexism, Politically Incorrect Social Commentary, Uncouth Fashion Sense)

Disclaimer: Whoever owns the Star Trek franchise these days owns these characters. I can't keep up with all the corporate buyouts lately. Except the characters I invent of course. I guess you could say I own the story itself. But then, there are those who claim that only a few basic plot lines exist and they all get told and re-told anyway. Feel free to redistribute this document at will as long as it is given away for free and kept intact. Just don't sell it. If I am not allowed to make money on it, neither is anyone else.

This story was originally posted to the Trip/T'Poler's section of the House of Tucker (HoT) website in three parts on October 1, 5 and 12, 2006. It can still be found on that site as of the time of this PDF document preparation, in case someone prefers HTML format. Copies of the feedback comments I received from the online story are included herein as the Appendix.

This story is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living, dead, or yet unborn is simply your own paranoia bothering you so don't bug me about it.

Note: Vulcan words used in this story were either stolen wholesale from the Vulcan Language Dictionary at <http://www.starbase-10.de/vld/>, or I made them up myself.

Description: This is a sequel of sorts to my previous story, [For Want of A Nail](#). The time period is several weeks later. Things are proceeding just as Daniels predicted, but there were some details he neglected to mention.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	21
Chapter 3: Conclusion	40
Epilogue	67
Appendix.....	69
Part 1 Commentary	69
Part 2 Commentary	74
Part 3 Commentary	82

Chapter 1

The extremely well-dressed man pressed his thumb against the identification plate, then fastidiously wiped it off with his handkerchief. The desk sergeant on duty pressed a key and told the intercom, "Bring out the prisoner." She looked up and added, "It will be several minutes, Mr. Hanson. If you would care to have a seat?"

Hanson glanced over at the less than inviting chairs that lined the wall of the public waiting area and shook his head. "I will stand, thank you," he told her frostily. The room was certainly not dirty, but there was something about any detention facility that always managed to convey an impression of dinginess, no matter how thoroughly it was scrubbed.

"Suit yourself." The desk sergeant shrugged and went back to her reports, leaving Hanson to brood. He raked surreptitious glances over the young policewoman. Not half bad, really. Could stand taking down a peg or two of course. All cops needed an attitude adjustment, and female cops were especially enjoyable. Briefly Hanson contemplated options that would be most effective for breaking the resistance of this one. Then he forcibly pushed everything else out of his mind. Business before pleasure.

Cantrell was waiting for delivery and he was never a patient man. Since Paxton's death Cantrell had quietly taken control of the organization, and he operated Terra Prime with a silent ruthlessness that made Paxton's former demagoguery seem almost childish by comparison. Getting distracted by a tempting piece of fresh meat could get lethal real fast. Hanson turned his back on the desk sergeant and walked over to read the notices posted on the far wall.

Hanson had time to read the wanted listings, and amuse himself recognizing the names of several members of Terra Prime in the process, before the inner door opened. He turned with casual arrogance to meet his client. The idiot didn't look any better than he had the last time Hanson saw him. The young man's eyes lit up when he saw his attorney though, and he let the guard lead him over to the front counter with a smile. The formalities of releasing him to Hanson's custody were concluded quickly.

Hanson forestalled the inevitable rush of chatter with a quick finger across his lips. They walked out of the detention facility in silence, and remained silent until the doors were closed and locked on Hanson's personal air car. Then the young man spoke, "Thanks. I don't know how much longer I could have stood it in there."

Hanson quirked his lips in faint contempt. "Didn't the boys look out for you like I said they would?"

Massaro nodded jerkily. "Yeah." He stopped for a moment and shuddered. Then he jerked his shoulders. "Yeah they did. I really appreciated it too. You and Mr. Cantrell have really stood by me through this, and I won't forget it."

Hanson thought ironically, "*Sure kid. You're as loyal as a dog aren't you?*" He laughed silently to himself. "*A real son of a bitch. Literally.*"

Instead of speaking his thoughts Hanson started the air car and moved into the traffic pattern. Massaro settled back against the cushions and asked him, "Where are we going?"

“Well Mr. Massaro,” Hanson answered him. “Since you happen to be effectively homeless at the moment Mr. Cantrell is offering you accommodations at his country estate.”

Massaro’s eyes widened and he turned in his seat to stare at Hanson with excitement. “You’re kidding!” Hanson allowed himself to chuckle at the fool’s openly naive sense of wonder.

“Now why would I be kidding?” Hanson asked reproachfully. “You know that we take care of our own. You have been a faithful soldier for us, and we are not going to abandon you now.” Massaro settled back in relief.

Hanson triggered the autopilot and input the destination code. The onboard computer in his air car contacted traffic control at the Tierra del Feugo central routing command and received clearance. In a moment the craft tilted back and rose sharply upward, accelerating rapidly. Hanson’s air car was top of the line, as befit someone in his position as top legal counsel for one of the richest interplanetary conglomerates in Human space. Within fifteen minutes they had achieved sub-orbital velocity and were skimming the spine of the Andes, heading north.

-&-

“*Ambassador Soval,*” the intercom announced, “*Commander Tucker has arrived.*” Soval acknowledged the information and stood up from his desk. His new makeshift office was a far cry from the amenities available in the original Vulcan compound. But, considering that the original Vulcan compound was presently a bombed out pile of pulverized debris that Human workmen were in the process of bulldozing away, Soval wasn’t in the mood to be picky. No one had died in the blast, a fact that could be laid in large part at the feet of the man he was going to meet.

The Egyptian sun beat down on his head with what most Humans would have considered merciless force when he stepped outside. To a Vulcan like Soval it was pleasantly warm and bright. Most of the refugees were settling into their new quarters in the Cairo compound without any major difficulties. A few of the children were experiencing relocation distress. But counseling was ongoing and all of them were anticipated to make acceptable adjustments eventually.

The Cairo compound had been prepared for precisely this eventuality, as a backup location in case of emergency. During the century since First Contact it had never been needed - until now. In the interim it had served as a meditation retreat for Vulcan personnel and as a rehabilitation area for staff members who were ill, but not ill enough to require repatriation to the home world. The climate of Egypt was remarkably salubrious to Vulcan physiology. Soval found himself walking more briskly than he had in years.

Trip Tucker strolled around the edge of the compound, taking his good old easy time and staying well beneath the shade of the perimeter awning. He wore a broad brimmed straw hat shaped like a sombrero and loose, flowing Vulcan robes. He also wore a liberal coating of sweat and a look of haggard distress. “Dang. I thought Florida was hot,” he told Soval as they met. “I guess I got fooled.” Trip tried unsuccessfully one more time to make the split fingered gesture of greeting and gave up in disgust. “Sorry.”

“Do not concern yourself, Commander,” Soval told him kindly. “Many Humans are having difficulty with it. It was gracious of you to make the attempt. Please. Let us go inside and have something cool to drink.”

“You’re a good man Soval,” Trip gasped gratefully. He followed his host into the visitor’s reception area and almost collapsed with relief at feeling the air conditioning. After being outside, the mere 30 degrees Centigrade of the visitor’s center felt arctic. “I can’t believe it’s September,” Trip muttered. “What’s it like around here in July?”

“I find it quite delightful,” Soval said as he led them to a table. “At my age it is restful to enjoy the soothing warmth.”

Trip made an unidentifiable sound and sat down shaking his head. “You know Soval, I realize Vulcan is even hotter than this. But when I was there somehow it didn’t feel this hot to me. Maybe I just wasn’t paying attention at the time.”

Soval seated himself and requested that the waiter bring them a pitcher of ice water. Then he responded with, “Vulcan’s atmosphere is both thinner and much dryer than yours, even here. This allows your perspiration to evaporate more efficiently and radiates your body heat quickly.”

Trip looked intrigued. “Should have thought of that. I really was distracted though.” The water arrived and he joyfully poured a glass, downing it in a single extended swallow. He came up for air and wheezed, “Thank you. You just saved my life.”

“Hardly,” Soval raised an eyebrow. “But feel free to empty the pitcher. We also have tea, juice, coffee, or anything else if you prefer.” Trip shook his head while in the middle of another glassful. He finished again and worked out, “No thanks. Water is good. Some salt would be nice though.” Soval pushed the salt shaker across the table and Trip shook a liberal dose into his glass before refilling it yet again. “Ironic, isn’t it?” He told Soval. “I always hated deserts. Desert survival training was the closest I ever came to dropping out of Starfleet. I have never come closer to getting killed in my life than the times that I have been on desert planets. I grew up next to a blasted swamp for Cochrane’s sake! And what do I end up doing except marrying a Vulcan? Life is funny sometimes.”

“Seldom do things turn out the way we might have predicted them in our early youth,” Soval agreed. “I do have one piece of agreeable news that might mitigate your distress at the heat. I received word last night that T’Pol’s request before the High Council has been approved. Elizabeth has been granted Vulcan citizenship.”

Trip’s face split into a huge Human grin that lit up the room as brightly as the sun outside. “Yesssss!” He struck the table with his fist in triumph. Several Vulcan staff members turned to look at the sound. Recognizing Commander Tucker from their sojourn aboard Enterprise while waiting to be transferred to the new compound, they merely raised assorted eyebrows and went back to business. Nothing that this particular Human might decide to do would have surprised them in the least.

“That is one big weight off my mind,” Trip declared. “I’ll bet T’Pol heaved a sigh of relief too.”

“Forgive me if I decline to speculate on that,” Soval asked primly. “In any case you will be able to ask her yourself in a few days. The Shi’Ka’Ree is due to arrive tonight at 11:23 hours Greenwich mean time. They will dispatch a shuttle that is scheduled to arrive here at precisely 1:50 hours. Can you be ready to board then?”

“Yep,” Trip said confidently. “Most of my stuff is already there anyway. T’Pol took it with her and Elizabeth when they left. All I have with me is some clothes and toiletries. If I had to I could leave without them.”

“You are certain that the ‘cover story’ is still intact?” Soval leaned forward and asked quietly.

Trip nodded grimly. “Everyone except our families, Enterprise’s senior officers, you and your staff, Starfleet Command, and the Vulcan High Council thinks Elizabeth is dead. As far as the rest of the galaxy is concerned, T’Pol has gone home to Vulcan to grieve and I am going to be with her.”

Soval looked satisfied. “It is deeply regrettable that your daughter cannot claim her heritage openly. But I agree that this is far safer for the present.”

Trip’s face darkened. “With those...” He stopped himself. “I’m sorry. T’Pol keeps telling me that cursing is offensive to Vulcans as a sign of emotional immaturity. I suppose I am just a kid at heart, because sometimes the temptation is overwhelming.” He took a deep breath. “But I am trying. If I am going to be living on Vulcan, even part time, I refuse to shame my wife and daughter by acting badly. I have got to purge the habits that will make things harder for Elizabeth. It will be rough enough for her as it is.”

Soval inclined his head in respect. “The path to enlightened self-discipline is never an easy one Commander. But I have always found it to be worth the trip. Shall I show you to your quarters? You have several hours to rest before the shuttle arrives.”

Trip’s suitcase was waiting for him in the room when they arrived. He willingly acceded to Soval’s suggestion and, after a long cool shower, dropped onto the bunk for a ten hour nap. A staff member woke him up with a buzz on the intercom at midnight, in plenty of time to get ready and grab a bite of late supper before his ride got there.

When the shuttle arrived Soval walked out to speak to the pilot personally before summoning Trip. The sub-centurion on duty, not expecting such an exalted visitor, snapped to his feet smartly when the ambassador came aboard. Soval calmly waved him back into his seat and asked for a direct link to his captain.

When the screen cleared Soval offered greeting, “Peace and long life, Captain Tovan.” The deeply lined face of the grizzled old veteran displayed not the slightest indication of being impressed by Soval’s rank or person.

“Live long and prosper, Ambassador Soval,” Captain Tovan responded. “How may I serve?” “I merely wished to clarify the status of your passenger, Commander Tucker,” Soval told him. “In order to avoid misconceptions.”

Tovan looked impatient. “What misconceptions could there be? We will transport him to Vulcan as ordered. Quarters have been prepared with environmental controls adjusted to Earth tolerances. His meals will be served to him three times daily as specified in the standards and otherwise he will not be bothered.”

Soval let a tiny hiss of air escape between his teeth. Not even the fussiest Vulcan could have called it a sigh. "I perceive that my concern was appropriate. Commander Tucker is not simply a Human passenger Captain Tovan. Not only is he the husband of a Vulcan citizen," Tovan's eyebrows leapt upward and tried to crawl underneath his hairline at this information, "but the Vulcan people owe him a debt of honor. For several reasons," he added.

"I see." Tovan sat and looked at Soval for a while. "May I enquire as to what these reasons are?" Soval considered. If he didn't tell Tovan it was likely that Commander Tucker would. In which case the potential for misunderstanding and friction might be even greater. "If memory serves Captain Tovan, the Shi'Ka'Ree was present during the recent confrontation at the edge of Andorian space, which was arranged by former Minister V'Las as part of his effort to foment war?"

Tovan's face could not be said to betray emotion, but the muscles in his cheeks tightened almost imperceptibly. "That is correct."

"In that case I am sure you recall the part played by the Human starship Enterprise during that confrontation? I was aboard Enterprise at the time," Soval reminded him. Captain Tovan nodded guardedly. Soval firmed his jaw. "Commander Tucker was in command of Enterprise during that confrontation. Without his assistance I could not have prevented V'Las' plans from coming to fruition."

The sub-centurion that was sitting next to Soval maintained a rigid posture and kept staring straight ahead, but unlike his captain the young man's control was far from perfect. A muscle in his jaw was jumping spastically.

"Also," Soval added quickly, since it seemed that Tovan was about to speak, "During the recent bombing incident at the compound here on Earth, it was Commander Tucker who operated the transporter to remove our personnel before the explosive detonated. With his own hands he personally saved the majority of the people in the compound." Soval stopped and waited. Whatever Tovan had been about to say was deflated by this latest bit of news. "Understood. He will be treated with every courtesy as an honored guest Ambassador."

Soval inclined his head. "That is most agreeable. Particularly since his wife is T'Pol, daughter of T'Les and one of the discoverers of the Kirshara. Her mother was a close personal friend of Minister T'Pau." He turned and left, confident that Trip would not encounter any unsurmountable difficulties during his journey.

-&-

T'Pol turned to pick up her whining child. Holding Elizabeth close to her breast she shushed her quietly, and applied the gentle rocking motion that seemed to offer so much comfort to the half-Human baby. Her kinswoman, T'Leera, continued unpacking and placing items on the shelves.

"What is this, krei (cousin)?" T'Leera asked, holding out a small metal object. The item had bone plates affixed to the sides and some type of Human writing stamped on one end.

"An heirloom," T'Pol informed her. "It is a folding knife that once belonged to my adun's forefather. There is a story that accompanies it. Trip plans to pass it on to Elizabeth when she reaches maturity." T'Leera nodded and placed the small knife reverently in a place of honor on an upper shelf.

The clan's mountain retreat was small, but quite large enough for a family of three with room left over. T'Pol's extended family had grown and spread out over the planet during the course of centuries, with the family holdings being divided, then subdivided, then recombined with other holdings many times. However one tradition had always endured throughout Vulcan history.

Every fifth generation a family came together and negotiated. All of their properties were arranged so that each succeeding generation would always have access to a place of solitude. The last time this had happened was during T'Pol's grandmother's generation. As a result the family still maintained a commonly owned house in the Sa'Lor'Khal mountains that was open for the use of any family member who needed it. After being informed of T'Pol's circumstances, her clan had given unanimous consent for her and her child to stay there as long as they saw fit.

T'Pol noted Elizabeth working her tongue over her lips and felt a discomfort through the maternal bond. Since the baby had just finished a bottle of milk less than an hour before, she concluded that her daughter was thirsty again. T'Leera glanced over as T'Pol prepared a bottle of water.

"Does she require as much water as a Human child?" T'Leera asked in concerned interest.

"No," T'Pol informed her, picking up Elizabeth and offering her the nipple, which was greedily accepted. "Not even close to as much as a Human. But she does require approximately three times as much fluid as a Vulcan baby. That is in addition to her milk."

"Fortunately the well here is deep and plentiful," T'Leera pointed out. "With the baby and a Human adun, you will need a great deal of water."

"I am somewhat concerned about food requirements," T'Pol admitted, walking over to help rummage among the boxes with one hand while continuing to hold the nursing Elizabeth with the other. "At her last examination Dr. Phlox told me that her development was ahead of schedule for Vulcan babies, but behind schedule for Humans. Which seems reasonable since Humans mature approximately twice as fast as we do. However..." T'Pol trailed off with her brow crinkled as she pulled out a few items and laid them on the bed.

"What is it krei?" T'Leera asked.

T'Pol let herself sigh. "There is no logic in worrying about it of course. There is nothing to be done. If she needs it, she needs it. But Dr. Phlox told me that Human babies absolutely require animal protein for proper development of the central nervous system. Without the amino acids present in animal protein, a Human child can grow up brain damaged or even crippled."

T'Leera looked aghast. "That is absolutely unacceptable. I take it that you are concerned Elizabeth may share this requirement?" T'Pol nodded.

"It is too soon to tell for certain. We will probably be able to determine the answer for certain at her next examination."

T'Leera put on a stubborn face. "As you said, if she needs it she needs it. Surak has instructed us not to take life without cause and when it can be avoided. He did not instruct us to place the life of an animal above the life of a child. Is it not acceptable to kill in self-defense, to save one's own life? Is it not

acceptable to kill in defense of one's child? To protect one's child against attack? Then I do not see how it would not be acceptable to kill in order to save one's child from permanent neurological damage."

T'Pol told her, "Fortunately there are many Earth creatures, especially aquatic animals, that are all but mindless which could supply the appropriate amino acids if it proves necessary." She looked sadly down and added softly, "It will be difficult for her to integrate into our society with her mixed heritage as it is. Such a special dietary requirement will only increase the challenge."

"In the family, all is silence," T'Leera quoted. "It will not be an issue until such time as it becomes safe to reveal her identity, which may not be for several years. By that time perhaps she will have outgrown the need. In any case it is illogical to anticipate problems that have not yet materialized."

"You are correct of course," T'Pol agreed emphatically. "I must concentrate on preparing for Trip's arrival and for Elizabeth's Inclusion ceremony." They returned to unpacking.

-&-

Josiah Cantrell rotated his shot glass back and forth between his fingers thoughtfully. The rich amber of fine bourbon soaked up the golden autumn sunlight which poured like syrup over the rolling hills of his horse farm.

The man who, by those that truly knew him, was acknowledged to be one of the most dangerous Humans alive leaned back indolently in the rough hewn chair on his front porch. His feet were propped on the white wooden railing that bordered the porch, which in turn circled the entirety of the 273 year old house. Cantrell was a traditionalist in many more ways than one. He saw no need to abandon anything that had proven itself by standing the test of time.

Which was why he saw no reason to abandon the tried and true methods for enforcing strict obedience among his followers. Fear of pain, mutilation and death had proven themselves across the centuries to have enormous power over men. Cantrell used what worked. He took no pleasure from it. No more than castrating a stallion or drowning a sack of unwanted pups. It was just a necessary task to be performed in order to achieve a desired result.

He mused on the current state of affairs. Internal control of Terra Prime was stabilizing nicely. No one had dared to challenge him since Carter disappeared. With the last of Paxton's main lieutenants out of the way, the rank and file seemed almost eager to follow him. Cantrell did not think of them as sheep looking for a shepherd. More like wild dogs, ready to follow the one who had proven himself by putting the old leader on his back.

He took another delicate sip of the aged whiskey and rolled it across his tongue, savoring the full experience. In all things Cantrell strove to extract the maximum degree of sensation. Whether he was eating, drinking, making love, killing a man, riding a fine horse, conversing at a formal dinner party, or simply strolling through the forest, Josiah Cantrell was an Epicurean.

His latest woman, Susan, stepped outside and walked quietly over to lean against the porch post next to him. Josiah glanced up at her with a warm smile. This one pleased him well. She was good to look at, a tasty snack in the bedroom, and she didn't irritate him with foolish questions or constant demands for

more attention. He might keep this one for a while. Unless she let herself get knocked up of course. Like that other one... he thought her name was Lora... had been stupid enough to do. What a waste.

Of course he did not allow any of this to cross his face. Instead Josiah stood up and placed his shot glass on the railing. Reaching for Susan he gently ran the back of his hand over her cheek and smiled in honest pleasure. "You look as beautiful as always this morning darling. I told Jacob to start getting breakfast ready as soon as you got up, so it should be any time now."

Susan Wheeling shivered at his touch. This man was an enigmatic package of contradictions that intrigued, frightened and fascinated her all at once. Originally the lure of his good looks and power drew her into his arms and his bed. Once she was there, Susan realized that something else was holding her. Deep inside this man was a raw, primal force that ignited a passion unlike anything she had ever felt before. It terrified her, because somewhere in the darkest corner of her soul a voice was crying out to her with a warning of danger. But for now, the excitement of his touch, and the intriguing mystery that wrapped itself around his life, were too much for her to resist.

"A message just came in," Susan told him, forcing herself to hold steady against a sudden surge of desire, "from Hanson. He said that he picked up the package you wanted and he will deliver it to you as soon as he can get here."

Cantrell's lips quirked in amusement and he chuckled. "Hanson has been watching too many old spy movies dearest. We will be having a guest for a day or so, that's all. He will be staying at the visitor's cottage out back. Jacob will take care of him, don't bother yourself about it." He grinned. "Hanson loves to grab any chance he can get to play games."

Susan returned his smile mischievously. "'I wonder what he would say about your favorite game Josiah?'"

Cantrell threw back his head and laughed. "I am not about to let him get the chance to find out Susan. Come on, let's go in and get some breakfast." He gallantly slipped her arm through his and escorted her inside.

As they walked through the house, across the ancient oak floor toward the breakfast room, Josiah thought with wry humor, "*No Susan, I doubt that Hanson would find last night's game very interesting. Not nearly enough screaming for his taste.*"

He pulled back her chair and seated Susan with one of his habitual old fashioned gestures that she found so charming. They started pleasantly chatting about nothing in particular as Jacob brought in the scrambled eggs and flapjacks.

-&-

Trip stood up carefully and told the sub-centurion in barely comprehensible Vulcan, "Live long and prosper, Saunk. Again I express regret that I am unable to offer the proper gesture."

His studies in reading and speaking Vulcan had been greatly helped by spending his time aboard Captain Tovan's ship talking to the crew. At first Trip was absolutely amazed at the ease with which he got permission to hang out in the mess hall and chat. He was even more astonished at how many people

were willing to actually talk to him. Until he caught a few dropped hints and figured out that Soval had put in a good word or three. Oh well. Never look a gift Vulcan in the ear, Trip decided.

The shuttle pilot turned in his seat and inclined his head before raising his hand with divided fingers. "Peace and long life to you and yours Commander Tucker. It has been an honor to travel with you." Trip picked up his case and walked out without any further words between them.

The Vulcan sunlight drove into the top of his head like a spike. Trip immediately donned his straw hat, which diffused the effect from a driving spike into a hammering board. He fumbled into his sunglasses and blinked away the tears until he could see again. Taking his cue from a large sign that read 'Entrance' in seventeen different languages, two of which he could read, Trip started off.

The Vulcan clerks working behind the reception desk at the spaceport were accustomed to greeting every type of being in known space. Vulcans had been traveling the stars for centuries before most civilizations dared to even dream of flight. It took quite a bit to rattle a Vulcan. Blustering Klingons were met with calm equanimity. Bellicose Andorians found themselves facing unshakable politeness. Irascible Tellurites never got the chance to spout off an insult before they were briskly processed and sent on their merry way. Rigellians, Denobulans, Aldebarans, Tarkelians, it didn't matter. Vulcans had seen them all.

And for the past hundred years, Humans had been coming and going with gradually increasing frequency. Exasperating, yes. But nothing unusual about them. Merely childish and uncontrolled. All that was required when dealing with Humans was patience and a firm hand.

The clerk at the fifteenth terminal looked up and blinked. Then she looked again at the vision before her as if doubting the evidence of her eyes. From his scent the creature before her could only be a Human male, although for the moment that was all she had to base the conclusion on.

The new arrival was wearing badly rumped Vulcan robes, hitched up at the waist and tied in a crude knot that left his hairy ankles exposed. A pair of sandal clad feet protruded from beneath the front edge of the robes, but not far enough to leave the shade of the largest hat that the Vulcan woman had ever seen in her 162 years. The enormous lid spread out like a portable roof, encroaching on the personal space of people waiting for service at the terminals on either side of him. Beneath the hat, seeming to peek out from beneath it like a k'bet from beneath a rock, was a pair of impenetrable sun glasses mounted on a bright pink pair of cheeks.

Grappling frantically with her control, the clerk managed to emit a slightly higher than normal, "How may I be of service?"

The vision reached up and pulled off the glasses, letting them dangle on his chest by their neck strap. Then he removed the sombrero, to the visible relief of everyone surrounding him. Trip produced his identification and authorization and offered them with a smile and a polite, "Na'shaya. U' rom gakh vu saudau." ("Greetings. As good wart you appear.")

The woman inclined her head without changing expression and input the data provided, hanging onto a lifetime of discipline by her teeth and fingernails. She recognized the name and her eyes widened fractionally. The clerk reached over and switched on the universal translator. "Welcome to Vulcan, Commander. I also offer my personal welcome and my family's gratitude. My sister's husband's uncle's father-in-law was in the San Francisco compound during the recent bombing."

Trip's already pink face became beet red. He looked down and mumbled, "I was just doin' my duty, ma'am. I'm here to serve ya know."

She didn't smile, but he would have sworn that her eyes twinkled. "As are we all, Commander." She finished with his documents and slid them back to him. "Is there any other way I can be of assistance?"

"I, uh, I could use directions to someplace where I can arrange transportation," Trip told her. The clerk briskly directed him to a cab stand and called ahead to reserve a place for him. He thanked her profusely and headed out at the perkier shuffle he could muster, given the heat and gravity. The cab driver turned out to be a distant cousin of the reception clerk. Briefly Trip wondered if nepotism was a way of life in every Vulcan industry. He explained where he wanted to go as best he could manage. After a bit of initial confusion, due to the fact that Trip first asked to travel to a city on another continent, which had been destroyed in a war 2,000 years ago, they got things straightened out. He collapsed in relief and concentrated on breathing.

The home of T'Pol's third cousin twice removed was located at the outskirts of Shi'Kahr. When the cab driver off loaded his sweating cargo, refusing payment of any kind with unyielding determination, Trip decided that a damp cave would be acceptable if it only had running water. T'Leera's husband, Ganlas, greeted Trip as a welcome member of the family. He showed his guest to a spare room with a shower and suggested that Trip rest until nightfall, when they would proceed to the mountain retreat. On the verge of dropping from heat exhaustion, Trip could only nod.

-&-

Hanson made some adjustments to the controls and the air car swerved eastward. Massaro roused up and asked, "What's happening?"

"There's something you should see," Hanson told him. Massaro looked quizzically at him but said nothing more. In a few minutes they started crossing Brazil, passing over rich farmland interspersed with wide tracts of rain forest preserve.

When they reached the southern shore of the Caribbean, Hanson said grimly, "Pay close attention now. I know you have seen this from orbit. But it is important that you see it from down here, like the rest of us."

The southern coast of Cuba came into view and with it, the scar from the Xindi weapon. What was once a single landmass had been sliced as if by a war god's cleaver. The gigantic canyon bit deeply into the earth, well below sea level. Water had poured in from both ends to sweep mud, bodies, houses, trees, and memories before it in twin walls a hundred feet high. The walls had slammed together near the midpoint of the gash and erupted upward like an obscene volcano, spewing foul death and pitiful destruction in every direction from the center of the blowout.

By the time Hanson and Massaro made their flight over the area, the Cuban attack point had stabilized into a permanent lake of black corruption. An oil slick glistened iridescently at random intervals along the entire length of the inlet. On both sides of the planet's battle wound, a reeking swamp had formed wherein nothing lived. A thousand different poisons from household chemicals, to industrial cleaners, to vehicle fuels, to building materials, to pesticides, were saturating the water and land in this place. It would take decades of sickening work before anything green could dare try to grow here again.

“They are still finding bodies,” Hanson said abruptly, distracting Massaro from his nauseated fascination with the scene below. “Or parts of bodies I mean. Don’t even bother to collect them anymore. Not unless it’s something like a skull, or a complete limb, or a torso. Otherwise they just incinerate it on the spot and go on.”

Massaro was green. Hanson said sharply, “Lean back and close your eyes! Breath through your nose!” He thought viciously to himself, “*You puke all over my car boy, and I’ll deliver you to Cantrell in a sack.*”

Massaro closed his eyes and shook his head. “I will be all right. It’s just more intense than I expected. We saw video footage on Enterprise. But this...” He trailed off and looked out the window at the open water to regain his composure.

Hanson told him in a somber voice. “That’s exactly why you needed to see it son.” The lawyer put a fatherly hand on Massaro’s shoulder. “Those Starfleet bastards are up there flying around like gods on Mt. Olympus, looking down on us poor mortals. But down here, down here on EARTH, it’s a different story isn’t it? Down here those nice friendly aliens don’t look so nice and friendly do they?”

Massaro’s gaze was dragged back down toward the hellish cauldron below. “No,” he admitted.

“That’s what we have to prevent son,” Hanson pitched his voice to convey sympathetic understanding. “That’s what we stand for. That’s why Terra Prime exists. To make sure that something like this can never happen again. All of us together, working to keep our world safe.”

Massaro clenched his jaw and sat straighter. He faced forward and nodded sharply, gripping the arm rests of his seat and bracing himself as if preparing for a fight. Hanson smiled and started the air car in motion again, headed for Cantrell’s estate.

“*There’s one born every minute,*” Hanson mused in satisfaction as they flew north.

-&-

Trip woke up shivering. The open window allowed the cooling desert breeze to flow unhindered. After his shower Trip had sprawled across the bed naked and passed out almost instantly. Now his backside was covered in goose bumps. The thin, dry Vulcan atmosphere did not retain the day’s heat well at all. The stone used in Vulcan house construction was carefully chosen to maximize warmth retention. But that didn’t help much when someone left the window open the way Trip had.

He jumped to his feet and hurriedly closed the glass with shaking fingers. After dancing a minute and rubbing both arms briskly to stimulate circulation Trip dashed for his suitcase to get some clean clothes. Forget the dang robes. He started digging for the cotton underwear and silk lined coveralls.

Once he was decently covered and everything was wadded back into his suitcase, Trip poked his head out of the room looking for his host. Ganlas invited him to partake of some tea and bread, explaining that it would take half the night to reach the house where T’Pol and Elizabeth were staying. Trip settled down and started sipping and munching, trying with indifferent success to manipulate the Vulcan bread tongs.

“I have new sympathy for what T’Pol went through aboard Enterprise,” Trip told Ganlas, “when we first introduced her to chopsticks.”

“I recognize that it is customary among Humans to use fingers when eating bread, Trip,” Ganlas mentioned. “I will not be offended if you choose to follow your own customs when among family.”

Trip smiled but shook his head. “Thanks, but no. I need to learn this. I promised myself that I am going to learn everything I need to know in order to be able to function in Vulcan society without embarrassing T’Pol or Elizabeth. Even if I have to starve for awhile to do it.” He made another valiant attempt at moving a piece of bread to his mouth and ended up dropping it in his tea instead.

The hovercraft had an enclosed cabin, to Trip’s relief. He watched with deep interest as Ganlas manipulated the controls. “Looks pretty standard. Mind if I try?” Ganlas pulled his hands back and gestured for Trip to take over.

The Human grinned in delight as he got the feel of the craft. The Vulcan machine was delightfully maneuverable. clenched his teeth as Trip sent the craft through steep dives and climbs, sharp turns and hairpin spins. Finally the Vulcan diplomatically Ganlas suggested that perhaps it might be best if he took the controls back for a time, since they really should concentrate on arriving before sunrise.

Vulcan’s sister planet T’Kuht rose within half an hour. The fiery orb glared hot and orange above the horizon like a baleful demonic eye, searing the landscape with a bloody glow and carving knife-edged shadows.

Ganlas was willing to talk so Trip made an effort to expand his vocabulary. Unfortunately his pronunciation remained a bit esoteric. Ganlas tried, as tactfully as possible, to point out to Trip the absolute importance of consonants and how a minor variation in emphasis could change the entire meaning of a word. Progress was limited but it helped pass the time.

Finally, “There,” Ganlas said, pointing. “That peak is the marker. Do you see to the left how it slopes off into a saddle shape? Immediately on the far side is the house.” Trip leaned forward, suddenly galvanized at the thought of seeing his womenfolk again after so long. He closed his eyes and tried to empty his mind the way T’Pol had been attempting to teach him.

Their intermittent telepathic contacts were intensely satisfying to both of them. But Trip was frustrated beyond words that he could never be sure whether or not he would be able to establish a connection. Sometimes yes, sometimes no. On the other hand, T’Pol always seemed able to grab his attention whenever she wanted to make contact.

This time it was an almost-but-not-quite feeling. Trip got an impression of T’Pol that flickered and then faded. Before he had time to curse they were landing.

The house was built from native stone, single story and low profile. It blended into the landscape so naturally that if not for the exceptional brightness of T’Kuht’s light Trip might have missed it entirely. Ganlas set the hovercraft down within a few meters of the front entrance and killed the motors. He held up a hand when Trip started to stand.

“It is best to scan the area first for local predators,” the Vulcan told him in a matter-of-fact tone. Ganlas activated the onboard sensor array and did a swift 360 degree scan of the area, then did an aerial scan to check for flying attackers. Finding nothing within striking range, he nodded to Trip and they

disembarked. The night was alive with alien shrieks and growls but nothing could be seen, which only made Trip more wary. Ganlas didn't run to the door, but he sure didn't dawdle either.

Once inside Ganlas remarked, "I confess I prefer not to remain outside too long after sunset. It is unnerving to think that something could be waiting unseen in the darkness." Trip blinked but made no reply. The two men walked through the foyer and into the main living area where the women were waiting.

T'Leera stepped forward first and offered her husband two fingers. "Greetings husband. It is most agreeable to see you again. I have missed your presence these last three days."

Ganlas' expression softened noticeably and he bowed while returning her touch. "They have been empty days without you beside me wife."

Trip barely glanced at the other couple. He was fixated on T'Pol and the bundle she was holding. His wife's eyes were shining as she stepped forward and offered him the same two fingered greeting.

Instead of reciprocating it however, Trip threw his determination about adopting Vulcan customs to the winds. He caught her hand and kissed it, then reached behind her head with his other hand and kissed her mouth quickly.

A low grunt and a waving little arm called his attention downward. "Hi baby girl," Trip whispered happily. "Daddy's home." He reached for Elizabeth, who sleepily ignored the change in venue except for shifting her head to drool out the other side of her mouth for a while.

"How has she been? Eating good?" Trip whispered.

T'Pol answered in a normal tone, "Her appetite has been excellent, and she has been willing to take in an adequate supply of fluids. Her activity levels are increasing as well. Yesterday she managed to roll over onto her belly unassisted."

"Already?" Trip was mightily impressed. "And I missed it. Shit!" He caught himself and sighed. "Sorry. I am still working on breaking some bad habits. But I will, don't worry."

T'Pol caressed his cheek. "Your bad habits are no more numerous than mine husband. Don't spend so much time trying to be perfect. Just be who you are, and you will be perfect for us."

T'Leera called from the kitchen that the tea was ready. T'Pol led Trip through the archway to join the other two around the table. T'Leera poured for the men and announced, "Since Trip has arrived, we will announce the gathering tomorrow. That will give everyone in the family who is coming time to prepare. The Inclusion can be performed in three days time."

Trip took a quick gulp of his tea, holding it off to one side to make sure none of it dripped on Elizabeth. "What is this ceremony anyway? What's it for?"

T'Pol told him, "Every female child is formally welcomed into the family this way Trip. The women of the family gather to hold a brief ceremony, gifts are presented, a ceremonial meal is eaten."

"Only the girls?" Trip asked.

“No,” T’Pol glanced at Ganlas. “Males are greeted with a different ceremony. Ganlas can tell you about it later. It is not customarily discussed when women are present.” Trip raised his eyebrows and dropped the subject.

“Do Ganlas and I need to do anything except stay out of the way?” Trip wanted to know.

“I will be returning home tomorrow,” Ganlas informed him. “However, generally the baby’s father is introduced to the women as they arrive, and he also assists in serving food and drink. Otherwise his part in the activities is minimal.” Trip looked relieved.

“Meet and greet, pass out the treats. I can do that,” he said cheerfully. T’Pol squeezed his hand.

“I have every confidence in you husband,” she said. “How long will you be able to stay?”

Trip told her, “I am on a ten day leave, starting six days ago. In four days, when Enterprise stops off so Phlox can give Elizabeth her next checkup, I am supposed to start my detached duty going over those designs Admiral Gardner talked about. Two weeks of plan review, then Enterprise picks me up the next time Phlox checks Lizzie.”

“Elizabeth is being monitored closely then,” Ganlas noted with satisfaction.

“Most definitely,” T’Pol responded. “As the first of her unique heritage Dr. Phlox is deeply concerned with making sure that every possible source of trouble is monitored closely. Both of our planet’s governments emphatically agree. The High Council in particular is interested in gathering as much data as possible about her physical development.” Trip looked a little disgruntled.

“You mean they want to use her as a guinea pig?” he bristled.

“No,” T’Pol hastened to add. “Of course not. They merely want to make sure that all available information is gathered and kept safe. Please remember, Trip, that under V’Las much scientific knowledge was lost. Or, even worse, deliberately corrupted to meet his political aims. The current administration is attempting to purge the Science Directorate of his lies and restore the original goal of seeking and documenting truth.”

Trip put his cup down and drew his baby girl up close to his chest. She cracked her sleepy eyes open and peeped up at her father with a notable lack of interest. Trip put a feather kiss on her forehead and swallowed hard. “I guess,” his voice shook. Trip stopped and took a few deep breaths. “I guess there is nothing wrong with keeping careful records. We might need them someday. Or somebody else will.”

“It may happen sooner than you think krei,” T’Leera said lightly. “I was curious when I learned that T’Pol had married you, so I ran a search. I acknowledge being surprised to learn that there have been 27 marriages between a Vulcan and a Human since First Contact. Although yours is actually the first to occur between a Vulcan female and a Human male. Currently there are eight other mixed couples where the wife is of child bearing age.”

Trip looked shocked. “Twenty-seven? I had no idea. I would have thought something like that would be major news.”

“Probably the people involved chose to avoid publicity because of the weight of social disapproval,” Ganlas offered. “Consider your own people’s recent reaction. And as much as it distresses me to acknowledge it, our people would not have been open to such a union until very recently.”

Trip snorted, “One of my favorite twentieth century authors named Heinlein wrote that ‘history bears the same relation to truth that theology does to religion, i.e. none to speak of’. I guess just because something didn’t get written down doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

T’Pol looked thoughtful. She remembered something from the meld that she had shared with her other self aboard Daniel’s ship...

“...He will marry a Human woman openly, causing a firestorm of controversy in the process, and their child in turn will,” Daniels paused and smiled. “Let’s just say that there will be a cascading domino effect...”

“Yes, I agree. Someone will put this information to good use in the future,” T’Pol said emphatically.

-&-

Hanson acknowledged the landing instructions and turned over the autopilot to Cantrell’s transportation control system. The air car hovered a moment over the landing pad until the twin doors dropped open. Then it descended slowly into the dimness of the parking garage. As the car settled to the pavement the doors swung back into place with a dull boom, like a vault closing.

Massaro glanced out the window nervously. There were several other air cars and land vehicles of various sorts parked at a distance. This underground garage was as large, or perhaps even larger, than the one at the detention facility he had just left. Hanson sat quietly with his hands on his lap. “We wait here until our escort arrives, son,” Hanson reassured him. “Just relax. Everything is under control.”

Their escort materialized in the form of two extraordinarily large gentlemen by the names of Joe and Mike. Joe was the talkative one. He said, “Hello, Mr. Hanson.” Mike simply looked Massaro up and down with pit viper eyes.

Hanson nodded briskly and held still while Joe ran a quick scan of them both. Finding nothing suspicious, he said, “Please follow me.” Hanson gestured for Massaro to come on and took off after Joe, with Mike tagging along behind, to Massaro’s extreme discomfort.

Hanson and Massaro climbed into the back of a luxury ground car. Joe and Mike settled into the front seat and maintained their calmly detached demeanor. Massaro had seen Vulcans who exhibited more blatant evidence of emotional reaction. Mike in particular made him feel like an ant on a window sill, under consideration for either squashing or flicking off into the yard.

Joe pulled the car out of the garage and launched it down the road at a speed barely slower than Hanson air car. Massaro squeaked and grabbed the seat handle. Hanson’s grin was more than half sneer. “Calm down son,” he advised. “Joe is the best driver in the business. That’s why Mr. Cantrell hired him.” Massaro managed a timid nod but did not let go of his hand hold until they reached the estate.

Massaro started rubber necking as soon as they got out of the car. He gaped at the sprawling mansion, the huge barns, the wide pastures where blooded thoroughbreds grazed and played, the split rail fences that extended off to the edge of a seemingly endless tract of old growth forest.

“This farm has been in Mr. Cantrell’s family for almost 350 years,” Hanson told him. “Not many people are ever invited to visit here, much less stay the night. You are being granted a rare privilege Mr. Massaro.”

Cantrell was waiting for them at the door of the guest cottage with a smile, along with a nondescript looking man of middle years and middle height. Hanson said, “Mr. Massaro, this is Josiah Cantrell. Leader of the Terra Prime movement and quite probably the ultimate savior of our planet.”

“Oh for goodness sakes, Fred,” Cantrell admonished. “You make me sound like some kind of messiah. I am just a man like anyone else. Just like you and Mr. Massaro here. All of us trying to do the best we can for our people.” He offered his hand and said with honest sincerity, “It is a real pleasure to finally have the chance to meet you, Mr. Massaro. I have read the report of what happened on Enterprise several times. I promise you solemnly that neither I, nor anyone else in Terra Prime, will ever forget what you have done for our cause.” He smiled broadly. Mike, standing behind Massaro, started to twitch a tiny smile but suppressed it instantly. Everyone else kept a straight face.

Cantrell turned to the vague looking man beside him. “This is Jacob. He is my right hand around here. Anything you need, just let him know and it will be provided. For now I am sure that you must be tired and hungry. There is a change of clothes inside in your size, and a fresh meal laid out. Freshen up, eat a bite, and get some rest. We can talk later this evening.”

Massaro was all but speechless. “I don’t. I mean. Mr. Cantrell, Sir. I don’t know how to thank you for everything you have done.”

Cantrell put a hand on his shoulder. “We can talk later this evening lad. For now, just take a little time to recharge yourself.” He shooed his guest inside and traded a significant glance with Jacob before turning away with Hanson. A flick of the wrist brought Joe and Mike to his side.

“Keep an eye on him, but not obvious. Make sure he doesn’t get curious, but I don’t want him aware of it for now.” They acknowledged the order and faded away into the landscape.

Cantrell started strolling and Hanson fell into step beside him. “Any problems?” Cantrell asked idly, looking out over his pastures.

“No, Sir, Mr. Cantrell, Sir,” Hanson all but babbled. “I followed instructions exactly. Just as you predicted, the sight of Cuba really shook him up and got his attention. He seems really grateful for all of your help.”

“He should be,” Cantrell snorted in mild disgust. “That worthless sonuvabitch cost us more than 200 good men, compromised seven ongoing operations and lost us more than 50 million credits in anticipated profits for this year alone. Even if he succeeds in this mission, which I highly doubt, it won’t make up what he cost us.”

“But it will at least get rid of him, either way,” Hanson diffidently reminded his boss.

Cantrell brooded silently for a moment. Then he nodded. "At least there is that. We can't just quietly dispose of him. It has to be public and it has to be done in a way that Starfleet can't cover up. The whole planet knows what he did, and they know that Starfleet broke him. We can't have that, Fred. It is bad precedent. It weakens morale in the ranks. It also sets an extremely poor example to other weak links like Massaro. We have to show them what happens when cowards fail and then fold. It can't be allowed to happen again."

"Yes, Sir," Hanson said. He waited patiently to find out why Cantrell had held him back for a talk. One did not try to hurry Josiah Cantrell. One waited patiently. If it took all day and all night, one stood still and did not let out a single peep of protest.

"I have been thinking, Fred," Cantrell said at last. "This issue with Tucker never did get properly settled. We really need to tie up that loose end."

"Tucker?" Hanson blinked. "The Starfleet goon with the Vulcan bitch? I don't understand, Sir? Why does he matter? The brat croaked, just like it was supposed to. We made the point that mixing blood is fatal. I am sorry but I must be stupid. I don't see it."

Cantrell smiled and cocked his head. "Stupid? Fred, don't try to bullshit me." A tiny glint of hardness flickered in the back of his eyes, just for a fraction of a second. But it was enough to cause Hanson's testicles to draw up into his scrotum and his bowels to turn to ice water.

"I am sorry, Sir," Hanson whispered, as sweat beaded on his forehead. Cantrell laughed and clapped his shoulder.

"Relax, Fred," Cantrell reassured him. "Just don't try to pile it too thick, all right?" Hanson nodded nervously. "The thing about Tucker is that he is high profile. He is one of the heroes. He went out and fought the Xindi, remember? He matters. People pay attention when he talks. When a man like that picks a Vulcan broad, it catches people's attention. Again, it sets a bad example."

"But," Hanson tiptoed, "other Humans have tried alien sluts. It didn't change anything."

"Sure," Cantrell agreed. "When it was just a quick piece of tail it didn't matter." He paused, thinking. "Remember when Johansen scooped up that Andorian?"

Hanson smiled at the memory. "I remember he couldn't stop talking about her. Personally I couldn't see it. Those antennae made her look like a bug to me. But Johansen swore she was a great lay."

Cantrell nodded. "He claimed she had enough spunk to give him a good ride all three days. Right up until he cut her throat. Of course, he snipped off the antennae first. But my point is that it didn't mean anything to him. Tucker actually married this fox eared bitch."

"What would you like done, Sir?" Hanson asked.

"We have been keeping those Sleepers in Starfleet for a rainy day," Cantrell reminded him. "I think I hear a rumble of thunder in the distance. Activate Davis, Wu, Schmidt, Richardson, and Gonzales. Have them remove this particular stain on Humanity's honor."

“Understood, Sir,” Hanson replied. He turned to walk back to the ground car. Cantrell watched him for a moment, musing. Hanson was a useful man. Crooked as a dog’s hind leg of course, but at least he had sense enough not to get greedy. For a quick moment Cantrell remembered Hanson’s predecessor, Paxton’s pet shyster. He wondered what the odds were that anyone would ever discover that body. Perhaps in a few thousand years some archaeologist would dig up the skeleton and scratch his head, wondering how in the world a person could have ever gotten into such a location.

Cantrell grinned, then let it work its way into a real laugh. He was still chuckling when he reached the house. Susan came out and told him, “You look happy.” She smiled back at him.

He put his arms around her waist. “I am happy. Why would I not be happy? It is a beautiful day, I am holding a beautiful woman, all is right with the world. How about we go fix up a picnic lunch and ride up to the pond? What do you say?”

Susan shivered at the heat smoldering in his eyes. She doubted they would be doing much eating once they reached the pond. “Sounds wonderful to me,” she murmured in his ear. “Let me get changed into some riding clothes and I will be right down.” Cantrell admired her swaying hips as she preceded him into the house.

Life was indeed good.

Chapter 2

Trip had a headache. A bad one. It started right behind his eyes and ended somewhere in the vicinity of his tail bone. But he soldiered on like a good Vulcan husband, revealing no evidence of his pain.

“Would you care for some more kasa juice, Lady T’Para?” Trip graciously asked the wizened old bat who sat grimly presiding over the festivities in the family room. She waved him off with an imperious finger and he subsided, properly chastened.

Trip retreated to the relative shelter of the kitchen nook in relief, hoping that nobody would notice his absence for a while. He heaved the deepest sigh he could, straining to keep it silent. A trickle of sympathy made it through the bond and comforted his bruised ego and browbeaten male soul. Being trapped alone in a small house with 46 human women would have been a prospect to daunt the boldest of men. But 46 *Vulcan* women?

Were it not for the thought that T’Pol really needed his help, he would have run screaming into the night and gladly taken his chances with the wild sehlat and the le-matyas.

His solitary retreat was cut short by the only thing that could have spurred him into action by that point. Elizabeth had been expressing her dissatisfaction with being passed around like a football for the past several minutes. Finally she decided that enough was enough and started venting at full volume. Since she was going to do it, she figured she might as well do it properly. Every Vulcan in the house winced at the piercing volume of her shrieking wail, backed by the power of Vulcan lungs filtered through Human vocal cords. Luckily there was no real glass within range.

Trip plunged into the storm, bent on a mission to salvage what was left of everyone’s eardrums. He scooped up his daughter from the arms of whoever happened to be holding her at the time, Trip didn’t even bother to check who it was, and started to bounce and rock and talk to her. “It’s ok baby Daddy’s got you it’s all right now settle down honey please settle down Daddy’s got you have mercy on us *please!*” He started walking down the hall with her, murmuring and rocking. Gradually the tornado faded into a drizzle and the expressions of misery all around smoothed over.

“Well done young man,” T’Para regally acknowledged his service. “The child is plainly becoming fatigued and requires the comfort of a parent. As T’Pol will be occupied with gifts, you shall be permitted to present your daughter to the remaining guests.”

“Oh joy. Oh lucky me,” Trip thought plaintively. *“All the battles I have been through, all the deadly perils I have faced, all the times people have taken pot shots at me. But did I get lucky enough to draw the short straw and avoid this? Nooooo....”*

“I am honored,” He said dead pan, inclining his head with dignified restraint. T’Para’s expression told him he certainly had better be.

T’Pol gestured for Trip to join her and they moved together to face the next member of the family, a middle aged woman with a reasonably friendly expression. At T’Pol’s nudge, Trip knelt with Elizabeth and carefully held her out for inspection. The woman placed two fingers gently on the baby’s face and softly murmured a brief phrase in ancient high Vulcan. The lady, whose name Trip could not have

remembered if someone had stuck red hot irons to his crotch, quirked a tiny smile and told them both, “May she grow strong and true.”

The two of them moved on to the next guest where a similar ritual was performed. Trying to spare himself some pain with the Vulcan gravity, Trip decided to switch off and kneel on the other leg this time. The act was repeated with only minor variations a total of 14 more times, by which point Trip could not feel either one of his knees. He could feel his hips though. Yes, he sure could. Most definitely he could feel his hips. And his thighs. His thighs were right there, making their presence known.

The presentation was finally done. Only one more item was left on the agenda, Trip learned. “Your daughter will be carried outside,” T’Para told him, “and given her clan name under the light of T’Kuht. As her father it is your responsibility to stand guard against any prowling dangers of the night. You will go out first to secure the area, then you will stand guard, patrolling the perimeter while the ceremony is conducted, and you will remain outside until the last woman has returned indoors. Do you understand?”

“Certainly,” Trip told her with deep relief. “*This* is something I can handle. This is something I understand.” He handed Elizabeth to her mother, then turned toward the back bedroom and the weapon cabinet to prepare. T’Pol followed him down the hallway. As Trip unlocked the cabinet and drew out a phase pistol along with a weapon belt, T’Pol put Lizzie in her crib and came over to advise him. “Tradition requires that you carry one of the ancient weapons also husband,” she told him softly. T’Pol pointed to the wall, where a rack full of various imposing types of cutlery hung. Trip strapped on the phase pistol and gave his wife an amused look, then wandered over to check out the assortment of oversized kitchenware. T’Pol went on, “Customarily most fathers choose either a lirpa or a spear, but you are free to pick anything that appeals to you.”

Trip hacked out a derisive laugh. “I haven’t touched a spear since I went wild boar hunting with one as a teenager. And I didn’t kill anything then.” He reached out and pulled a short stabbing spear off the wall. “But at least I know which end to hold and which end to poke with.”

T’Pol reached into the weapon cabinet and pulled out a flashlight and a portable scanner. Trip took the gear and asked, “What area will you be using?” He picked up his personal communicator and slid it into his shirt pocket, clipped the light on his belt and powered on the scanner.

T’Pol gave a detailed description of the specific location where the ceremony would be conducted, as well as the route that the ladies would follow in proceeding to and from the spot. Trip nodded without comment and left by the back door. T’Pol gathered her own communicator and went back to rejoin her guests.

T’Leera met her at the door to the family room with a cup of tea. T’Pol nodded and sipped the refreshing brew with gratitude. “It will not be long. Trip will call in as soon as he has surveyed the ceremonial grounds.”

T’Para said coldly, “I presume that he is trained for such work?”

T’Pol replied calmly, “My adun is an experienced officer Eldest Mother. In addition, he grew up in a subculture that maintains a strong hunting tradition. He is fully at ease in such a situation.” T’Para made no further comment.

Five minutes later T'Pol's communicator beeped.

“Area clear. I scanned and visually surveyed the route, nothing larger than one of those k'bet you showed me along the path. I am at the far side of the ceremonial grounds. There is a le-matya in the distance, approximately a kilometer off. I am watching it closely, but it shows no sign of approaching.”

“Acknowledged,” T'Pol said crisply. “We are on the way.” She closed the communicator and started to turn and retrieve Elizabeth when T'Para's voice stopped her.

“He cannot possibly have covered the entire area in that length of time,” she declared in disapproval. “I further question whether your scanner has a range of a full kilometer.”

T'Pol returned frostily, “Trip does not need to walk over the entire area to survey it. Nor does he require the scanner to detect the le-matya. He can see it.” The old woman's mouth actually dropped open a fraction for a brief instant.

“Have you been among Humans so long that you have begun adopting their habit of telling jokes child?” T'Para demanded.

“Certainly not,” T'Pol sniffed, a picture of offended dignity. “Due to it's thicker atmosphere, dense cloud cover, and the extremely low albedo of its moon, Earth nights are much darker than Vulcan. As a consequence Humans have developed acute night vision. My adun can see clearly outside by the light of T'Kuht even without artificial lighting.” She left to get the baby, leaving a murmur of interested discussion behind her.

Trip paced the outer rim of the ceremonial plateau. The scanner kept insisting that nothing was close enough to be a threat, but he trusted his eyes more than any instrument. The weight of the spear was oddly comforting. Intellectually he knew that the feather light phase pistol in the holster on his hip was a hundred times deadlier. But for some reason the heft of the spear, and the gleam of its broad bladed tip was more calming to his nerves.

“It really is just a thin veneer, isn't it?” Trip pondered. He reached the end of his self-imposed picket and reversed course. From the corner of his eye Trip saw the first of the ladies arriving and starting to take their places around the big altar-firepit-belltower thingie in the middle of the sacred area.

The le-matya was moving. Trip tensed up and stopped to watch it closely. The huge catlike reptiloid raised its head and started to weave its snout back and forth like a snake. Trip recalled reading that le-matya, like pit vipers on Earth, tracked prey by heat. In the thin Vulcan air the nights got cold quickly. Anything warm blooded, especially anything with a body temperature as high as a Vulcan, would stand out to a le-matya's senses like a neon sign. A large group of Vulcan's must shine like a beacon to the beast.

Trip slipped out the phase pistol and absently check the settings. It was on stun. He was bound and determined not to shame T'Pol on this special occasion by taking a life when it wasn't required. The le-matya still had not shifted location. Trip watched a moment longer and decided to continue along his route. That cat-lizard was far from the only danger out here. It wouldn't do for him to get so bound up watching this one critter that he overlooked a passing sehlat.

Trip glanced over at the women. T'Para was holding Elizabeth in both hands, raising her toward the sky and reciting something indecipherable to Trip's ears. T'Pol stood in front of them with a colorful cloth spread across her arms. The other women were formed around them in a semi-circle watching and listening intently.

Trip felt a comforting tingle at the back of his mind and knew that T'Pol had initiated a faint telepathic contact. Nothing intense, just enough to assure herself that he was all right and let him know that all was well with the two of them. Trip smiled gratefully. Then he tore his eyes back to business. He scanned the far end of his patrol arc and swung back to retrace his steps.

The le-matya was gone.

Adrenaline boiled through Trip's veins like acid. Between one breath and the next his heartbeat doubled. Trip opened his hand and let the spear fall, slapping the holster and drawing the phase pistol all in one motion. With his other hand he yanked the scanner off his belt as his eyes started flickering from side to side, piercing every nook and shadow to spot the predator.

Nothing. His mind screamed warning to his mate through their bond. Trip sidestepped and crouched at the lip of the bluff, blinking rapidly to moisten his eyes in the dry air. His pupils were dilated painfully wide and his ears strained to catch the slightest whisper of sound. His muscles were rigidly tense, blood pulsing hot and ready for combat.

There it was. Moving low and fast. Hugging the ground and coming in, moving from cover to cover. Headed straight for the plateau. Heading for his woman and his child. The le-matya had already covered a third of a kilometer in the time it had taken him to notice its movement and locate it. The thing was impossibly quick.

Trip felt his skin and his extremities getting numb as the endorphins kicked in. The throb of his pulse shook his whole body like a drum beat. The light of T'Kuht shone as brightly to his abnormally dilated eyes as an overcast day on Earth. The slight rustle of sand under his feet and the sound of his own breath were deafening.

A stone rattled at the base of the plateau. Trip fired. The stun beam hit the reptiloid directly in the shoulder and didn't even slow it down. A whistling scream lifted into the night and the animal started scrambling up the loose scree at the base of the cliff. Trip took careful aim and fired again, hitting the le-matya mid-torso. He held the beam until the phase pistol became too hot to continue. The le-matya slowed its advance but kept coming.

Trip started muttering a long string of words that would have earned scorching looks of disapproval from the assembled Vulcan ladies, if they could have heard him. Then he re-set the phase pistol to kill and fired again. The le-matya stopped moving and started sliding back down the slope. Trip released the firing stud and slumped to his knees in relief, gasping for air. He took regular tri-ox injections every morning to help him keep going until his lungs acclimated to the thinner atmosphere, but just moving around on Vulcan still took a lot out of him.

It sounded like it was taking the le-matya a long time to finish sliding to the bottom of the talus slope. Trip raised his head and stared directly into the red eyes of the straining hunter as it dragged itself upward again. Trip's right hand swung around mechanically and slapped into his left palm. He took

aim like a robot, firing directly into the center of the le-matya's chest with the phase pistol on full power.

Trip held the beam steady until the power unit faded and died. The le-matya, mindless hunger armed with poison claws, managed a squealing hiss and crept forward another meter. It was barely alive, but it still moved. One front paw reached out and slapped the ground, only an arm's length short of Trip's position. He backed away and grabbed the spear.

The creature had holes burned through it. Trip's first shot on kill setting had drilled completely through it's body, leaving intestines and blood dripping out of either side of the animal's body. The last shot had seared away skin and flesh on the le-matya's chest, splitting and charring the breast bone. But the beast was too brainless to lie down and play dead.

Trip stood with the spear balanced in his hands. His brain was wrapped in a fog of fearful rage, but his subconscious mind threw up old memories of more than fifteen years ago. The lessons were too basic to forget.

"...back hand for power. The front hand guides the point with a loose grip. The back hand grip is firm but not tight. Don't try to aim it like you would a gun or a bow. Just keep your eyes fixed on the strike point. When the prey is within range, STRIKE!"

He stood sideway with the spear poised and ready. The le-matya hooked the claws of both front feet on the lip of the cliff and pulled itself painfully upward. Trip waited with the spear raised and felt his eyes grow hot. The le-matya's head came up over the edge of the cliff and snarled in Trip's direction. He drew in a deep lung full of air and got ready. As the le-matya opened its jaws and lunged Trip crouched low and stabbed for the animal's neck, just below the jaw.

The spear point hit hard and penetrated the le-matya's throat, driving upward toward the skull. Trip vented his lungs in a roaring bellow and shoved forward with every bit of strength his legs possessed. The front half of the reptiloid rose off the ground and its claws swiped blindly at Trip, who ducked and pressed in close to get inside the animal's reach. He twisted the spear shaft and pushed hard, forcing the le-matya over onto its side.

Trip ended up kneeling between the le-matya's forelegs, with both hands wrapped around the spear just behind the long, broad point. He bore down with his full weight, yanking the tip back and forth to widen the wound and digging deeper into the beast's brain. At last the le-matya's writhing slowed to spasmodic quivers, then stopped. Trip sagged forward and rested his forehead against the spear shaft, trying to suck in enough oxygen to keep from passing out.

T'Pol raised her face from her bundled child and opened her eyes. "The le-matya is dead," she announced.

T'Para took the news calmly. Of course. She matter-of-factly replaced her personal disruptor in its concealed carry holster beneath her robes. Several other women followed suit with their own weapons. "Is your adun injured?" the Eldest Mother asked T'Pol.

"No," T'Pol answered with half-closed eyes. "He killed the animal without sustaining any scratches."

T'Para nodded. "Most satisfactory." The Eldest Mother turned and started leading the way back to the house. T'Pol fell in step behind her and the other ladies joined the procession in order of seniority. T'Pol sent a gentle telepathic touch to let Trip know that they were returning home, feeling his recognition and acknowledgment.

Trip worked the spear out of the le-matya's skull with more effort than it took to put it in. Then he gathered his phase pistol and scanner. Then he propped up on a rock for a while. In the distance he could see the last of the ladies leaving the ceremonial grounds. Trip looked up and let the cold Vulcan night wind sweep the last of the sweat from his face. He opened his mouth wide, hoping the breeze would push more air down his lungs than he could pull in alone.

The stars on this world glinted like laser points, burning holes through his eyes and into his soul. Each point of energy flared with a merciless intensity that could only be seen on Earth at the highest mountaintops. The narrow slices of sky between the violent sparks above him were as black as an Orion's conscience. T'Kuht rode high above him now, her tortured surface dotted with occasional flares of active volcanoes. Trip's eyes were relaxing as the adrenaline subsided, leaving him with the inevitable shakes that always accompanied the aftermath of battle. The light dimmed but was still plenty bright enough to see clearly.

The last of the women were out of sight on the path back to the house now. Trip sighed and stood up. He smacked a new power pack into the phase pistol and re-holstered it. But he left it on kill this time. A careful scan showed nothing big enough within range to be worth worrying about, so headed down the slope to the ceremonial grounds and strolled tiredly over to the altar.

Interesting structure it was. Trip walked around it admiring the carvings. Weddings, funerals, inclusions, bondings, they were all performed here. Anyone in the family who didn't have a home with enough room to host their own group would come here and use the family's common grounds. Idly Trip fantasized what might have happened if T'Pol's wedding to Koss had been held here instead of at her mother's house. He had a sudden picture of himself holding out a kipper in front of a le-matya and crooning "here kitty, kitty". Trip grinned and shook his head. Time to head back.

This place was incredible. So many things about T'Pol were becoming clear to him now. If only he had been to Vulcan before he ever met her. So many of their problems would never have happened. So many things that confused him back then would have been simple and easy to understand. If only he had been here one time before he ever met her.

Koss would never have stood a chance. In the privacy of the blood colored moonlight, Trip allowed himself an ugly snarl. Now he knew about the kali-fee. Of course T'Pol wasn't going to call a challenge during the ceremony. What good would it have done at that point? But Trip wasn't sure if T'Pol realized that he had been doing some in-depth research.

He wasn't sure if she realized that he had learned about the gas'rak-kali-fee. The challenge of the right to claim one as a mate. Unlike the koon-ut-kali-fee, the gas'rak-kali-fee was issued between two males who both wanted a female, and it was done before the wedding. In fact, the woman had no say in the matter. She did not even have to be informed that the challenge was taking place until it was over.

And unlike the koon-ut-kali-fee, there were no standard weapons or location or terms for the fight. Those, like the *code duello* on Earth, would be negotiated between the two participants. Tradition required that each participant be permitted an equal voice in setting up the conditions for the duel.

Which meant that Koss's vaunted Vulcan strength would not have saved his ass. Trip's eye's gleamed at the thought of getting Koss alone in a swamp at night. Or on the surface of an asteroid in a pressure suit.

Then he shook his head, irritated with himself. *"Let it go fool,"* he chided. *"It's over. Let go of it. She's yours. He's out of the picture. If he ever tries to make trouble again, then you can deal with him. Otherwise you are just giving him space in your head that rightfully belongs to T'Pol and Lizzie."*

It just wasn't that easy though. Sometimes he still woke up in the night, sweating, from a dream of standing there and watching her giving herself to another man. Trip supposed that part of him was never going to completely forget it. He was just going to have to come to terms with it. It didn't hurt as bad now as it once had. He knew she loved him. He knew that she wasn't going anywhere. Besides, it had been a marriage in name only. He would get past it eventually. He would get past it. But as long as there remained breath in his body, he would never stop wanting to kill Koss.

He couldn't even make the ta'al hand gesture any more because of that sonuvabitch. T'Pol had carefully taught it to him on the journey to Vulcan so he could use it when he met her mother. He had practiced it so carefully too. Trip stopped, sadly remembering how he had been innocently eager to make a good impression, hoping T'Les would someday be his mother-in law.

Now, whenever he tried to make the ta'al gesture, a picture of that meeting instantly flashed into his mind. The meeting, and what it led to. Invariably his hand would spasm into a convulsive knot of quivering pain. No matter how often he tried or practiced, he just couldn't force himself to do it anymore.

Trip stopped along the path at a patch of loose sand to plunge the spear point into the dirt several times. He finally got the blood off well enough to justify carrying the weapon inside for final cleaning. The back door scanned and recognized him, sliding open to admit him with silent efficiency. T'Pol waited for him inside the rear storage area with a clean towel and some water. She took the spear and sat him down on a bench.

Trip grunted tired thanks and drained the bottle of water in one swallow. Then he wiped his face and gasped, "Everything go all right?"

"Yes," T'Pol let him see one of the smiles she reserved for their private moments. "The ceremony was completed successfully, thanks to you." She moved unexpectedly to straddle his lap and put her arms around his neck. Trip smiled back in surprise and hugged her waist. "I am most pleased, Husband," T'Pol told him. Then she leaned in for a long, lingering kiss.

Trip felt a jolt of lightning travel from her lips down his spine to his loins. He moaned and pulled her closer, feeling her softness mold against him. He pulled back reluctantly, only because the alternative was unconsciousness. "Wow. For that kind of reward I will go kill a few dozen more."

"That wasn't the reward, Trip," T'Pol told him with an impish gleam. "The reward comes later, after the guests leave." Trip leaned in again for another kiss.

"Let 'em find their own way out," he mumbled.

"Elizabeth needs to be fed and put to bed," she reminded him. Trip whimpered but nodded.

The formal leave taking was long and tedious. On the plus side, the junior members of the family jumped in to help with the clean up. So as the tide ebbed, it left order in it's wake instead of chaos. Finally they closed the door to find themselves alone in their own home for the first time.

Elizabeth, worn out from all the handling and excitement, took her bottle and drifted off with minimal fuss. T'Pol started giving Trip his reward in the shower with a full body shampoo, using herself as the sponge. To Trips intense frustration the shower stall was designed for one (skinny) person. Perfect for intimate contact, not so good for acrobatic activity. By the time they got rinsed off he was hotter than the water.

They dried each other slowly and thoroughly, licking off the extra droplets as they went. T'Pol pushed Trip backward onto the bed and slid down next to him, nibbling her way up his chest to the side of his neck. "Ummm," Trip sighed happily. "That feels fantastic. I was more than half expecting to sleep on the floor tonight." He rolled over and drew her close.

"Why would I allow you to sleep on the floor?" T'Pol looked confused. Trip laughed quietly.

"I thought you might kick me out of bed." He added in response to her stare, "Because I killed the le-matya. I tried not to take a life, hun. I really did. But the stun setting just wasn't powerful enough to stop it. I'm sorry I had to do that, especially on this special day."

T'Pol lifted a long suffering eyebrow and kissed him deeply before responding. "It is completely acceptable by the teachings of Surak to kill in defense of one's own life or in defense of one's family Trip. Besides," she looked a touch mischievous, "it improved your standing with the Eldest Mother I believe. She seemed uncertain at first of the wisdom of my choosing a Human. However, since you have proven that you are competent to defend us, she has been mollified." She ran her tongue along the edge of his jaw to his throat, then down his jugular vein to his collar bone.

"In that case," he pulled her over on top of his chest, "I have a confession to make. Winning a fight always turns me on." He gently nipped her shoulder.

She looked down at him with her dark eyes glowing. "My people are descended from warriors, Husband," she growled. "I invite you to guess what watching you win a fight does to me." She swung her leg across hips and bent forward to capture his mouth.

Elizabeth was the only person in the house who got any sleep that night.

-&-

Trip was trying his hand at giving Elizabeth her bottle, and trying feebly to grab a rare bite of his own breakfast at random intervals, when the call came in from Enterprise. T'Pol stood up from the kitchen table and answered the hail.

"T'Pol? This is Hoshi Sato. It is good to talk to you again. How are things down there?"

"We are well Ensign Sato," T'Pol informed her with a smile, glancing over at her husband as he tried to mop and feed simultaneously. "Although I fear more of Elizabeth's formula is being deposited on Trip's shirt than in her stomach at the moment." A faint giggle came through the communicator.

“T’Pol? Captain Archer here. If you have no objection we will beam down as soon as we receive clearance.” Trip looked up in concern.

“There’s no reason to use the transporter Cap’n,” Trip called over. “There’s plenty of room to set a shuttle pod down in front of the house.”

“We have our reasons Trip. I will fill you both in when we get there. See you soon. Archer out.”

Trip and T’Pol traded concerned looks.

It was about twenty minutes later that the whine of a transporter beam came through the front door speaker, revealing the arrival of their guests. Trip opened the door and stood watching in surprise as multiple beam-ins took place in quick succession. At the end of it seven people stood in front of the house. Archer, Malcolm, and Phlox were standing next to a short Vulcan woman, two huge Vulcan males and an older Vulcan man who looked vaguely familiar to Trip.

“Welcome,” Trip said uncertainly. “Come on in.” The invading horde trooped inside to be greeted by T’Pol’s raised eyebrow of Who-The-Heck-Are-You?

Recognition soon lit her eyes though, and she explained to her husband, “Trip, this is Chief Minister T’Pau. Chief Minister, this is my adun, Commander Charles Tucker III. He prefers to use the nickname Trip however.”

T’Pau raised her hand in greeting. “Peace and Long Life Commander. I am pleased to finally have the honor of meeting you.”

Trip straightened. “Live Long and Prosper Chief Minister. I regret that I am unable to return the gesture properly. Welcome to our home. And I believe the honor is mine.”

T’Pau gestured to the three men accompanying her. “I believe you have both met Healer Kerlek before. The other two are my bodyguards, Thorun and Stavol. I am required to have them escort me at all times. I apologize for intruding unannounced on your home in this fashion, but I could not resist the temptation to meet you, Commander. And to meet your daughter as well as to see T’Pol again.”

“We are honored at your interest Minister,” T’Pol told her evenly.

T’Pau gave her a straight look. “Your mother was my friend and ally T’Pol. Without her, and you, the Kirshara would never have been found. Without your adun’s courage our people might have been plunged into the most destructive war in our history. Your child is unique in the universe. She is the first of her kind, and a living embodiment of the IDIC principle by the very fact of her existence. It would be strange indeed if you were all not a focus of interest.”

Phlox knew a cue when he heard one. “Speaking of which,” the Denobulan stepped forward cheerfully, “how is my favorite little patient today?”

“Messy,” Trip sighed. “What started out as breakfast turned into a wrestling match. She won.” The non-Vulcans broke into a laugh.

“At this age getting them fed is more an art than a science, Commander,” Phlox advised sagely. He took Elizabeth from her mother’s arms and started clucking to her. Lizzie perked up at the sight of her favorite live toy and promptly reached for his nose.

Healer Kerlek stepped forward. “Commander, Lady T’Pol.” He seemed hesitant. “With your permission, I would like to observe and assist Dr. Phlox with his examination of Elizabeth. I am here as a representative of the Science Directorate, in the interest of documenting her growth and development.”

“Sure,” Trip’s casual approval seemed to stun the Vulcan, who remembered vividly the almost savagely protective attitude that Trip had displayed aboard Enterprise. “Anything Phlox agrees to is all right. Anything he doesn’t agree to is off limits. OK with you T’Pol?”

“Certainly, Husband,” she agreed demurely. The two medical men took the baby and headed for the bedroom. Meanwhile T’Pol invited everyone into the kitchen for tea and snacks.

“So this is why you had to use the transporter?” Trip asked. “I still don’t get it. In fact, it makes even less sense now.” He looked at T’Pau and her bodyguards. “I don’t want to worry anyone Minister. Actually we have never had an accident with the transporter aboard Enterprise since we launched. But it still adds an unnecessary risk. I am surprised that your bodyguards allowed it.”

Thorun and Stavol exchanged resigned looks. Then one of them, the slightly taller one with the knife scar on his chin, said, “One does not allow the Minister to do anything. One obeys and makes the best possible arrangements given the circumstances.” T’Pau had the grace to look a bit embarrassed.

“We have a security situation Trip,” Archer told him soberly. “A shuttle pod might have been tracked. Tell him Malcolm.”

His tactical officer shot the Captain a dirty look that said, plain as day, why me?, but in true British fashion he kept a stiff upper lip and carried on with his duty. “It’s possible that Terra Prime may have agents on Vulcan, Commander,” Lieutenant Reed said bluntly.

Trip sat perfectly still. Only his white knuckles gave any sign that this news was effecting him at all. T’Pol closed her eyes and reached deep inside. During her meld aboard Daniels ship, when she joined her mind with that of her alternate self, they had exchanged a complete set of memories. Her alternate self had at one time spent a year studying the disciplines of Kohlinar. T’Pol searched deep within herself to find those memories and started putting them to practical use. She decided that she was going to practice them on a regular basis from now on. More than likely she would need them.

Malcolm went on, “There have been a multitude of minor incidents recently. But the thing that really set off alarms with everyone happened about five months ago. A young Andorian woman affiliated with their embassy here was kidnapped in Shi’Kahr. She was never seen again.”

T’Pol asked, “What makes you think Terra Prime was responsible for this?”

T’Pau answered her. “At the time of course, the Andorians were not sharing information with anyone. Only since we have recently begun to enjoy improved relations,” she inclined her head to Trip, “due in large part to your efforts Commander, was this incident revealed. It was during a meeting with the Andorian ambassador two days ago that I learned of the kidnapping. After he informed me of the

evidence that his agents had gathered, I felt it prudent to inform Captain Archer of the details as well. He and I, along with Lieutenant Reed, spent most of the day yesterday at the Andorian embassy consulting with the Andorians who investigated the disappearance.”

“Originally the Andorians suspected Vulcan kidnappers. Naturally,” Archer said sadly. “But the deeper they dug the more suspicious they got. Eventually they dug up enough evidence to make it virtually certain that the last people who were anywhere near the young woman were Human.”

Trip leaned forward and rested his head on his clenched fists. “Did they identify the Humans?”

“Three of them,” Lieutenant Reed said. “One of them was I.D.’ed as a Jacob Svengali, Earth citizen. Residence unknown. Employment unknown. Suspected member of Terra Prime. Another one was I.D.’ed as Louis Johanson. Earth citizen. Residence in San Francisco, currently vacant. Employment, unknown. Suspected member of Terra Prime. The third one was I.D.’ed as Frederick Hanson. Earth citizen. Residence, Chicago. Employment, attorney. The guy is a high powered legal mercenary for a long list of clients, most of whom are known or suspected fronts for Terra Prime.”

“Where are they now?” Trip asked coldly.

“We don’t know about the first two,” Archer said tiredly. “Hanson is back on Earth. We know that because he...” Archer stopped and looked helplessly at Malcolm, who gazed back stubbornly and shook his head. No way was he going to let his superior officer off the hook on this one. Archer’s shoulder’s sagged.

“Hanson is the lawyer who got Massaro out of jail.” He clenched his teeth and waited for the explosion. He was not disappointed.

“WHAAAAT!!!!”

Trip leaped up and slammed both fists down on the table hard enough to crack the thin marble top. He ignored the blood and pain from his damaged hands, and brushed away T’Pol’s efforts to examine him. Trip tried to swallow and failed.

Finally, “Tell me,” he managed to force out. T’Pau and her bodyguards watched with interest. This Human was plainly in the grip of killing rage, but he still managed to retain enough self-control to function within civilized limits. Quite impressive actually, considering....

Malcolm said moodily, “We couldn’t go to court with the confession Trip. It was coerced. Besides, he didn’t have counsel present. We could use everything he told us in the confession, and we did use it to disrupt Terra Prime in a hundred different ways. But the confession itself was completely inadmissible in any Human court. And we couldn’t produce a witness who saw him take the DNA samples out of sickbay either.”

Trip started to say something, then stopped. Of course they couldn’t produce a witness. That information had come from Daniels. He could just picture it. *“Why yes your honor. We have a witness. A time traveler from the 31st century told us all about it.”* The entire prosecuting team would end up doing time for contempt of court. At minimum.

“What about the shuttle? He couldn’t worm his way out of that could he?” Trip said hopefully. “We could prove that much on our own. He had to have been the one who sabotaged the shuttle.”

“They negotiated it away Trip,” Archer said grimly. Trip’s face turned crimson. “Hanson argued that even if the shuttle was damaged, which he did not admit by the way, all it proved was that Massaro might have made a mistake. In order to prove deliberate malice they had to have a motive. Without something to tie him to the DNA theft, there was no admissible evidence that could be used to prove in court that he had any motive to try to kill anyone. Reasonable doubt Trip. There was no way they could have gotten a criminal conviction. Right now, with the political climate being what it is on Earth, Hanson threatened to turn it into a media campaign making it look like the Vulcans were trying to persecute Massaro and make him a scapegoat. Remember that he was with us in the Expanse, after all. Finally they plea bargained it down to just busting Massaro back to crewman and giving him a dishonorable discharge.”

T’Pol watched in deep concern as her husband turned and walked into the living area, then passed through it, down the back hallway to the storage room. Trip stood breathing heavily next to a metal storage cabinet. Then he cut loose with a right hook that had everything he owned behind it. The reverberations shook the entire house.

Growing up in Florida had provided Trip with a wealth of cultural variety. Aside from his recent efforts to learn Vulcan, Trip was mono-lingual in almost every respect. Except one. One of the main advantages to sharing his boyhood and young adulthood with other young men of differing subcultures had been the chance to broaden his vocabulary of invective. Trip could curse fluently in English, Cajun French, and street Spanglish. He cut loose and used it all with inspiration and true sincerity.

Captain Archer and Lieutenant Reed listened to the recital echoing down the hallway with a combination of discomfort and admiration. “Seven minutes and I haven’t heard him repeat himself once Malcolm,” Archer muttered in mild awe. “I think that’s a record.”

The Vulcans were more clinical about it. T’Pol tried to maintain her dignity. “My adun has chosen to remove himself to the far end of the house to spare us his emotional state. Unfortunately...” T’Pau told her, “It is not a matter to concern yourself T’Pol. He does not follow the path of Surak. It would not be logical to expect him to maintain calm in the face of this news. It was courteous of him to withdraw to the maximum possible distance within the house, as you said. However I am curious about something. The translator does not appear to be completely effective at the moment. What exactly is a ‘payr-roe’ and why would anyone’s sister wish to mate with one?”

Before either of the panicking Starfleet officers could be pressed into satisfying her thirst for knowledge, Dr. Phlox emerged carrying Elizabeth, with Kerlek in hot pursuit. Both medical men looked intrigued by the recitation coming from the rear of the house. “I take it that you have informed Commander Tucker of the situation,” Phlox remarked as he walked up.

“Unfortunately,” Malcolm admitted. They listened as the rate and volume of cursing started to diminish. “He held everything together quite well until we told him about Massaro. That straw broke the camel's back.”

“I’d like to break Massaro's back,” Archer muttered under his breath, ignoring the looks this garnered from the Vulcans. Elizabeth distracted everyone by loudly demanding momma and the subject moved on to happier things for the moment.

“You will be pleased to know T’Pol, that she seems to be completely healthy,” Phlox beamed. “She has gained a bit more weight than I anticipated, but it all appears to be going into bone and muscle tissue so there’s not one thing wrong with that.”

Trip appeared sheepishly in the doorway and slunk around the perimeter of the room to join his wife and daughter. “I’m... sorry about that everyone. I apologize for my outburst. It was inexcusable.”

“Hardly inexcusable Commander,” Phlox scolded him. “Why, if I received news that the man who wanted to kill my child had just been released from jail I do believe that I would have done a great deal more than simply mutter a few swear words. Your frustration is completely justified, don’t let anyone tell you it’s not.” Dr. Phlox gave T’Pol a meaningful look, which she accepted silently.

Trip chewed his tongue and sighed. “Anyway. How’s Lizzie doin’?”

“As I was telling T’Pol, quite well.” The Denobulan gave one of his trademark grins. “She has obviously been eating well. However I do think we need to add some supplements to her diet from this point forward.” T’Pol winced a bit, but nodded.

“What kind of supplements?” Trip wanted to know. T’Pol focused on Elizabeth to avoid looking at the other Vulcans. “Do we need to import anything?”

“Not really,” Phlox assured him. “She just needs some additional Earth proteins. For now I suggest that you arrange to have some Human infant formula delivered here. We can try her out on that to see how well she likes it. If there is no problem getting her to drink it, then you can try alternating bottles. One bottle with her old formula, one bottle with the enriched Human mixture.” He smiled again and added. “Otherwise we can try adding supplements directly to her existing formula, but she might object to the taste. It would be better if she can get them naturally from her food.”

“That will present no difficulty, Doctor,” T’Pau said. “If you will provide Healer Kerlek with your specific recommendations, I will ensure that the formula is delivered promptly and confidentially.”

“Thanks,” Trip said gratefully. “That will be a big help.” He smiled hesitantly. “About earlier.” Trip paused and cleared his throat. “I recognize that my emotional outburst was entirely inappropriate. I deeply regret my lack of control. But even more than this, I regret that my actions may have reflected badly on T’Pol. I hope that you all recognize that she has only begun to teach me the basics of proper Vulcan behavior, and I am not by any means the best student. I ask that you do not hold her responsible in any way for my failure.”

T’Pau tilted her head and examined Trip curiously. T’Pol shook her head and put a hand on her husband’s shoulder. “Enough Trip,” she told him tenderly. “Stop. You have nothing to apologize for.” T’Pol turned to face her Vulcan guests. “Dr. Phlox will confirm that Humans are not equipped to follow the path of Surak. Some Human philosophers, for example the ancient Stoics, have attempted to promulgate lifestyles that eschew emotion. However these have inevitably failed due to the reality of Human physiology.”

Phlox agreed, “Powerful emotion causes the Human endocrine system to release a variety of stimulating chemicals into the bloodstream. If these chemicals are not purged through physical expression of the underlying emotion, a variety of deleterious effects can occur. Serious damage can be

inflicted on the nervous, digestive, and circulatory systems. In extreme cases this damage can even be fatal.”

“Really?” Kerlek looked fascinated. “I wonder if this will effect Elizabeth in later life.”

“Hopefully not,” Trip said uneasily. “Her Vulcan genes are dominant.”

“True, her genetic makeup emphasizes Vulcan genotypes,” Kerlek acknowledged, “However her physical make up is a blend of the two species. For example her nervous system displays aspects of both races. Her circulatory system is primarily Vulcan, whereas her digestive system tends more toward a Human configuration.”

“Which actually provides her with a number of advantages,” Phlox started to warm up with what his shipmates recognized as his lecturing voice. “The Vulcan circulatory system is remarkably efficient, and copper is a more effective material for transporting oxygen than iron in any case. So she has this advantage.”

Trip shrugged. “Good.” Phlox nodded and went on happily.

“It’s really quite remarkable Commander. The more I work with this young lady, the more amazed I become at just how fortunate she was. The genetic manipulation process by which she was cloned could not possibly have been this selective by deliberate choice. The technology does not exist. It would be absolutely impossible. Yet looking at your daughter it is almost as if someone quite deliberately picked and chose the best attributes from each race to include in her genetic make up. Amazing.”

“Uh...” Trip shot T’Pol a look. She in turn raised an eyebrow and looked thoughtful. “What do you mean doc?”

“Well,” Phlox gushed onward enthusiastically, “as I said the Vulcan circulatory system is more efficient, and that is the one she ended up with. However the Human digestive system is superior in many ways, and Elizabeth seems to have as close to a Human digestive system as it is possible to get inside a Vulcan physiology.”

“How is the Human digestive system superior, Doctor?” Kerlek wanted to know. “Vulcan’s can survive for extensive periods without food and water, and we are capable of sustaining ourselves on a wide variety of foodstuffs.”

Phlox nodded, “True. But not as wide a variety as Humans.” At the forest of levitating eyebrows he explained, “Humans finished up the final phase of their evolution during a series of ice ages. Water was available during an ice age. One could always melt snow. But frankly, food is even harder to come by on top of an ice cap than it is in the middle of a desert. The ancestors of modern Humans spent most of every winter huddled together starving their way toward spring. They adapted to take advantage of food wherever they could find it. As a result, a Human can go without food even longer than a Vulcan. And when they do locate food, they can eat almost anything that doesn’t eat them first.”

“Is this why Humans require meat?” T’Pol asked quietly. “Because plant food was difficult to find during the ice ages?”

Phlox told her, “Not really. An adult Human doesn’t actually require meat. In fact, an adult Human is a true omnivore. That is, an adult Human like... well our three companions here, is capable of surviving as either a pure vegetarian or as a pure carnivore. Although the optimum diet for them is a mixture.”

“A pure carnivore?” T’Pau asked, blinking in surprise.

“Certainly,” Phlox responded cheerfully. “An adult Human is capable of surviving indefinitely on nothing but animal flesh. Provided of course that they are willing to consume the entire animal from nose to tail, including all internal organs from brain to bone marrow.”

“No thanks,” Archer broke in distastefully. “Brain is not one of my favorite cuts.”

“I dunno Cap’n,” Trip objected. “Head cheese is all right if it’s made properly.”

“In any case,” T’Pol desperately broke in to change the subject, “Elizabeth is well equipped to deal with a wide variety of environmental challenges?”

“Oh most definitely,” Phlox chortled. “In fact, she is even better equipped to deal with some of Vulcan’s challenges than native Vulcans are. For example her respiratory system is standard Vulcan, with the fortunate addition of a Human style filtration system added to it.”

“Specify,” T’Pau requested.

“Earth’s atmosphere is thick, and wet, and absolutely clogged with dust, and bacteria, and virii, and plant pollen, and spores, and microscopic invertebrates Minister. You might be astonished at how much space in the Human skull is taken up by an interconnected series of sinus cavities. Among other things, the cavities intercept and filter those minute invaders before they have a chance to penetrate the upper respiratory system. Elizabeth has been blessed with such an arrangement. Many of the typical respiratory ailments that plague your people should hold no terrors for her. I doubt for example that she will ever have to deal with th’kahl fever the way most Vulcan children do. Or if she does, I would expect it to be a very mild case.”

Kerlek offered, “Th’kahl fever will probably be a non-issue in any case, given her hybrid immune system. Elizabeth seems to possess anti-bodies from both her parent’s species.”

Phlox perked up even more brightly. “Yes! That is something else even more wonderful! When you first brought her to Enterprise this was the very thing that caused her illness and almost killed her. But now, somehow, the two formerly conflicting systems have been persuaded to work together. Elizabeth’s immune system is equipped with defenses tailored for both Vulcan and Human diseases. Her Human half should protect her against Vulcan infections, while her Vulcan half should protect her against Human infections. I tell you this little lady is the most remarkable small person I have seen in many years.”

“IDIC,” T’Pol said with glowing eyes. “Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations.”

“Indeed,” T’Pau agreed emphatically. “A most hopeful symbol for the future. For the present however, I must return to Shi’Kahr. The press of Council duties is relentless. Here,” she handed Trip a PADD. “This contains my contact information, as well as alternate personnel who will be able to assist you if I am not available. In the event that you need assistance of any kind whatsoever, great or small, I urge

you not to hesitate in contacting us. Anything from a medical emergency, to more baby formula, to a leaky roof. The entire High Council is in full agreement that Elizabeth's welfare is a matter of the highest priority."

"Gee, I," Trip squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. "We really appreciate this. Don't know what to say. Thank you."

"No need," T'Pau brushed it off. "Our people are at a turning point in our history. The katra of Surak has been found, and he has led us once again to the truth of his original teachings. Our entire way of life is being renewed and reforged. Can it possibly be coincidence that just at this crucial moment in our history, when our people are on the cusp of a second Reformation, that your daughter comes to us? The child of two words, a daughter of the two closest friends to the one whom Surak himself chose to bear his katra? A child whose mother was herself one of those who re-discovered Surak's writings? A child whose father put his own body between two warring armies in the name of peace, just as Surak himself did so long ago? Hardly."

Trip was speechless. He just stared thoughtfully at the PADD while farewells were being made. After T'Pau and her bodyguards had beamed out, T'Pol sat down with Phlox and Kerlek for an in-depth discussion of Lizzie's needs regarding diet, exercise, hygiene, mental stimulation, potential career paths, and retirement options.

The three Humans sat down in the kitchen over coffee and started talking about security. "We have arranged with Starfleet to provide you and T'Pol with an evacuation option if you need it," Malcolm told Trip. "Send the code word 'Hammer' to the Earth embassy and two shuttle pods loaded with MACOs will be on their way here in minutes. They will escort you to a safe house that T'Pau has gotten the Security Directorate to set up. After that a joint task force will take over guarding all three of you 24/7 until the threat, whatever it may be, is neutralized."

"That's assuming that we are able to get a message out," Trip noted.

"We thought of that too," Archer told him. He slid over a small instrument about half the size of a medical scanner. "That's a little item that Malcolm tells me is standard in security work. It's a code generator. There is a match to it in the embassy. The pair of them are synchronized to generate matching codes on a regular basis twice every hour. What we want is for you or T'Pol to call in to the embassy at random intervals every day. Don't announce it in advance. Tell them how many times each day you plan to call, but not when. During the call, you will provide them with the code that this generator gives you. If it doesn't match, or if you don't have a code for them, Operation Hammer goes into play automatically. They will never ask for the code, it will be up to you to volunteer it. If someone else is listening, or holding you at gun point, just don't say anything about it. Help will be on the way ASAP. And of course if you don't call they will also assume the worst and hit the panic button."

Trip heaved a vast sigh of relief. "This helps Cap'n, Malcolm. This helps a lot. I was starting to get scared about leaving T'Pol and Lizzie alone when my leave was up after this."

Archer half grinned. "You don't think we would stand for that do you? If it wasn't safe we wouldn't be going anywhere. Not without all three of you. Not gonna happen Trip."

“All right,” Trip smiled. “Now, let’s get those designs downloaded to my computer here. I want to take a look at those things. Warp six, here we come!”

-&-

The reception hall was a marvel of architectural design. Built in the form of a geodesic dome, it was constructed from a synthetic crystalline material so transparent as to be effectively invisible. Especially at night, like tonight. Floodlights around the perimeter of the great hall shone on the foaming majesty of the horseshoe shaped palisade of Niagara Falls, which plummeted majestically past the inner slope of the dome. Suspended in midair across the roaring chasm of the falls, the Niagara Dome was one of the most exclusive and expensive resorts on the planet.

Even with the best sound proofing that Earth science could provide, Ambassador Soval could clearly hear the roar of the falls. His feet felt the faint vibration through the floor like the growl of a hungry beast. His glass of juice showed ripples from the harmonics. Every time he attended a diplomatic function here, he went home with a headache. However, the needs of the many...

Draklas, one of the Andorian delegation, approached him and Soval turned politely. After spending 43.7 minutes trading insults with the Tellurite ambassador’s daughter, a nice refreshing interlude of verbal fencing with an Andorian would be a pleasant relief. At least he wouldn’t have to listen to any more remarks about his body odor.

But Draklas surprised him. “Ambassador Soval, Commander Shran requests a confidential meeting with you. He sent me to escort you, if you agree.”

Soval sent both of his eyebrows skyward. “Shran? I had no idea that he was on Earth.”

Draklas smirked. “Nor does anyone else. Which is precisely the purpose behind keeping this meeting confidential. Will you come?”

Soval considered carefully. “I will need to inform my aide of my whereabouts and the purpose for my departure. She can be trusted.”

“Of course,” Draklas snorted impatiently. “You would be a fool to take my word for it and just wander off. By all means tell someone where you are going and who you are going with. Just please don’t spread it around. If it becomes general knowledge then the entire purpose for Shran’s mission will be destroyed.”

Soval set his drink down and found his aide, J’Nal, surrounded by Human and Denobulan admirers. She looked grateful to be rescued, and listened intently to his explanation. “If I have not returned or contacted you within two hours,” Soval instructed, “inform the Security Directorate.” J’Nal acknowledged the order and left to take up her position at a communicator.

Draklas led Soval to a standard Human air car and took off north into the autumn night. They flew for several minutes before Soval asked, “Can you provide me with any information regarding the purpose for Shran’s arrival here?”

“I fear not,” Draklas sounded regretful. “I am under strict orders Ambassador, not to divulge anything. My instructions were explicit. I was to transport you to the meeting place, and otherwise to keep my mouth shut.”

Soval subsided and waited silently until the air car settled down in a forest clearing. They emerged and Draklas explained, “Commander Shran is based nearby. As soon as I leave and he confirms that we were not followed, he will come here himself to meet you and escort you to his camp. It should not be more than fifteen minutes or so.” Soval nodded in understanding. Draklas climbed back into the air car and took off, leaving Soval to enjoy the crisp northern breeze that was sweeping down from Earth’s polar regions as the planet drifted closer to its autumnal equinox.

In the southern Canadian latitudes where Soval found himself, the deciduous leaves were already well advanced in their annual color changes. Dried leaves rattled on the trees and blew across the ground in rattling waves. In much the same way that sand blew across Vulcan’s deserts, he mused.

Frost was forming tonight on the upper surfaces of the plants. Soval suspected that if he didn’t keep moving, it would soon be forming on him also. “*Humans have so many admirable qualities,*” he grouched to himself, “*why couldn’t they have shown the good judgment to have evolved under a sun that put out a decent amount of heat?*” The sheer illogic of this thought stopped him in his tracks and made him realize how very tired he was. “*I haven’t made time to meditate properly in three days,*” he realized. Not good at all. Duty or no duty, some things could not be deferred. He would be of no use to his people if he allowed himself to become dysfunctional.

Crackling footsteps approached, to Soval’s relief. He saw a humanoid silhouette outlined by a softly glowing lantern step into view at the edge of the clearing. The figure was bundled in form concealing coveralls and carrying what appeared to be a long weapon. “Commander Shran?” Soval asked, stepping forward.

The figure raised the weapon and took aim. Soval reacted with reflexes that had grown up dodging wild sehlat, and spent their young adulthood trading weapons fire. He dove, hit the ground rolling and bounced to his feet, then dashed for the edge of the forest, ducking and weaving. Several soft sounding eruptions behind him informed the Vulcan that he was dealing with a projectile weapon. Most probably a standard Human hunting rifle, using highly compressed gas to propel an explosive bullet.

As he leaped sideways behind the cover of a large oak tree, Soval felt something impact his right shoulder. Shock waves spread down his arm, across his shoulders and down his spine as the bullet detonated on the bone of his shoulder blade. The kinetic energy knocked him staggering.

-&-

The Andorian called Draklas flew directly west, then southwest. Eventually he settled the air car beside a small restaurant in a non-descript town. Draklas put on a pair of gloves and pulled a hood over his head. Then he got out of the car and walked away from it, never looking back. His associates would take care of it.

Three blocks later Draklas stepped into an alley behind a warehouse and ducked through a doorway. He followed the outer wall of the empty building to a small office and settled down in front of a sealed terminal. After inputting an extremely complex identification code, providing DNA identification,

submitting to voice and retinal analysis, and then submitting yet another code, he was able to activate it and then input his password.

The speaker activated, though the screen remained blank. *“Thyren. Report.”* The voice was mechanical, obviously scrambled.

The Andorian cleared his throat. *“Delivery complete.”*

“Precautions?”

“Yes, of course,” Thyren allowed a touch of impatience to enter his voice. “Even though I sincerely doubt that a Human of Massaro’s obvious incompetence is capable of killing an experienced Vulcan operative. Not even one as old and out of shape as Soval. Moreover, the ambassador is not an idiot. He made sure to let his aide know where he was going. I scanned him in the car, and he is carrying a tracker. Which any sane person would be doing of course. In addition I made sure to notify the local Human authorities.”

“Excellent. We are dealing with enough as it is. The last thing we need is to reignite war with the Vulcans right now.”

“Set your concerns to rest. Soval will survive his little adventure, I am confident.” Thyren leaned forward. “What is important about this is the fact that Terra Prime now considers me a useful tool. They believe me to be as honorless as they are themselves, willing to sell myself to anyone for the right price. The closer I can maintain this connection, the closer we can reach to the ones who killed General Skrilla’s daughter.”

“You are now convinced she is dead?” The scrambled voice still somehow managed to convey disappointment.

“Yes,” Thyren looked grim. “I have also consulted various Human reference works on the subject, used for law enforcement training. All agree. If she has been missing this long without any contact from her kidnapers, then she is dead. Most likely they captured her for useful information. Once they were finished interrogating her, they killed her and disposed of the body to remove a witness.”

“Then it falls to us as her comrades to carry out the duty of revenge. There is a blood debt to be paid.”

Chapter 3: Conclusion

He crouched low and listened intently, breathing through his mouth as silently as possible. The enemy was out there somewhere. But the wind was getting stronger, and shifting leaves made it impossible to pick out the Vulcan's footsteps.

Massaro turned up the volume slightly on the earphones he wore. The noise suppression circuit in the headset was supposed to filter out extraneous background noises like rustling leaves, but it didn't work for shit. The infrared goggles were at least doing their job. He could see a monochrome image of the forest as brightly as if it were high noon.

His nostrils flared in atavistic reflex. The Vulcan was inhumanly fast. "*What else did you expect fool?*" he sneered at himself. Massaro crept forward a half step at a time, moving timidly toward the tree that Soval had ducked behind. "*Three times human strength they say,*" he remembered. In the Expanse, Commander T'Pol had certainly never shown any problem sparring with human men. Even the biggest MACOs on the ship had to use skill against her, brute force alone was never enough.

If a Vulcan woman could face a MACO the size of an air car, what could a Vulcan man do to a human male his size? Massaro was already sweating, this thought made it even worse. He gritted his teeth and swung wide around the tree, keeping the rifle pointed at the spot where Soval had disappeared. Nothing. Relief shuddered through him and made his knees weak.

Now what? Massaro scanned the area beyond the tree quickly. Then he went over the area more thoroughly, checking each bush, each mound of leaves. Nothing. Sudden cold lanced down his back and he whirled around. Nothing. Massaro spun in a slow circle. No sign of the Vulcan anywhere. He had vanished into thin air. Shit. *Shit. SHIT.*

Massaro tried to quiet his panting. Think. He wasn't a ghost, he was just a mortal. An alien, yes. Fast and strong, yes. But still flesh and blood. He was hiding somewhere, behind something that was blocking his body heat from the infrared goggles. All he had to do was proceed forward with extreme caution until he spotted a tell tale glow of heat, then cut loose and spray it full of bullets. Job done, and he could go home.

"*No!*" he thought in panic. Massaro dropped to a squat and pointed the rifle into the branches above his head. Nothing. It was just the wind. The Vulcan had not climbed the tree after all. Massaro's hands were shaking so badly he could barely hold the rifle. Sweat dripped into his eyes and blinded him, fogging the lenses of his goggles. His heartbeat deafened him to any other sound. He started to hyper ventilate.

Why had he let Cantrell talk him into this? Stupid question. What else could he do? Without Terra Prime's help he had nothing left now. His Starfleet career was destroyed. With a dishonorable discharge hanging over his head, and a blacklisting from Starfleet Command, nobody would ever hire him unless it was one of Mr. Cantrell's companies. He either committed to Cantrell all the way now, or he cut his throat and got it over with.

And this was his last chance to make it up to Mr. Cantrell for screwing up so badly aboard Enterprise. He bit his lip bloody as he remembered confessing to Lieutenant Reed. He had volunteered information that they didn't even ask for. He had given them things that they had no way of even suspecting. Massaro flushed in shame. But what else could he have done? They were going to bring in those Vulcan priest-warlocks and mind rape him.

He shuddered and tightened his shoulders. Vulcans. Like the one he was hunting tonight. Like that bitch T'Pol that had corrupted Commander Tucker. As fine a man as ever lived, until she turned him into a traitor to his own race. Massaro took a deep breath. He was going to do this. He was going to kill this Vulcan tonight. Then he was going to go back and report to Mr. Cantrell that he had successfully accomplished his mission.

Massaro started creeping forward again, making sure to keep checking in all directions, including overhead.

-&-

Soval lay perfectly still, watching the human by the light of the lantern he was carrying. A moment later the light went out and Soval closed his eyes quickly. It took several seconds for his vision to adjust to the near total darkness under the trees. Only the almost imperceptible glow of Earth's full harvest moon trickling through the branches gave him any light at all.

Soval could still make out the vague shadow shape of the human standing between him and the brighter glow of the clearing. The human turned and Soval caught a quick flash from the goggles he wore. Night vision gear. He also remembered seeing some kind of helmet that covered the man's ears. Most likely his hearing was augmented as well. If he knew in advance that he would be facing a Vulcan, it would be a logical precaution.

After squatting and looking up into the tree for a moment, the human assassin straightened and began moving once more, heading deeper into the forest along the heading that Soval was originally following when he left the clearing.

The cold humus pressed against his cheek was causing his face to become numb. His hands were better off, being folded together against his chest. Fortunately his clothing was well insulated. Normal Earth temperatures had become increasingly chilly to Soval as the years passed, and he had permitted himself to appreciate the logic of avoiding frostbite by arranging for his suits to carry an extra layer of thermal protection. At present, this not only added to his comfort but also provided a shield against the assassin's heat sensors.

Once the human had passed beyond earshot Soval slid carefully from under the log, emerging out of a pile of wet leaves. He remained crouched and listening. There was no indication that his motion had been detected. Carefully he tried to move his right arm. The pain was severe but the limb was still mobile. A trickle of blood could be felt, but the damage overall was much less than he had expected. Soval raised an eyebrow and considered. Apparently the human was using a small caliber rifle. Not the most logical weapon for an assassin. The range of such weapons was quite limited, and the projectile velocity was also quite low. They were designed for small game hunting, and depended on the explosive bullet to provide the shock power to kill the prey.

On the other hand, they were ubiquitous across the planet and easily obtained, legally or otherwise. They could also be disposed of readily and were difficult to trace. Knowing nothing about his attacker, Soval could not assume that the assassin had access to significant resources. Perhaps a small caliber rifle was the best he could get. A shot to the head could still kill him. It would not be appropriate to forget that fact.

Soval unfastened his ambassadorial sash. He moved cautiously back toward the relatively well lit clearing, but forbore to enter it. Staying within the shelter of the forest, but near enough to take advantage of the full moon's dim light, Soval circled the clearing. Along the way he stumbled over several stones, two of which he picked up and knotted into the ends of his sash. It was not an *ahn-woon* by any means, but it was far better than nothing.

Soval finally worked his way around to the point from which the human had emerged. He discovered a small path leading away from the clearing and promptly started following it. For now, speed was more important than stealth. His first concern must be to put distance between himself and the assassin. If there were cohorts up ahead, so be it. He would deal with them when he found them. Hopefully there would be either a vehicle or a shelter that he could commandeer, either of which might provide communications ability.

In any case, when he did not return in two hours, the Security Directorate would dispatch a team to home in on his tracker signal immediately. Soval calculated that his flight to the clearing had required 26.4 minutes. From the time Draklas had departed to present was...

Soval raised an eyebrow. He had lost track of time. Most disconcerting. Extreme fatigue, coupled with pain and blood loss were hampering his thought processes to a greater degree than he had realized. Finding shelter was becoming imperative.

-&-

Massaro ground his teeth in frustration. The Vulcan might as well have transported off the planet. Except he knew that it couldn't have happened. No, somehow the devious old S.O.B. had managed to hide himself so well that Massaro had overlooked him.

All he could do was back track and try again, using a wider search pattern this time. Sooner or later he had to find him, or his body. Maybe one of his shots had hit? Massaro considered the idea hopefully. If that was the case, the Vulcan might be somewhere bleeding to death right now. He felt much better at the thought.

Massaro zigzagged his way back to the edge of the clearing and suddenly stopped with a curse. The hollow under the fallen log was plain to see now, as was the pile of wet leaves that Soval had used for cover. Seething with anger, Massaro forgot his fear long enough to close in and examine the trail. Groping through darkness had prevented the Vulcan from doing anything effective about hiding his trail. The shuffled leaves and broken branches were plain to see.

Massaro glanced forward and saw where the Vulcan had reached the clearing's edge and started to circle. Where was he going?

It hit him like a club. His air car. The Vulcan was going to double back and try for Massaro's air car. The Vulcan was running scared. A surge of new confidence burned through him. All right then. The

hunter bared his teeth. Let him try to break in. Before he had time to get past the lock it would all be over. Massaro strode confidently along Soval's trail, no longer worried.

-&-

The air car was securely locked. Without tools Soval calculated the probability of being able to break in at less than 0.13%. He was considering his options when the sound of footsteps on the path told him that time for thinking was up. The low, spreading branches of a nearby maple tree provided easy access to an elevated attack position. Soval carefully coiled his improvised weapon in his left hand and waited, immobile again.

The footsteps approached, stopped, then approached again. A slightly darker shadow among all the other shades paused at the edge of the trees. Then it moved forward in the direction of the dimly blurred outline of the air car. It froze in place and Soval tensed. He heard the human stop breathing. Then the rustle of clothing, and a metallic click.

Soval vented the piercing *kwul-tor* scream of *ke-ta-yatar* and leaped for the shadow, swinging his weighted sash ahead of him in a whistling arc at what he judged to be head height. The two men crashed together and hit the ground. Massaro, blazing with panic strength, rammed the rifle crossways into Soval's face and pushed with everything he had. He somehow got out from under the old Vulcan and rolled away, frantically groping for the trigger of his weapon.

Soval struggled to his knees. The impact and resultant struggle had wrenched his wounded shoulder, increasing the pain by an order of magnitude. He was perilously close to losing consciousness. Looking up, he saw the outline of the assassin against the stars and heard him fumbling with the mechanism of the rifle. Barely coherent with pain and blood loss, Soval groped and found one end of his sash. He pulled his arm back and then snapped it forward in the standard *ahn-woon* throat attack.

The stone weight on the end of the sash flew past Massaro's head, then caught and spun around his neck like a bolo. Soval yanked with all his waning strength and dragged the young human forward off balance. Massaro dropped the gun and grabbed for the cloth band that was cutting off his air. Soval coldly struck upward with his weakened right fist and punched Massaro directly in the testicles as hard as he could. What little air Massaro had left departed abruptly and he went to his knees.

Soval lunged forward and embraced Massaro tightly, reaching for the back of his neck with both hands. He caught the human's neck in the grip of *tal'shaya* and applied the necessary pressure. Massaro died instantly. Too slow to release him, and too weak to hold him up, Soval let himself be dragged down with the corpse. They lay together for a time, hunter and hunted, as the Vulcan tried to regain enough breath to move again.

Eventually he managed to pull himself away from the body of his would-be killer and drag his bleeding self over to the air car, where he slumped in shaking exhaustion. An unknown time later Soval heard the engines of several air cars approaching that he recognized as Vulcan made. Lights swept over the clearing, followed by security operatives dropping into position on lift belts.

"Ambassador." Soval tried to respond but had trouble forming the words. Hypothermia was robbing him of the ability to move or speak. A rapid series of commands were snapped back and forth over his head. Then someone wrapped an emergency blanket around his shoulders and two people helped him stand.

A hypo against his neck took effect quickly, and Soval managed to open and focus his eyes. His chief operative, Ketan, was directing a team in securing the area. Seeing Soval on his feet brought Ketan over at a trot. "What is the Ambassador's condition?" he demanded of the medic who was running a scanner over Soval.

"Minor bullet wound in the right shoulder," the medic reported blandly. "Moderate damage, non-lethal." Soval pulled loose from the hands gripping him and walked over to the body of his attacker. Ketan followed closely. In the near distance every Vulcan could hear the rapid approach of Human vehicles. Many of them, all closing at high speed.

"Ambassador," Ketan insisted urgently, "we must evacuate you immediately."

Soval replied, "No." He looked down at the body of the man he had killed for a moment. Then he knelt and removed the goggles and helmet. His breath hissed in recognition. "Massaro."

"The Terra Prime operative aboard Enterprise who stole Commander T'Pol's genetic material?" Ketan asked stonily.

"Yes." Soval climbed tiredly back to his feet, just as a light swept down and outlined the two of them as they stood over the body. Soval glanced up and saw the logo of a planetary news service, along with a recorder aimed directly at the clearing. The Human was recording everything. The dead Human, the Vulcans standing around the body, the ambassadorial sash still wrapped around the body's throat, everything. Well, so be it then.

Soval turned and gestured for the medic. He sat down and allowed Ketan to assist him in removing his shirt, giving the reporter a clear view of his bloody back and the bullet wound. The medic went to work.

-&-

"Thank you, Crewman," Captain Archer said. Crewman Gonzales unloaded the tray onto the table in the Captain's Mess and Trip breathed in blissfully.

"Steak and mashed potatoes, with red eye gravy. Oh man," he gloated. "Hey that reminds me, Cap'n. I brought back a crate full of kasa fruit for Chef. It's still in the shuttle pod."

"I will have the Quartermaster send somebody to unload it after dinner," Archer told him. He waited until the crewman had left the room and continued, "Anyway, from the way you were talking earlier this Inclusion ceremony sounds like the Vulcan version of a baby shower."

"Partly," Trip agreed evasively. "It's a lot more than that. But partly it's a chance for the women of the family to bring gifts for the baby."

"So what did you get? Clothes and things like that?" Archer poured them each a beer from the pitcher.

"Plus a lot of educational baby toys," Trip told him. "Things to stimulate Lizzie's mind and develop her coordination. Some of them are pretty interesting. Some of them are cute. And some of them are just annoying." He carved off a chunk of sirloin and started chewing it happily.

“Like what?” Archer asked him in amusement, taking a sip of beer.

“Well,” Trip swallowed the bite, “there is a mobile that hangs over her bed with lights and chimes. As she slaps some parts of it, it rings with different tones. Other parts light up in different colors when she hits them. So she can make up her own music and light show with it. Which is nice in the day time. But in the middle of the night when you are trying to sleep it’s not so great.”

“You couldn’t accidentally on purpose lose it?” Archer spooned out some more gravy and passed the bowl to Trip.

Trip slopped gravy on his lap and sighed. He set the bowl down and started mopping as he muttered, “No way. She loves the thing. Took about five minutes before she got totally fascinated. We wouldn’t dare try to take it now. That kid has an incredible set of lungs on her Cap’n. You hafta hear her scream to believe it. Comes from being adapted to that thin air of course.” He looked up. “Can I have another napkin?”

Archer handed him one. “But what really echoes through the house is when she laughs,” Trip grinned with a faraway look in his eyes. “You can’t help busting out laughing right along with her. Or I can’t anyway. T’Pol just stands there fighting to keep a straight face most of the time. But I swear Cap’n, I heard her snicker once or twice. She would deny it under torture, but I heard it.”

Archer’s face broke out in an incredulous smile. “T’Pol? Snickering?”

Trip nodded emphatically. “There’s another toy that Lizzie got from the Inclusion ceremony that really puts a strain on T’Pol’s self-discipline just because the little squirt loves it so much. It’s some kind of exercise gadget that she can shake, or stretch, or twist, or squeeze.” Archer nodded understanding. “It drives T’Pol crazy because it goes ‘urbutt’ when you squeeze it,” Trip continued, “which sends Elizabeth into some kind of baby giggle seizure.”

“Uh... seizure?” Archer looked blank.

“Y’know what I mean, Cap’n,” Trip elucidated, “when they go ‘hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee hee shee sheesh hee-tchee-tchee-tchee-shee-hee hee hee hee hee hee*hic*hic*hic*hic*’ and then slide over off the cushion and look confused. T’Pol hates the thing.” He scooped up another bite of red eye soaked mashed potatoes reverently.

“In between watching the ladies laughing, did you get any work done?” Archer inquired.

“Yep,” Trip affirmed. “I went over those plans from stem to stern and back again. They are crap Cap’n. Never fly. I found seven critical flaws that would cause a containment failure before the engine even made it up to warp four, much less all the way up to warp six. Had T’Pol check me on this. She said that ‘these calculations appear to be insupportably optimistic’. The injector designs especially are, in her words, ‘astonishingly inadequate’. Those are direct quotes Cap’n.”

Archer looked grim. “I will want you with me when we contact Admiral Gardner. He isn’t going to like this.”

“He would like it even less if they built something that blew up,” Trip retorted.

“No one doubts your conclusions Trip,” Archer said. “If you two agree that the plans are crap, then the plans are crap. I just don’t want to hear what the admiral is going to say about the time and resources that have already been spent on them.”

The admiral had plenty to say, and he said it eloquently. He expressed his mind with a verve and elan that bespoke his many years of service aboard ships of the line. Trip heard it all with open mouthed admiration. “By Cochrane’s empty whiskey bottle, Admiral,” Trip said. “I would take my hat off to ya if I was wearin’ one.”

“This is just exactly what we don’t need right now,” the admiral sighed. “I was hoping that at least one thing would be going right for a change. But plainly, I am paying for my sins in a past life and the karmic load is still massive. I must have been a politician.”

“I take there are some other difficulties, Admiral?” Archer asked in concern.

Gardner looked out from the view screen at them in resignation. “If you hadn’t called me, Jon, I was going to contact you anyway as soon as Commander Tucker returned. I wanted you to be aware of this before you left orbit around Vulcan in any case. Now, after hearing this about the designs, we may be making a change in schedule.”

“What happened, Admiral?” Captain Archer asked

Admiral Gardner rubbed his brow. “Three days ago former Ensign Massaro tried to kill Ambassador Soval. He failed and ended up dead himself. Soval is in the infirmary at the Vulcan compound right now. The media are going wild.”

Jonathan Archer winced and glanced over at his friend, expecting another explosion. To his surprise, Trip was sitting with his mouth gaping open in disbelief, absolutely stunned. Archer had never seen it happen before in all the years he had known Trip. Too choked with anger to talk, yes. But never actually shocked into immobility.

“I can certainly see what you mean, Admiral,” Archer said worriedly. “Why haven’t we heard anything about this? The Vulcan authorities haven’t said a word to us about it.”

“I gather,” Admiral Gardner told them, “that the Vulcans are trying to minimize the spread of this news back home as long as possible. Sure, it will get out eventually. But T’Pau wants to let us much insulating time pass as she can before it becomes common knowledge. It also gives us time to track down where Massaro has been hiding and who set him up for this.”

“Set him up?” Trip roused up at last. “What do you mean by that, Admiral?”

Gardner grimaced. “Soval was lured to an out of the way place for an ambush. Oddly, somebody placed an anonymous tip with the local cops about five minutes after Soval was dropped off. Even more oddly, the decoy who lured Soval to the ambush point deliberately allowed him to notify his aide where he was going, who he was going with, and let him take a tracker with him. That sound strange to you?”

“Oooo Kaaay,” Trip leaned back in his chair and blinked. “That makes no sense at all. In fact, why bother with an ambush? Why not have the decoy just dump him out somewhere, then take off and shoot him from above?”

“Exactly,” Gardner. “It gets more interesting. A few minutes after the tip to the local police, another anonymous tip was sent in to the news media. But this tip came from a different location, using a different communications protocol, with a different voice. The two recordings don’t come close to matching. Plus somebody gave Massaro a small caliber hunting rifle to do the job with. The kind of thing you take rabbit hunting. To kill an adult Vulcan! No gentlemen, Massaro was a patsy. He was meant to fail.”

“Terra Prime probably considered him disposable after his failure on Enterprise,” Captain Archer mused.

“Most likely,” Gardner said grimly. “But they are getting more use out of him dead than they did alive. With the news pictures of Massaro dead on the ground and Soval and his men standing over the body, Terra Prime is stirring up a hornet’s nest of rumors and innuendo. Everything from conspiracy theories about Vulcan hit squads, to implications that Earthgov was forced to let the Vulcans kill him or face invasion.”

“Oh by the...” Trip buried his face in his hand and started rubbing his forehead in extreme pain. Archer just sat there shaking his head in rank disbelief.

“Surely, Admiral,” Archer protested. “Surely even the most ignorantly xenophobic Human can’t possibly believe such ridiculous tripe.”

“It doesn’t take a majority, Jon,” Gardner said sadly. “All it takes is a sufficiently strident minority to put a real strain on diplomatic relations. By itself this one incident is not that serious. But add it all together with everything else that has happened recently, and all of it riding on the coat tails of the Xindi attack, and you can see why we are worried.”

“I suppose so,” Archer said sadly.

Gardner continued, “There is one more thing. I know you have both been briefed about General Skrilla’s daughter, Tenla? The young Andorian woman who was kidnapped on Vulcan?” They nodded. “The decoy who lured Soval to the ambush point was Andorian. He identified himself as Draklas, a member of the Andorian delegation for the new embassy they just opened in Toronto. Except there is no such man.”

Trip threw up his hands. He stood up and walked over to look out the window into space, shaking his head. “Beautiful,” Archer growled in disgust. “That is just utterly beautiful. These cloak and dagger games give me indigestion.”

“The Andorian embassy,” Admiral Gardner said carefully, “has declined to cooperate with the investigation into this matter.” Archer closed his eyes and sighed.

“What are your orders, Sir?” he asked in resignation.

Gardner rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "I think I am going to modify them a bit from what I originally had in mind. Commander Tucker?"

"Yes, Sir?" Trip turned away from the window and walked back to the view screen.

"You mentioned that Com-, Lady T'Pol helped you check over the design plans? She had no objections to doing that?" Trip looked surprised.

"No, Admiral. No problem there. Why would she?" Trip wondered.

"What about," Gardner hesitated, "if we assigned you to modify and make improvements to them. Would she be willing to assist you with that as well?" Trip straightened thoughtfully.

"On what basis, Admiral?" Trip asked. "T'Pol resigned her commission because Vulcan tradition demands that the mother be the primary caregiver for a baby. At least until they are old enough to go to school. She is not going to let anything interfere with that."

"Understood," Gardner said. "I was thinking of a civilian consultant position. We would reimburse her on a per task basis, with her free to set her schedule at her own convenience."

Trip looked intrigued. "I can ask her. I can sure ask her, Admiral. Tell the truth, she misses Enterprise." He added hurriedly to both of the men listening, "Not that anything in the galaxy would ever drag her away from taking care of Lizzie. No way. But you gotta know that after spending all those years working for the Vulcan High Command, then aboard Enterprise with all we have been through, well... Settling down to changing diapers and filling bottles is a little tame."

"I can well imagine," Gardner said. "How long do you think it would take the two of you to fix those designs? Turn them into something that might actually be workable?"

"Oh man, Admiral," Trip ran his fingers through his hair. "That's the kind of question you can't really answer until you get into it. A case like this is like tipping over dominoes. Finding one thing always affects ten more things that have to be changed too. I couldn't even give you a realistic estimate until we put some time in on the actual work. If you want a guess I would say at least a year, maybe more. Maybe a lot more."

Gardner winced but nodded. "We should have had you in on it from the start. I argued in favor of it, but I was out voted. Now I get to say I told you so, but it just doesn't feel very satisfying for some reason." He grimaced.

"So I am going to lose my chief engineer after all," Archer said.

"I am afraid so, Jon," Gardner told him. "We can't afford to waste any more time spinning our wheels with this. Not if we want warp six within our generation. Unless you think there is someone else out there who can get the job done for us quicker?"

Archer sighed and laughed at the same time, shaking his head. "You've got me, Admiral. Trip is the best we've got. I just hate to lose him."

“Hess can handle things Cap’n,” Trip told him earnestly. “Seriously,” he looked at both officers, “I want to recommend Hess as my replacement right up front. She is the best on my team. She is smart, she gets along with everyone on the team and they all respect her. You couldn’t do better than Hess, and that’s a fact.”

“Noted,” Archer nodded. “You have mentioned Hess before. Her performance reviews have never been less than top notch. It is a little bit soon for a promotion, but not unheard of.” He turned to the screen. “Admiral Gardner, based on Commander Tucker’s recommendation, I would like your approval to promote Hess to Lieutenant Commander and place her in charge of engineering.”

Gardner smiled. “It’s your ship, Jon. Your ship and your crew.”

Archer returned his smile. “Thank you, Sir.”

“Now, speaking of that aforementioned ship and crew, Jon,” Admiral Gardner continued. “As soon as Commander Tucker has been delivered to his new duties, you are going to Andoria.”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Things are tense, Jon,” Gardner told him. “First with Terra Prime kidnapping that girl on Vulcan. Now with this situation where a mysteriously non-existent Andorian supposedly lures Soval into an ambush.”

“You don’t believe Soval, Sir?” Archer wondered.

“I just don’t know, Jon,” Gardner muttered. “The Vulcans claim they are turning over a new leaf. I would like to believe that they are. I hope they are. But they have been manipulating us about one thing or another for a hundred years. And they have been lying to the Andorians even longer. Look at P’Jem. We can’t afford to take chances.” He saw their expressions. “Look, I personally like Soval. He seems like a decent guy. But he also works for his government, just like us. He obeys his orders, just like us. Even if he might not like them personally, he would still obey them.”

Trip’s indignant look suddenly relaxed into uncertainty. Archer tightened his lips and nodded. “Understood, Admiral.”

“So you, Jon, are going to Andoria to smooth feathers. You will travel with diplomatic credentials, and once you arrive you will get in touch with our embassy there. The paint isn’t even dry on the walls in that place. I would hate to have to close it before we finish moving the furniture in,” Gardner said. “Try to keep that from happening, will you? Coordinate with Ambassador Jenkins, she can get you up to speed on current conditions there. Make contact with Commander Shran and see if he will still talk to you. Do what you can for us, Jon. Meanwhile I will try to put out fires on this end.”

“Will do, Sir,” Archer acknowledged.

Gardner told Trip, “Commander, I want you to return to Vulcan and report to our embassy compound in Shi’Kahr to get the paperwork taken care of for your new assignment. You will be reporting directly to me, is that clear? If anyone tries to give you grief about that, just refer them upstairs and I will make sure it doesn’t happen again. All you worry about is getting those plans done.”

“Yes, Sir,” Trip said. Gardner nodded.

“All right then, Gentlemen. I have a press conference in twenty minutes. Then a meeting with the Tellurite ambassador in an hour and a half. Then I need to swing by the Vulcan infirmary and visit Ambassador Soval. Then I have the joy of trying one more time to convince the Andorians to cooperate with us in finding out who this Draklas guy is. Wanna trade jobs?” They both recoiled at the thought and Gardner signed off looking tired.

-&-

Thyren walked upstairs from the concealed tunnel and waited in front of the door to be scanned. After the sensors had finished analyzing him, a cover slid aside to allow him to input his access code. Then another plate slid aside to permit him to provide retinal and DNA identification. Finally the door lock disengaged and the portal opened. He walked into the lower basement of the Andorian embassy.

Lethos glanced up from the work table. “I regret the necessity. I would not have called you in from your field work if it were not imperative.”

Thyren waved it off impatiently. “Of course you would not. That is understood. What has happened? Did you find one of them?”

“In a sense, yes.” Lethos had an odd look on his face. He pushed a small box across the table. Thyren gave it a quick examination. It looked unremarkable. A simple cardboard box. The kind that was used on this planet for shipping small packages routinely.

“Open it,” Lethos requested. Thyren complied. He stared fixedly at the contents.

“Interesting.” He looked up. “Was there anything else?”

“There was,” Lethos told him. He held up a Human data cartridge. “I have scanned it of course. There is nothing dangerous in any of it. No poison, no biotoxin, nothing explosive. Nothing dangerous in the entire package.”

“Except the package itself,” Thyren stated flatly. Lethos smiled in agreement. He turned and slipped the data cartridge in the room’s terminal.

Thyren watched as the large wall screen brightened. It showed an outdoor Earth scene. There was a small Human dwelling off to one side of the view. The rest of the view was taken by a grassy yard, surrounded by a tall privacy fence. The terrain was steeply sloping. The time of day appeared to be early morning or late evening, judging by the long shadows. There was no sound to the recording.

A door in the swelling opened and a human male stepped outside. The recorder focused in on the Human’s face and froze movement for a few seconds. Thyren tensed in recognition. He had studied that face day and night ever since beginning this mission. It was one of the three Humans that they had confirmed as having been the last to see Tenla alive. This one had been identified by the Human authorities as Louis Johanson. There could be no possible doubt.

“I see that you recognize him as well,” Lethos remarked.

Thyren hissed, “Yes.” His eyes never wavered from the screen. Motion resumed on the recording. Johanson looked directly at the recorder, his expression becoming surprised, then puzzled, then angry. He said something, then he strode toward the recorder with a dangerous look in his eye. At approximately the halfway point a quick flicker of light denoted a weapon flash. Johanson stopped in shocked disbelief, then dropped in his tracks.

The recorder approached the fallen body and looked down. Johanson was plainly dead. The recorder zoomed closer to the corpse, and a pair of hands wearing skin tight black gloves appeared in the field of view. One of the hands was holding a knife. The other hand picked up Johanson’s left hand and showed it to the recorder, separating the smallest finger and applying the knife to the base of it. One quick slash sufficed to sever the digit, along with the silver ring that encircled it.

The recorder drew back and showed some material being sprayed over Johanson’s corpse. In seconds the body became to emit fumes and shrivel, along with the clothing it was wearing. The shriveled remains started to blacken and char. Within minutes nothing was left of Louis Johanson but ashes, drifting away in the wind. The recording ended and the screen went dark.

Thyren looked at Lethos. Then he turned back to the box and looked at the finger inside, taking special note of the silver ring it bore. “It certainly looks the same,” he admitted.

“It also bears DNA that matches the traces we found on Vulcan, when we analyzed Tenla’s ground car,” Lethos told him quietly.

“General Skrilla will appreciate this,” Thyren said, equally quietly.

“Do you think it will satisfy her, for the Humans to kill them privately this way?” Lethos wondered.

Thyren offered, “As long as her daughter is avenged, I really doubt that General Skrilla is going to be overly concerned about ways and means.”

-&-

Crewman Gonzales went off duty and headed for his quarters at a brisk walk. Ordinarily he would hang around for a while in the kitchen and chat with his friends, or drop in at the gym to shoot a few hoops. But today he had something urgent to take care of.

His roommates were still out. Good. Two were on duty this shift, the other one never showed up in their quarters except to shower and sleep. And only then when his girlfriend forced him to. Gonzales still felt his gut tighten nervously as he opened his locker. He felt only marginally better once he activated the anti-monitoring field. At least now the security cameras and microphones were disabled.

Gonzales pulled out what appeared to be an ordinary PADD. He entered the proper instructions and plugged in a small device at the side. Then he spoke quietly, “Ground Mole from Sky Hawk.” He waited with his guts in a knot for the reply.

“Sky Hawk this is Ground Mole. Go ahead.”

“Turncoat is running back to his hole. Repeat, Turncoat is jumping ship. He’s all yours.”

“Understood. Not a problem. Ground Mole out.” The satisfaction in the distant voice came through clearly.

Gonzales deactivated the transmitter and reset everything. He left his quarters with a feeling of deep relief. He really had not been looking forward to the job anyway. Now to find Matilda Wu and let her know that their part of the mission was off. He really hoped she wouldn't be too disappointed. Pissing off Matilda was never safe nor wise.

Ensign Davis stroked the communicator switch with his thumb and smiled. So Tucker was coming back down. Couldn't leave his green-blooded piece alone huh? All right then. So much the better. They would take care of the traitor down here. And maybe while they were at it, they would sample the Vulcan themselves. Find out just what she had that would make a man willing to give up his whole world and his entire species.

Davis went to find Schmidt and Richardson. They had some planning to do.

-&-

Josiah Cantrell was at peace with the world. He sighed with heartfelt satisfaction and pushed his plate back. “Jacob, you have outdone yourself this time. The filet mignon was fit for an emperor.”

Jacob Svengali grinned at his boss. “Keep piling it on Josiah. If you're not going to pay me a living wage, at least I can get some appreciation.” Both men chuckled. Svengali continued clearing the table.

“Is Susan still upstairs?” Cantrell asked idly. “It's a shame she missed out on this. I told her too much of that Tex-Mex chili at lunch would tear up her stomach, but she wouldn't listen to me. Typical woman.”

“I think she went outside,” Svengali waved vaguely. “Probably headed for the hammock.”

Cantrell stood up. “I will go see about her.” Svengali frowned.

“You coddle that broad too much Josiah,” he said bluntly. “It doesn't pay to get attached to them, you know that. Sooner or later, they all turn on you.”

Cantrell sighed and looked at his old friend. “I know Jacob. But I can enjoy it while it does last can't I?” he asked a touch wistfully. Jacob shook his head in disgust and went back to gathering dishes.

Cantrell walked outside. The September sunset was an explosion of crimson and orange, fading into purple and indigo. The glowing outline of the regal oaks still wore their warrior's golden armor against the coming attacks of slashing ice and screaming wind. For now though, all was still cool and calm. The loudest sound to be heard was the distant whinny of a mare as she imperiously summoned her colt. Cantrell smiled again. How he truly loved this place.

Someday, he brooded, he would have to see about siring an heir. It wouldn't be right not to pass it on. After seventeen generations, the land would pine and waste away without a Cantrell to tend it. Perhaps Susan?

He snorted and immediately rejected the thought. No. It would be the ultimate in stupidity to breed one of his concubines. It was dangerous enough allowing a woman to live in his home and sleep in his bed every night. But to give one full control over his blood? Over his family's future? Never going to happen. No. He would have to hire a host mother, and then arrange to have her eliminated afterward. It would take a lot of searching and selecting to find one fit to bear his seed.

The hammock was empty. Where could Susan have gone? Cantrell strolled casually across the grounds with his hands in his pockets, enjoying the fresh air and his full belly, in no particular hurry. The riding stable was empty, and her horse was in the stall. Josiah's forehead wrinkled. Slowly he paced around to the rear of the house.

There was movement in one of the windows of the guest cottage. Cantrell let his shoulders sag. He closed his eyes and shook his head in disappointment. Then he straightened up and put on a smile. Stepping toward the door, he walked into the cottage with a look of casual inquiry on his face.

Susan jumped and whirled around. "Oh! Josiah," she was flustered. "You startled me." Susan was flushed and nervous. Her eyes kept moving. Cantrell nodded to himself. Confirmed. He really felt a touch of sadness about this one.

"What are you doing out here Susan?" Cantrell asked cheerfully. "Is your stomach ache better?"

She visibly got a grip. "Yes. Thank you for asking. Much better." Susan headed for the door. "I was just looking around. I haven't been out here much and I was curious, that's all." Cantrell didn't move out of her way. Susan stopped in front of him, looking up and swallowing.

"What have you got there?" Josiah asked curiously, pointing to the newsreader PADD in her hand.

"Oh nothing," Susan said quickly, with terror flashing in her eyes. "Just the newspaper."

"Oh good," Cantrell purred. "I haven't had time to read it yet. May I?" Before she could react, or come up with some excuse, he plucked it from her fingers. Josiah quickly scrolled back to the most recently viewed pages and stopped when he found the picture she had been examining. Massaro's body, with a close-up view of his face. He glanced up from under his eyebrows at Susan, who had gone absolutely ghost white.

"Old news Susan," Cantrell said calmly. "Several days old. How long have you been worrying about this? You should have come to me with your concerns. I could have settled your mind days ago."

Susan looked bewildered. But somewhere in her eyes was a frantic desire to believe him. "You can? I mean... I didn't know what to think Josiah. I saw that picture and... I mean... It looked... I mean it looked exactly like the man who stayed here. It... I couldn't... I just..." She floundered desperately.

Cantrell took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He shook his head and smiled a tiny smile. "Susan, Susan. Don't you trust me yet? have I ever given you cause not to trust me? Have I ever lied to you?" She started to relax a trifle. Cantrell reached out and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, as he often did. "I promise you darling. Let's go back to the house where we can sit down and get comfortable over some coffee, and I will explain everything. All right?" She managed a smile and nodded in relief. Cantrell leaned over for a quick kiss and stepped to one side so she could precede him through the door.

As Susan stepped in front of him, Cantrell stiffened his hand like an ax blade and struck the back of her neck with all the strength in his back and shoulders. Her neck snapped with a dull crunch, like a rotten stick. Susan's body slumped to the floor. Her bladder and bowels cut loose as she went down, leaving her corpse to lay in a stinking puddle. Cantrell looked down in disgust.

Josiah stepped outside and pressed a button on his belt. Less than two minutes later Joe and Mike came racing up from different directions. Cantrell did not look directly at either of them. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder and growled, "Clean up." He walked toward the house.

The bodyguards went inside to find exactly what they expected. Mike spoke, in a high and gentle voice, "What a rancid mess. Again. What does this make him, three in the past two years?"

"Yeah," Joe answered. He bent over to estimate the size of the body and examine the injury. "I'd say this one is a prime candidate for being thrown off a horse. I'll get the cart, you saddle her gelding."

-&-

Hanson powered up his air car and entered the destination code for Tokyo. He sat back and waited for the San Francisco traffic control computer to work its way down the queue to him. The communications terminal announced an incoming call with a code he recognized. Hanson activated the security scrambler and answered.

"Hanson here. Go ahead, Mr. Cantrell."

"*Any luck, Fred?*" Cantrell's voice sounded a bit snappish today, and Hanson made a mental note to tread carefully. No telling what might have rubbed him the wrong way.

"No, Sir. Johanson disappeared into thin air," Hanson replied diffidently. "I have checked everywhere. But I still have a team on the job. As soon as they learn anything they will let me know."

"*Probably picked up a hooker somewhere and is laying around stoned out of his mind,*" Cantrell growled. "*If he is I will hang him by his own guts when I get my hands on him.*"

Hanson felt queasy. He was far from sure that Cantrell was exaggerating. They signed off and the lawyer tried to settle his nerves by reviewing the notes for his next meeting. He finally got clearance from traffic control and joined the stream of commuters who were heading out over the Pacific. Hanson relaxed against the cushions as his car climbed to an easy 15 kilometer altitude and leveled off, heading west at Mach two. He smiled and started to look back down at his notes when something in his engine rumbled.

Hanson's eyes snapped to the controls. The entire panel was dark and dead. He leaned forward and flipped several switches, no response. Then the engine cut off. Instantly, the car started to drop like a rock. Hanson vented a grunt that was more than half scream and stabbed at the communicator. No response. Nothing was working. Nothing at all. A few more seconds of futile effort convinced him that it was hopeless. He pushed back and yanked the emergency ejection lever.

It didn't move. Ice crawled along his spine and sank deep into his soul. Hanson twisted and contorted his body to look at the side of his driver's seat. Somehow the ejection mechanism had been deactivated.

All of the standard connections were missing. He tried to think past the primitive horror that ripped through every nerve in his body. Above all other deaths, Hanson feared the falling death. His eyes were dragged to the front window, where the blue perfection of the ocean beckoned, growing ever closer with each precious breath.

Tears flowed down his face and he tried to pray in his final seconds. He managed a feeble, "I'm sorry," just as the water rose up to strike like the avenging wrath of Lady Justice.

The boat was small and sleek. It was low to the water, dark in color and inconspicuous. It was built for speed. It slid to a stop beside the wreckage with nearly silent grace. The single occupant surveyed the floating debris, looking for something. He picked up a pole with a hook and reached over to drag Hanson's arm closer. Part of the shoulder was still attached. Reaching down with a pair of clippers that had jagged jaws, muchly similar to the teeth of a small fish, the boatman snipped off Hanson's smallest finger. Then he let the arm splash back into the water and started the engine again.

The boat's wake did not disturb the scavenging sea creatures for long.

-&-

Captain Archer looked disbelieving. "Are you sure, Ambassador? When I last spoke to Admiral Gardner he seemed adamant that Starfleet needed to find out who Draklas was."

Ambassador Jenkins took another slug of beer and burped tiredly, propping her feet up on the coffee table. "I am sure, Captain," she said ruefully. "After hounding my ass for a week to do everything but seduce the entire Andorian High Command if I had to in order to track this guy down, they send me a communique yesterday to drop it like a hot potato. It is verboten. Don't ask. Don't even bring it up in casual conversation."

"But they didn't say why?" Lieutenant Reed asked thoughtfully.

"Nope," the ambassador told him. "Just drop it. But on the plus side I am happy to report that old man Gardner says things are much less tense back home. Somebody has somehow managed to mollify the Andorians by doing something, for someone, somewhere. But I am not supposed to ask about that either, and neither are you apparently." She finished off her beer and smacked the mug down on the table in frustration.

"I wonder if Shran knows anything that he would tell me," Archer speculated.

"Captain," Reed hesitated. "If I may. I recommend that for the moment we let sleeping dogs lie. Unless I am mistaken, this situation sounds somewhat familiar." He gave his commanding officer a look. Archer scowled, but eventually nodded.

"At least," Captain Archer said philosophically, "I will have the chance to restock my supply of Andorian ale."

-&-

T'Pol ran the simulation again. Still inadequate. Even at the lowest settings the field collapsed immediately. Therefore, the material specifications would have to be revised for the plasma field

generator coils. Which would require that the power output ratings be recalculated. Which would mean that the transmission cables would have to be redesigned and re-spec'ed. Which meant that the material specifications for the cable terminals would need to be revised. Which meant that the impedance values for the entire power supply subsystem was completely out of balance and would have to be redesigned from scratch.

Down the hallway she heard her adun's voice echoing. "Don't give me that look of disdainful cuteness Lizzie. Just because you are three times as strong and half again as fast as the babies that Daddy learned on, doesn't mean that you are going to squirm out of here butt naked."

T'Pol smiled to herself. When she agreed to accept Admiral Gardner's offer, Trip had enthusiastically offered to help take up the slack with child care duties. T'Pol was dubious, but agreed to let him make the attempt. From the sound of things, she was going to be doing most of her consulting work while Elizabeth napped.

"Come back here!" Trip's yell brought T'Pol half out of her chair. She hesitated, not wanting to make him feel inadequate. But not wanting to stand by and let catastrophe proceed unhindered either.

"I will tape you to the bed little girl, don't think I won't," Trip declared in a no nonsense tone of voice. Elizabeth's answering giggle declared that she knew he was bluffing. "Oh, you don't believe me?" T'Pol stood up and waited, torn by indecision. "You just hide and watch then, young lady. See if I don't- you get your feet out of there!"

T'Pol made a beeline for the bedroom. She found Trip and Elizabeth both covered in powder, as well as the bed, the floor, and two of the walls. Trip had so far managed to get a shirt on Elizabeth, which she was in the process of taking back off. Meanwhile, as soon as Trip would get one side of the diaper fastened, Elizabeth would kick her way into getting her opposite foot into the seat of it and push it off. All the while, the child was engaging in the kind of back bending, twisting, jackknife contortions that can only be achieved by infants.

T'Pol moved in smoothly and suggested, "I found a discrepancy in the field generator coil specifications, Trip. You should double check my results. If I am correct, we will need to redesign the entire plasma field power system from the ground up." As she spoke T'Pol tactfully reached over and grabbed the baby's ankles in one hand, pulled the diaper up between her legs and spread the front across her belly, and fastened down each side with two quick motions.

Trip stood panting from his efforts and looked abashed. "Maybe I should," he accepted the bone she was throwing him. "I told Admiral Gardner at least a year, but it could be a lot more. Beginning to look like a year won't even get us well started, with everything so messed up in these. What were those fools thinking?" Trip shook his head in disgust. "A lot of this is basic stuff. Things that anyone should already know. Well established things."

"Well established to you," T'Pol pointed out, picking up Elizabeth and reinserting her into the shirt, despite the baby's best efforts to thwart momma's plan. "Because you were the one who established them. On Enterprise, by trial and error."

Trip got a strange look on his face. "Never thought of it that way." He watched T'Pol picked up the old diaper and make a face. Even wrapped, the odor was profound. She promptly closed her nostrils and carried it at arm's length to the disposal unit.

"I really wish I could do that," he told her. "Shut my nose off that way. I wonder why it is that when you take Human formula and run it through a hybrid metabolism, what comes out the other end would knock a buzzard out of the sky."

"Human baby waste does not smell that bad?" T'Pol asked.

"Not anywhere near," Trip swore. "No worse than Lizzie's when she is taking the Vulcan formula. I wonder what a Human baby would put out if they tried Vulcan formula?"

"I am not curious enough to make the experiment," T'Pol said distastefully. She shifted Elizabeth to her other arm and led the way back to their home office. As they entered, Trip paused to admire the new wall hanging. When he returned from Enterprise, Trip had brought along a printed and framed copy of their marriage certificate. It now hung proudly in the center of the wall over their twin desks. T'Pol saw him checking it out. "If you wish, we can also obtain a copy of the family record that documents our bonding. That is the only official record here on Vulcan. Such matters are handled privately within the clan."

"I'd like that," he told her with a fond smile. "We could hang them together." Trip sat down and added, "It's a good thing we have a backup copy. Right now the only record of our marriage is the one on Enterprise. It's official, we are legally married under Earth law. But if we ever move to Earth and you decide to apply for citizenship, we will have to file the record with Earthgov's planetary database. And if anything happens to Enterprise," he concluded, "this will be the only existing record that we were ever married."

"My family's record will still exist," T'Pol reminded him. "Details of marriage and blood lines are kept private within the clan. But if proof of the information is ever needed it can easily be obtained." Trip pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"That's a relief." He turned to his terminal. "Now let's see what kind of mess they made with those field coils. How bad did you say they were?" T'Pol activated the controls to send him her simulation results. Trip put on an expression of extreme pain.

-&-

Lethos and Thyren sat stiffly before the monitor. The older Andorian woman who faced them from the screen wore an expression of grim satisfaction. "You have confirmed the identification?" she snapped.

"Yes, General," Lethos assured her. "The DNA analysis matches the second suspect samples taken from your daughter's ground car in Shi'Kahr. The one that the Human's identified as Frederick Hanson."

General Skrilla's antenna drew back and flared widely into the position of intense pleasure. "How did he die?" she demanded.

Lethos looked at Thyren, who answered, "There was no recording this time, General. Public newscasts report that his air car failed at a height of 15 kilometers. He fell into the planetary ocean and died on impact." She smiled.

“So he had plenty of time to realize his fate? Time to know that he was going to die, and to feel fear?” she asked, savoring the words.

“Most definitely,” Thyren promised her. The old woman’s eyes gleamed.

“Only one remains,” she whispered. “I had begun to doubt Shran, when he swore to me that these Humans were as honorable as the Vulcans are treacherous. But I see now that he spoke truth. They are trying to make it right, as best they can.”

“We are still seeking information about this last one, General,” Thyren informed her. “This Jacob Svengali. I have traced him to the eastern part of this continent. I have further confirmed that he is indeed highly placed in the chain-of-command for the Terra Prime group. Their former leader, Paxton, was killed by his own men in punishment for his failure on Mars. There is now conflicting information on where the real power lies. But we will find him, General. Sooner or later, we will find him.”

General Skrilla looked narrowly at Thyren, “You make them sound Klingon.”

“They are as brutal as Klingons,” Thyren told her, “but without the slightest trace of any honor code to restrain them. I have come to believe that this is the reason most Humans are so meticulous about following their own rules. It is because once they break free of the controlled structure provided by their code, they become little better than animals.”

General Skrilla flexed her antenna in understanding. “Continue with your work then. But something tells me you may not be required to finish it.” She bit out these last words savagely and joyfully. The screen went blank. The two operatives traded significant looks.

It was two days later that General Skrilla’s prediction came true. Lethos and Thyren were going over a paper map of North America, which was spread out on the table before them, when the communications monitor beeped to signal in incoming message. Which was impossible.

Lethos snapped upright and stared in shock at the terminal. Thyren remained frozen, bent over the work table. “I thought you said it was sealed.”

“It is,” Lethos sounded shaken. “Not only sealed. It is deactivated!”

“Apparently not anymore,” Thyren noted. He approached the terminal as if afraid it had grown teeth and pressed the button to receive the incoming message. The screen cleared to show a view of Earth from space. Obviously it was being beamed in from one of the planet’s weather satellites. The view zoomed in on North America, shifted east, then moved to follow the course of the Mississippi river south. At the junction of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, the viewpoint zoomed in again and then shifted southeastward.

Finally the view stopped and hovered over an area. The view zoomed once more, tightening down until a collection of buildings could be seen. A picture of Jacob Svengali’s face was superimposed on the view screen. Planetary coordinates were displayed. The view froze in place and remained unchanged from that point on.

It took them 47 minutes to gather weapons and reinforcements from the Imperial Guard troops assigned to the embassy. While they prepared for the attack, the ambassador’s staff worked feverishly to gather

as much intelligence as possible about the target. What they found ensured that the Andorians went in loaded for bear.

The farm was unnervingly quiet. Thyren led his squad eastward around the perimeter of the main building cluster, scanning for life signs. His fighters were tense and ready for anything. But nothing appeared except the grazing animals Humans used for riding. Lethos reported similar results from the other side of the compound with his team. The Andorians checked all of the outbuildings carefully, moving in toward the main house fully certain that they were heading for a trap.

The small dwelling at the rear was empty. Careful scans and visual checks revealed no signs of Humans anywhere. Lethos growled in raging frustration. "They were warned! They have escaped!"

Thyren urged calm. "Even if they have, we have learned much. We know where he has been hiding. We know who has been hiding him. We have more names. We have more connections. We have more useful information." He looked at the house. "I have no doubt that there will be even more useful data inside. If we can get it without blowing ourselves up." He gestured to his ordnance experts to lead the way.

The two bomb specialists entered with meticulous precision, scanning every millimeter of the way. They moved through the house one room at a time until they reached the dining area, where they stopped.

"Sub-Commander Lethos. We have found the occupants. They are here. Dead."

When Lethos walked into the dining room he stopped and blinked in rank disbelief. This was the most bizarre thing he had ever seen. Not even the lowest level slums on Rigel could offer a sight to compare to this. Behind him, he heard several of his hardened veteran fighters start to gag. Thyren walked up beside him, obviously shaken.

Four Human bodies were arrayed neatly on the floor, side by side. Their limbs were arranged in the typical pattern for Human burial, with the legs together and the hands carefully folded together on the chest. On the dining table above and behind the bodies, four brightly polished metal platters were laid out. Each of the platters was occupied by one of the severed heads of the four bodies. Only one thing broke the pattern. One of the bodies was missing a finger. On the floor between Lethos and the bodies was a much smaller metal platter. On this smaller platter lay a severed finger.

Thyren whispered, "I have read," he choked, "I have read an old Human legend that spoke of something like this. I do not think that this was meant entirely for us Lethos. I think we should take the finger and leave. Quickly."

"Agreed," Lethos said in a shaky voice. He stooped and gathered up the severed digit and backed toward the door, somehow unable to turn his back on the macabre spectacle. The Imperial Guardsmen followed them out with relief. No one spoke a word on the way back to the embassy.

-&-

Trip carefully adjusted the frame. "How's that?" he wanted to know. T'Pol eyed it carefully. "It appears level, and parallel with the other one," she judged. Trip stepped back in satisfaction. The Vulcan marriage record, with its elaborate calligraphy, provided a sharp contrast to the machine

printing of the Starfleet marriage certificate. Trip thought it was a nicely ironic statement of the contrast between the cultures. The emotional Humans produced documents that were sterile and utilitarian. The strictly disciplined Vulcans made documents that were beautiful works of art.

“It’s too bad we don’t have a birth certificate for Lizzie to put up,” Trip said regretfully. “She deserves to have some kind of documentation to commemorate her. The very first child born to a mixed marriage like ours.”

T’Pol walked over and slipped an arm around his waist. “Does it really matter so much to you, Husband?”

Trip thought for a minute and shook his head. “Naw. Not really. I guess my people are always making noises about who was first at something, and trying to pin it down. But in the long run what difference does it make? People argued for centuries that Christopher Columbus was the first European to discover America. Then they found a ruined settlement that showed Vikings were there centuries before him. Then some guy built a ship like the ancient Egyptians used and proved that they could easily have sailed across the Atlantic even centuries before that. And who cares anyway at this late date?” He turned around and smiled at her, returning her hug. T’Pol leaned forward and rested her head on his chest.

“Anyway,” Trip said in a moment, “since our little trailblazer is taking her nap, how about you and I go explore the kitchen and see what we can discover for dinner?”

-&-

Davis set the shuttle pod on the plateau using lowest power thrusters to minimize dust. Richardson and Schmidt made a final check of their weapons while Davis started scanning the area.

“Aside from wildlife,” Davis reported, “all I see are one Human and two Vulcans. All three are west by 10 degrees northwest. Distance 450 plus meters.” He glanced up. “That way,” he pointed. “Beyond those two rocks. Readings say there is a path there, leading to a house. All three are in it.”

Richardson, the security ensign, was the only one of the three with significant training in this kind of work. Under his direction they approached the house with extreme caution, moving in leapfrog fashion. One would advance while the other two covered him. Then the next would advance. Then the third. When they finally reached the house Richardson assigned Davis to circle around and cover the rear door, while he and Schmidt prepared to assault the front.

Davis reported softly, “One Human and one Vulcan at the front of the building. The other Vulcan bio-sign is alone near the back. It reads very weak, like it’s hurt or something.”

Richardson sent back, “Don’t take any chances. Even a sick Vulcan is dangerous. On my signal we go in together fast. Davis, you find and neutralize that third Vulcan ASAP. Then move in to reinforce us. Schmidt and I will move in from the front before they know what hit them. Ready?”

The other two signaled that they were in position and ready. “GO!”

Trip was setting the table when he heard the door crash open. He dropped the plate he was holding and dashed for the front, just as an explosive charge detonated at the back of the house.

“ELIZABETH!” T’Pol screamed and leaped, disappearing down the hallway.

Two Humans came through the doorway wearing nondescript coveralls. Trip fell back to the kitchen and frantically looked for something, anything he could use as a weapon. A carving knife in a butcher block caught his eye. He grabbed it just as the intruders followed him through the archway. Trip dropped into a deep crouch and lunged forward, cutting edge up, trying for a disemboweling slice. The last thing he knew was the shock of a sickening blow against his skull.

T’Pol ran for the bedroom with the primal terror of her maternal ancestors ripping through her heart. She grabbed the edge of the doorway and used it to swing herself around and stopped, frozen into immobility. A grinning Human male was standing next to Elizabeth’s crib. His pulse rifle was pointing down at the crying baby.

“Now what have we here?” the Human male said softly. T’Pol tensed unbearably as he reached into the crib. She started to take a step forward and he shoved the pulse rifle against Elizabeth’s belly. ***“FREEZE BITCH!”***, T’Pol stopped moving and breathing. The Human went on, “One more twitch and you can shoot hoops through this brat’s guts.” He scooped up the baby and slung her carelessly under one arm. “Now. Move. Down the hall to the front. Slow.”

Richardson and Schmidt were dragging Trip’s unconscious body into the living area when Davis pushed T’Pol through the hallway entrance. “Look what I found gentlemen?” He smiled lasciviously. “Some R&R for us after a hard day’s work. And guess what? They were hiding a little surprise up here too.” He stepped to one side so that his companions could see the baby.

Schmidt scowled. “That thing was supposed to be dead. Massaro swore it died. Couldn’t that incompetent fool do anything right?”

Richardson snorted. “Question asked, question answered. But I like your thought Davis.” He walked over to T’Pol, careful to stay out of arm’s reach and keep his weapon up. “She does look appetizing, doesn’t she?” He chuckled. “I wonder what she would be willing to do for us to keep us from skinning that little brat alive?”

“We could use that knife Tucker tried to gut you with,” Schmidt volunteered, getting into the spirit of the game. Davis laughed. T’Pol looked hard at her adun, probing desperately for his mind. She had to learn the extent of his injury before she could make any plans.

Pain. Red Human pain. Fear. Rage. Panic. Desperation. Defend. Enemy. Danger. Family. Kill. Enemy. Kill enemy. Defend family. Kill enemy. Kill. *Kill.*

His mind was a tangle of wild emotion and animal instinct, all mixed with the agony of the blow he had taken. She narrowed her eyes. It would hurt him even more to do this, but she had no choice. Otherwise they would both die. More important, Elizabeth would die.

T’Pol had lived among Humans far too long to have any illusions about these men or their intentions. No matter what they might promise, once they had finished taking their pleasure of her they would never leave anyone alive in this house. Trip must wake up. She put all her telepathic strength into a scream for aid. She howled into the most basic, primal core of his hind brain.

Deep in the darkness, the animal mind that formed the root stock for the creature calling itself Trip stirred in its morass of pain. It heard something. A calling. Its mate was calling. Its mate was calling in fear.

Instinctive responses that were ancient long before thought activated once more. The male animal pulled from his body's reserves and began to burn his own flesh. Biochemical stores that would have been sufficient to sustain life functions for days under normal conditions were being ravaged and all but vaporized. All to provide the raw energy for a few explosive moments of ultimate effort. He would pay for it later. He would pay a terrible price. But if his family survived it would be worth it. If they did not, then nothing would matter anyway.

Trip opened bloodshot eyes to view his worst nightmares made real. In that instant, he locked eyes with T'Pol and they both felt the unspoken understanding. "*Whatever we have to do to save her.*"

"Sleeping Beauty's awake," Davis sneered. "Let him baby sit while we entertain Mrs. Beauty." Richardson kept his rifle on T'Pol, and Schmidt covered Trip. Davis sauntered over and casually dropped Elizabeth onto the couch like a sack. She bounced and squalled indignantly at the rough handling. Trip had never wanted to kill more in his life, but T'Pol's constant sending of strength kept him on the sane edge of control. Just barely. How she was able to hold herself together through this would be a mystery to him until the day he died.

Trip dragged himself to the couch. Elizabeth was scared, pissed off, pissed all over herself, and generally not a happy camper. Trip carefully picked her up and held her tightly, shushing her softly with his head down while watching the rest of the room.

Davis roughly claimed the right to go first, since he was the one who found the brat. The others made only token protest. Schmidt walked into kitchen and returned with the kitchen knife, sneering. He tested the edge with his thumb significantly and licked his lips. T'Pol lifted her chin and turned to walk down the hallway, not looking at Trip. Her husband closed his eyes and prayed. Trip turned slightly and shielded Elizabeth as best he could with his arms and body, frantically trying to think of a way out.

Davis watched T'Pol's backside swaying in front of him and felt his mouth dry out. She was one hot slut. Tucker was a traitorous S.O.B., but he had to admit it. For a piece like that he could almost see the guy's point of view. Almost. If she was Human he might buy it. But not for a green-blood.

Davis shoved T'Pol into the bedroom roughly and told her, "Let's just see how enthusiastic you can be. Remember something. We don't have to skin her all at once, do we?" He looked into her eyes and smiled. "We can start at the bottom and work our way up, a little at a time."

T'Pol sagged and slowly sat down on the edge of the bed. "What do you want?" Her voice was low and shaking. Davis laughed triumphantly and unzipped his coveralls. He stepped in front of T'Pol and said, "Looked like your man was getting ready for dinner when we came in. Since we interrupted your meal, it's only right that we make sure you don't go hungry. Here's a little snack for you. Unwrap it and enjoy."

T'Pol stiffened. Davis put his pulse rifle against her temple and snarled, "*Do it!*"

She raised her hands and opened his underpants, pulling his genitals free. Davis relaxed and spread his legs, anticipating the pleasure to come. T'Pol reached one hand around his shaft and began to caress his

testicles with the other hand. Davis threw his head back and moaned. “Mmm. That’s right bitch. Now suck it.”

T’Pol glanced up. His eyes were closed and the pulse rifle was pointing down, with his finger off the trigger. She shifted her right hand to grip a single testicle. Then she cupped her hand around it and dug in with her fingers, clamping down as hard as she could grip while twisting and yanking down with all the strength in her enraged Vulcan shoulders.

Davis emitted a sound that could best be described as supersonic. His eyes flew open and he started to bend and buckle at the same time. T’Pol’s left hand flashed up to his throat. Before he could make a sound loud enough to alert his cohorts, her fingers encircled his windpipe and dug in. A quick twist of the wrist, with some help from her carefully manicured fingernails, and Davis’s windpipe parted company from his neck, crushed flat. T’Pol then reached up to press firmly against the major blood vessels along both sides of his jaw, cutting off oxygen flow to his brain and inducing blackout in seconds.

T’Pol caught his falling pulse rifle before it could hit the floor. With her other hand she steered the toppling corpse onto the bed, making a rueful note that they would need to replace those sheets. Human blood stains were almost impossible to remove from Triaxian silk. She focused hard on Trip, sending reassurance and warning to get ready. Over and over she pushed it, trying to break through his fog of rage and shame and pain. Finally she thought that he had picked up her message. T’Pol slid over to the weapon cabinet and pulled out Trip’s phase pistol and a scanner. Then she sidestepped to the doorway. Laughter echoed down the hallway. “Not making much noise are they?” the one called Schmidt said.

“One of them has their mouth full,” Richardson replied humorously, “wanna bet which one?”

“Hard to say. With a rack like that in front of him a man would get tempted,” Schmidt chortled. “Hey Pretty Boy, are they are firm as they look?”

“Aw, he don’t wanna discuss it Smitty,” Richardson gibed. “Look. He’s bashful.” Both men laughed cruelly. T’Pol decided that they were as distracted as they were ever likely to be. She knelt close to the floor and stole a swift glance around the doorway. Neither were in view of the hallway. She slipped out of the bedroom and began stalking her prey.

A picture flickered into her mind. Trip on the couch holding Elizabeth. Schmidt standing next to them, and Richardson facing the couch, two paces away. She concentrated on her position in the hallway. Then she heard Trip begging hoarsely, “Can I please get her some water?”

“What for?” Schmidt growled. “Vulcan’s don’t need water.”

“She’s half Human. You know that. Please!” Trip blubbered. “Is there any decency in you at all? She’s just a baby!”

“Shut your whining. All right. Go get the puppy some water then. Just quit crying about it,” Richardson snapped in disgust.

“Thank you,” Trip whimpered, sounding pitifully gratefully. T’Pol heard him shuffling toward the kitchen. A few seconds later she received a dim image of him holding Elizabeth tightly, crouched down beneath the table. It was time.

She lunged around the doorway in a low crouch and moved laterally across the room, firing the pulse rifle in a constant series of short bursts. Schmidt went down with his chest a smoking ruin. Richardson hit the floor rolling and returned fire, singeing T'Pol's hair and forcing her to dive behind Trip's favorite recliner for cover.

Richardson lunged for the door and made it outside before T'Pol could get off another shot. She took position beside the door and tried sniping after him, but once he made it into the rocks near the house it was hopeless.

Trip slapped the comm unit and hit the emergency code.

"Embassy here."

"Hammer"

"Acknowledge Hammer. Tac Alert activated. Situation Report?"

"We got hit. Three Human. Two down. One running. Need reinforcements."

"Acknowledge. Reinforcements en route. ETA 31 minutes. Maintain and secure position. Maintain contact until MACOs arrive."

Trip turned and faced T'Pol, who pushed what was left of the door as close to shut as possible and come to stand beside him. "You heard 'em hun. Stay here and hold the fort." He pulled his phase pistol and the scanner from the waistband of her pants. "The other one's dead, right?"

She nodded. "But you are not going out there Trip. There is no reason -"

"Yes there is T'Pol." Trip looked very serious. "You heard what they said." Her expression contorted in pain and she dropped her eyes.

"I know." She whispered. "But nothing happened husband. I swear it. I killed him before he could do anything."

Trip's face cleared. He reached over and touched her chin. "That's not what I mean darling." She looked up. "He knows about Lizzie T'Pol." Her eyes flew wide in understanding. "If he gets back to Terra Prime and tells them she is still alive..."

T'Pol's lips pressed together, then she reached over and took Trip's phase pistol, exchanging it for the pulse rifle. "There are extra packs for the rifle on the body. Wait 11 seconds and I will fetch them."

By the time Trip detected the air car on the portable scanner and made it to the ceremonial grounds, Richardson had already managed to lift off. He ran a lightning fast checklist of everything he knew about that make of air car, looking for weak points. There. Right there, under the main thruster housing. That spot where the fuel feed ran next to the exhaust manifold.

The fireball was visible to both transports full of MACOs when they were still more than fifty kilometers away. Trip crawled out from beneath the rock ledge where he had dived when he saw the

flare begin, and saw that T'Pol's family shrine was a melted puddle of slag. He winced. NOOOoooo. Oh No. No Way. There was no way by Zephram Cochrane's pickled liver that he was going to stand up and explain to Eldest Mother T'Para how he had been responsible for this. Not gonna happen. He would move to Andoria first.

-&-

"Yes, Eldest Mother," Trip sweated at attention and kept his eyes forward. "I am completely responsible. My decision. My choice. My action. T'Pol is completely blameless. I shot the air car knowing full well that the explosion would be powerful enough to cause a wide radius of damage, and that the shrine would be within the blast radius. I, and I alone, am to blame."

T'Pol sent him hopeful support through the bond. She sat with the rest of the watching family members. The Eldest Mother had called a meeting of the family Elders to discuss certain matters as soon as she learned of the events in question.

T'Para lacerated him with her gaze. In fact, she peeled him, skewered him, and roasted him over a slow fire. All without saying a single word. "Were you aware that the shrine you destroyed was 3,145.68 years old?" she finally asked him.

Trip winced. "No, Eldest Mother, I was not. I knew it was very old however."

"Then tell me young man, what went through your mind to justify the destruction of such an important piece of our family's history." The old woman could not properly be said to have an expression, not as such. It was more like she wore a face that might potentially be capable of wearing an expression, should such a thing ever become a logical option.

Trip gritted his teeth. "Truthfully, Eldest Mother, I wasn't thinking about the shrine at all. Or the family history. I was thinking about my daughter. I was thinking about how if the Terra Prime operative escaped, Elizabeth would never be safe again. And that is all I was thinking of. I am sorry I destroyed the shrine, though."

"So you are telling me," T'Para said bitingly, "that your personal concern for your daughter was so intense that it drove every other consideration completely out of your mind? Nothing else carried any importance to you at all?"

"Well," Trip hesitated and looked unhappy, "I was worried about T'Pol and Elizabeth and..." He stopped and stiffened his spine. "Yeah, I guess I am telling you that."

"Excellent." Trip blinked and weaved in place. T'Para looked over at T'Pol. "You chose well daughter. Stone and metal can be rebuilt. What is important is the blood, and the loyalty to the blood." She looked back at Trip. "Other families have accepted Humans before this. A very few. But you are the first of your people to join our clan. I confess to misgivings about you. However thus far you have shown yourself to be an adequate mate to T'Pol. Continue as you have begun, and you will do well together."

T'Pol stood up. "There is one change that we must make, regretfully, Eldest Mother. For our daughter's sake." She stepped into the center of the meeting room and took Trip's hand, helping his stability tremendously.

T'Para eyed them both. "What change to you desire to make daughter?" T'Pol glanced at Trip. He hung his head and started talking again. This head of household thing really got to be a heavy weight sometimes.

"Eldest Mother," he told her somberly, "my people are going through a difficult time, as you know well." T'Para nodded and, if Trip hadn't known it to be impossible, he might have fooled himself into thinking he saw a trace of sympathy. "The members of Terra Prime who attacked us do not represent a majority of my people. They do not even represent a significant minority, they are only a tiny minority of what we call the lunatic fringe. But there are still hundreds of thousands of them."

T'Pol decided to help him cut to the chase. "It is unlikely that it will be safe for Elizabeth to reveal her true heritage among her father's people for decades, if ever. In the meantime, she needs to be free to live as normal a life as we can give her."

"What is your solution to this dilemma then?" T'Para wanted to know.

Trip looked bitter but determined. "We have discussed this at length, Eldest Mother. We believe that it would be best for Elizabeth if we change her name. Officially she is already listed as dead. Among my people I have offered the explanation that T'Pol resigned her commission and returned to Vulcan to grieve for our daughter. We can use this story to provide a cover to bring Elizabeth into the open."

"How so?" T'Para looked intrigued.

T'Pol explained, "Among Humans, it is not uncommon for couples who are unable to conceive a child to adopt an orphan and raise them as their heir. We believe that since Elizabeth appears Vulcan, with only moderate precautions we will be able to present her as a Vulcan child that we have adopted."

"This is irregular," T'Para raised her eyebrow. "As T'Pol will have told you, Trip, our people customarily raise orphaned children among other family members. Since you come to me with this, I conclude that you are requesting my collusion in crafting a 'cover story' whereby Elizabeth will be presented as the child of a deceased family member?"

"Exactly." Trip said. "Will you help us come up with a convincing line of bull?" He asked hopefully.

T'Para's nostril's twitched. "Certainly. Exercising one's creative talents is a valuable opportunity that should never be passed up."

Epilogue

After being ravaged in the Eugenics war, the ancient palace of the Kremlin had been lovingly rebuilt to its former glory. The vast architecture was regarded by the Vulcans in attendance at the diplomatic function as unnecessarily elaborate. The Tellurites were indifferent, preferring to concentrate their attention on the overloaded buffet tables. The Andorians, however, seemed to think it was the greatest thing since sliced onions. Several groups were being led through the maze by human guides, listening intently with agitated antennae to descriptions of the historical significance of various artifacts.

Ambassador Soval sat on a chair at the edge of the ballroom, sipping a glass of carbonated water. He was carefully considering the best opening to use with the Tellurite Ambassador about discussions for trade routes through the Vektal cluster, when he noticed a shift in the dynamics of the crowd. The random Brownian movement of the Humans around him was broken by one individual, who drifted unobtrusively closer to Soval using a technique familiar to any intelligence agent. Alarms went off in the Vulcan's mind and brought him to battle ready in a single breath.

Soval stood up with equal casualness and watched as the human male, realizing that he had been made, turned and strolled openly in the ambassador's direction. The human was of indeterminate age, not young but not really old either. His appearance was not distinctive, his height was average, as were his clothes. Soval nodded. Even so, something about the man tickled his memory.

"Ambassador Soval," the human said with a gracious smile. "I don't suppose you remember me, although we have met before."

The voice did it. "Harris." Soval raised an eyebrow. "If I am not mistaken, you have changed your facial appearance since our last encounter. New Zealand, was it not? Eleven years ago, during the unfortunate incident regarding the theft of spare injectors from one of our ships?"

"Terrible," Harris let his face turn somber. "I am so very sorry that we were unable to retrieve your property Ambassador. But at least we did capture the thieves."

"You presented us with two bodies," Soval corrected, "that you identified as being the thieves."

Harris shrugged and spread his hands helplessly. "They resisted arrest Ambassador. Our people were forced to defend themselves. Surely you can understand this. You of all people should be able to understand this."

Soval's face tightened. "Certainly. And the remarkable similarity between the injectors currently in use on Starfleet's NX class ships and our Surak class vessels is surely no more than coincidence."

Harris smiled amiably. "The principles of logical efficiency are universal, Ambassador."

"Beyond question," Soval said wryly. "How may I be of service today Mr. Harris?"

"I was hoping that you might be willing to deliver a message for us," Harris told him.

“Us?” Soval asked. Harris merely looked at him directly without replying. After a few seconds Soval told him, “Go on.”

“Ordinarily Earthgov has a policy of not interfering with our dissident groups. We have found through bitter experience that it is best to allow our people to have the... safety valve so to speak... of opposition groups wherein they can vent their frustrations. Otherwise Human populations tend to become restless to the point of being uncontrollable.” Harris paused and Soval nodded for him to continue. “However, Terra Prime in particular has become an unacceptable nuisance. We can no longer afford to tolerate them. They will be eliminated. Please advise your counterparts among the Andorians and the Tellurites of this, if you would be so kind.”

Soval digested this for a time. “How do you plan to accomplish this?”

Harris told him pleasantly, “That’s classified.” Soval raised an eyebrow. “It’s also none of your business. All you need to know is that it will be done.” He turned to leave but then paused and turned back. “By the way. Please send Commander Tucker and Lady T’Pol my congratulations and best wishes.”

Soval kept a stone face. “I shall do so. I have asked you this before Mr. Harris. What branch of Earthgov do you represent? Specifically?”

Harris replied, “Good night, Ambassador.” He walked away, not looking back.

Appendix

Part 1 Commentary

On 01 October 2006 at 08:28 PM TLR said:

Nicely done....You said you never did this before? Well I think you got the hang of it. Very nice story. T.

On 01 October 2006 at 08:41 PM Blackn'blue said:

I am simply imitating the best.

On 01 October 2006 at 09:48 PM lunaz said:

Enjoying the story very much. Like how Soval made sure that Trip's journey to Vulcan was a pleasurable one and meeting some of Tpol's other family members. I also found your explanation of why Spock's parents were known as the "first" vulcan/human marriage very believable. Looking forward to more of the story.

On 02 October 2006 at 06:52 AM Gammaent said:

Oooo... a very nice beginning. I really can't wait until everything comes together. A man, you made Terra Prime seem even more evil than it is! And Massaro like an idiot, though one can almost sympathize with him. Or perhaps that's just me, I've always imagine Massaro having a backstory that makes him not so evil/psychotic. I especially liked the large Vulcan family idea, it appeals more than the only child for everybody on Vulcan. Otherwise I can't wait for the next part!

On 02 October 2006 at 02:01 PM Linda said:

Aren't the bad guys so chilling? I'm looking forward to see them get theirs, though Massaro you can have a little sympathy for since he is such a dope - so kill him quickly and painlessly?

Love the glimpse into Vulcan home life. So 27 Vulcan males out of 4 billion prefer human mates? Here! I'm over here! (waving a colorful scarf so they can see me). And disregard that man behind the curtain (Its only my husband. Sharpening a lurpa.).

On 02 October 2006 at 04:31 PM Blackn'blue said:

I am glad you approve of large Vulcan families. You will like the next part.

On 02 October 2006 at 06:38 PM said:

Love it. Watch the progression:

The first story's rating? Simply: 'G'

The Second? Somewhat more specifically: 'PG-13 (Violence, Adult Language, Rampant Sexism, Politically Incorrect Social Commentary, Uncouth Fashion Sense)'

If I may be so bold as to suggest a third?

'R - (Violence, Adult Language, Rampant Sexism, Politically Incorrect Social Commentary, Uncouth Fashion sense, Sexy Results)'

~

Could they be sleepy borg?

On 02 October 2006 at 07:40 PM enterpriseScribe said:

Wery, wery good keptin!

Of course, as a strict veggie baby with a strict veggie baby of her own (13.5 months now, the cute little tofu-head), I'm happy to calm T'Pol's fears of any pediatric brain melting that could occur in Elizabeth. It has been statistically proven--time and time again--that only 1 in 5 vegetarians actually has a melted brain.

I liked the Vulcan clerk assisting Trip and the fact that Susan was "a tasty snack in the bedroom". lol
Excellent update, Blackn'Blue. Now that you are no longer a newbie, you get the evil joy of posting one chapter at a time and watching your poor commenters beg for more!

Just don't wait too long.

On 02 October 2006 at 08:35 PM Blackn'blue said:

I said I was gonna be politically incorrect didn't I? Although I am not going to go so far as some of the article I have read online who claim that when Earupeans stopped eating fish and started eating cereal grains their homicide rates went up :) Seriously, this was in a supposedly sceintific article.

Anyway, I am gonna spout along and just offend people right and left no doubt. Try not to take offense if you can help it. No offense will be intended to anyone at least. Remember that I am 1) foolish, 2) carnivorous, 3) contrary and I like to poke people.

Fair warning, the next part is going to get rather ugly in spots. Seriously. Some people are going to find parts of it offensive.

On 02 October 2006 at 11:13 PM eScribe said:

I don't doubt it.

Actually your line "offending people right and left" made me think of a hilarious Wanda quote from Curb. Totally unrelated.

Perhaps the homicide/veggie link could be a defense in some courts. Specially from real meat-eaty states.

On 02 October 2006 at 11:45 PM Blackn'blue said:

So....when is your next one getting posted pray tell?

On 03 October 2006 at 03:12 AM jgc said:

OK - I've read this one twice (when I find something I like, I always re-read). Josiah is VERY evil!
And Poor Trip! All he did is fall in love - and this creep wants him taken out!

I've always wished I had the imagination to entertain folks the way you are!

So please update...SOON!!!

On 03 October 2006 at 07:03 AM JohnO/LSR said:

I have found, as I have slipped into the low of my "high and low" writing states, that I cannot in good conscience release chapter by chapter because my creative attention is too transitory.

Good luck to you on accomplishing good attentive writing! :D Hey I haven't read this first part yet but I want to wait till you have the whole thing done so I don't have to wait :)

On 03 October 2006 at 03:36 PM Blackn'blue said:

I just finished a bedroom scene and had to stop for a cigarette.

On 03 October 2006 at 04:01 PM said:

lol

On 04 October 2006 at 03:22 AM Rigil Kent said:

Very interesting thus far. I have to say, though, I had a little trouble accepting how easily Massaro was freed. He would effectively be under Starfleet's mandate which would translate roughly into military control so just walking in and signing some paperwork wouldn't get him out. Unless, of course, Terra Prime has some "associates" who are very highly placed within Starfleet Command...

Totally dug the idea of the Vulcan consulate being located in Egypt. With the presence of a transporter, that makes more sense to me than parking it in San Fran. In the event that I can actually convince my Muse to cooperate, I may use that idea in the future...

A note: Trip IS able to do the ta'al hand salute. He did so when he was first introduced to T'Les in "Home" after T'Pol gave him a telling glance (sort of a "Now, you idiot. I didn't waste time teaching you the ta'al for you to screw it up before T'Mom!" look.)

Cantrell seemed suitably scummy but then, I've never really been able to tolerate bigots (which is probably why I had so much problem with season 1 Archer) so I'm probably a little too eager to see him get shot in the head or beat to death with a shovel.

However, quoting Heinlein (who wrote one of my all time favorite novels EVER: "Starship Troopers") made me forgive any mistake I may have noticed. :-D

Looking forward to more!

On 04 October 2006 at 03:28 AM Sash said:

This is even better than your first story! You've got a fine balance between humour and drama (and never use humour inappropriately) and I absolutely love the amount of detail you've included in your depiction of life on Vulcan. It's stuff like the family meeting every fifth generation to sort out their property that makes this story so absolutely "believable". I also like that you've given T'Pol a supportive family and made the ordinary Vulcans Trip meets much more than cardboard characters or stereotypes. My favourite bit? - The description of Trip in his wrinkled robe and sombrero! I love the way you've taken this completely different POV and just slipped it in there. I'm looking forward to the next installment!

On 04 October 2006 at 03:43 AM Blackn'blue said:

I remembered about Trip being able to do the hand salute *after* I finished part one. Drat. So I am going to write in an explanation in part two for why he lost the ability.

I also explained in part two why Massaro got out of jail. Actually it makes sense, if you assume that Starfleet is under civilian control and that members of Starfleet are granted basic civil rights similar to the ones we (for the moment) still enjoy in America.

On 04 October 2006 at 03:48 AM Blackn'blue said:

BTW Rigil. Cantrell is modeled after the kind of RL political kingmaker that you often encounter in the south. I am sure that you know the kind I am talking about, given your background. The smiling ones, who will joke and chuckle with their arm around your shoulders, while they are slipping the barrel up against your ribs and squeezing the trigger.

Cantrell will get his, never fear :) And from a direction he does not expect either.

On 04 October 2006 at 05:07 AM Rigil Kent said:

Ah. Cantrell is a Democrat. :p

(Sorry. Cheap joke. I simply HAD to make it...)

I can't assume that SF is under civilian control, sorry. They have a military rank structure, military uniforms and are doing the job of the military so, regardless of what they WANT to call themselves, they're pretty clearly the military. If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck...

On 04 October 2006 at 05:24 AM Blackn'blue said:

I mean, assuming that Earth is not under the control of a military dictatorship. In other words, that they have a constitutional form of government with constitutionally guaranteed rights like right to counsel, right's against self-incrimination, etc....

On 04 October 2006 at 05:35 AM Rigil Kent said:

Yeah, but he's a member of Starfleet so it stands to reason that their equivalent of the UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice) is going to take precedence over civil authority. He was active duty SF and effectively committed treason: that's the death penalty at worst, life in a military prison at worst. The way this was written, his sentence was remanded to a civilian court and that just doesn't make much sense...

It's just a gripe of mine that some Trek fans insist that Starfleet isn't the military. Sure, it's evolved beyond JUST a military as we know it but it's pretty clear that it IS the military.

On 04 October 2006 at 05:42 AM Blackn'blue said:

Hm... Does a member of the military have the right to a lawyer? Does a member of the military forfeit their constitutional rights of citizenship?

On 04 October 2006 at 05:47 AM Blackn'blue said:

In other words, it is one thing to catch a criminal. It is another thing to convict him. Ask any cop. Remember that their most important witness is a time traveling resident of the 31st century who has a habit of disappearing at odd moments. There is also the matter of coercing a confession out of a prisoner by threatening him with the equivalent of torture, when there was no legal representation present.

On 04 October 2006 at 05:55 AM Rigil Kent said:

To answer your questions in order: Yes. No, but from my recollection, the UCMJ takes priority over the Constitution for uniformed servicemembers. It doesn't conflict but is simply a stricter code of conduct (which is understandable being it's for the military). The JAG office (Judge Advocate General) generally prosecutes AND defends cases inside the military ... although, if this happened in the modern "Fleet", I think he probably could have requested a lawyer that wasn't Navy. The thing is, he would still be incarcerated at a military facility, not a civilian one.

Again, this is all predicated on the fact that Terra Prime DOESN'T have anyone in the highest ranks of Starfleet. If they've got someone way up there in the chain-of-command, all bets are off, I suppose, and (s)he could be responsible for remanding the case to civilian court. Perhaps with the excuse that it's good PR or something...

On 04 October 2006 at 06:00 AM Rigil Kent said:

In regards to your second comment (I missed that one while typing my previous comment), I find it difficult to believe that Reed wouldn't have exercised whatever links he has to Section 31 to make sure that this piece of sehlut excrement didn't get what he deserved. If nothing else, Reed should be one of the first people who finds out that Massaro isn't where he's supposed to be...

Yeah, there is a buttload of circumstantial evidence, but I'm fairly sure that, once they're alerted to Massaro's treachery, the crew of Enterprise could probably ascertain his actual guilt. He's an engineer, not a computer genius, so totally wiping out his digital "fingerprints" that led to Baby Elizabeth's creation would be hard if not completely impossible.

On 04 October 2006 at 06:56 AM Blackn'blue said:

He isn't any kind of genius. he just worked for one. He followed instructions exactly, lacking the imagination to improvise.

Some of your objections have already been addressed in part two. The others will be. Keep the faith Rigil. I will do my best not to let you down. :)

On 04 October 2006 at 05:25 PM Rigil Kent said:

I wouldn't call them "objections", merely observations.

On 04 October 2006 at 10:22 PM justTrip'n said:

Very impressive. So you never wrote fan fic before, but you wrote something right? Solve this mystery ... It's kinda bugging me.

And yes, those bad guys sure are evil!

Thanks! Keep it coming! Enterprise forever!

On 04 October 2006 at 10:50 PM Blackn'blue said:

I spent a lot of years as a tech writer. That solve the mystery?

On 05 October 2006 at 12:00 AM Windrider said:

I reeeeeeeally can't wait to see what happens next. Awesome stuff, this is gonna be good! :)

Part 2 Commentary

On 05 October 2006 at 03:36 AM jgc said:

This was VERY good! Although, I do think that Phlox should have at least looked at Trip's hands after he broke the table and punched out the metal cabinet.

Now, did I get it right when it looked to me that the Andorians are going after Terra Prime? (I'm trying not to look too idiotic).

It does my heart good to see that you are treating Trip as the hero he is, and that it is recognized by all concerned.

Very well done.

On 05 October 2006 at 05:06 AM Blackn'blue said:

Thanks for the kind words. Trip wasn't in the mood to let anyone check him out at the time. Remember that he pushed T'Pol away when she tried. But I am sure she made him hold still for band-aids later. :)

I wanted to give Trip a voice for a change. There are a lot of women on this site and they (understandably) tend to either focus on the female character's POV or skim lightly over the male characters. Only a few male writers here have ever written stories that I thought actually presented the male perspective realistically. I wanted to add my voice to the testosterone imbued chorus. I am trying to show Trip as a male human being, not as an idealized representation of what some female readers would like an imaginary male to be, but a more realistic picture of how an actual male human would act and react in the circumstances Trip has endured. That's my goal anyway. Only the readers can tell me if I hit it.

And BTW, you are correct about the Andorians. The thing about bigots like Cantrell is their blind spots. They tend to underestimate their opponents.

On 05 October 2006 at 06:02 AM Rigil Kent said:

Well, I liked it a lot. You did manage to cover a bunch of my issues with how Massaro got free and I soooooo felt for Trip in that opening scene. Also really liked the little factoid about Vulcan night vision ... I think I may borrow that in the future if you don't mind.

Interesting idea about the "gas'rak-ka-li-fee". I kind of liked the idea of Trip & Koss in the Everglades myself. :p I take it you made that up, huh?

And thank you for trying to paint Mr. Tucker as an actual guy. I know this will sound politically incorrect or insensitive or something, but it really does seem like a lot of the portrayals of Trip are not masculine enough. The guy only cried twice, people, and in both instances there were some significant extenuating circumstances.

I think you did a good job here and look forward to the next chapter.

On 05 October 2006 at 06:26 AM Windrider said:

Eeeeeeecellent. And I'm pretty sure you hit the mark dead on. I could see Trip, angry and cursing a blue streak. Wonderful stuff, and I reeeeeeeeeally can't wait for more! :)

On 05 October 2006 at 07:11 PM Blackn'blue said:

I suppose the single most distinctive gender specific issue that I wanted to address was the issue of Koss.

I have read several ladies on this site talking about Koss as if he was not that bad a guy, he was a victim

of circumstances himself, and so forth. I have also read several fan fics that present him this way.

In any case most, if not all, of the fan fics that mention Koss and the marriage at all tend to gloss over the whole situation IMO. They mention that it happened, they resolve it somehow, and then Trip and T'Pol simply get over it and go on with their lives.

That is not the way we are wired ladies. Trip stood there and watched with his own eyes while the woman that he loved with all his heart deliberately, albeit unwillingly, gave herself to another man. That leaves scars. Mental and emotional scars. Permanent ones. Some men never get past that kind of trauma. Others require years. I know that I personally would not be able to simply shrug and go on with my life the way so many stories present Trip as doing. I wanted to describe a taste of his inner pain.

I imagine (I am tip-toeing here) that it might be easy for another female to make excuses for a decent looking guy who is so desperate to marry a woman that he is willing to go to extreme lengths to accomplish it.

But to Trip, or any other RL male that I know of, what Koss did would be more than adequate grounds for cold blooded murder. If Trip had shot him down in cold blood without warning, no jury of twelve human males who had ever been born would have voted to convict him. There is no possible excuse for Koss. He was without honor.

This is the male perspective. I just wanted to write Trip's pain in realistic terms, without turning him into a crybaby.

On 06 October 2006 at 04:18 AM Kevin said:

Saying what you said is "the male perspective" is complete crap. It's your perspective, don't lump me in with your narrow-minded ignorant statements.

On 06 October 2006 at 05:17 AM Blackn'blue said:

I beg your pardon sir. I refer you to the warning at the top of the page. Specifically I wrote tha the story contains,

"Violence, Adult Language, Rampant Sexism, Politically Incorrect Social Commentary"

Did I, or have I ever, come onto the comments section of any of your stories and attacked you Kevin? Disagree with me if you will. By all means, feel free to consider me wrong. But I fail to see why you seem to feel justified in throwing insults at me.

I hereby acknowledge that apparently I was mistaken. At least one male reader does not agree with my opinion. Noted.

On 06 October 2006 at 05:33 AM Blackn'blue said:

Also, lest there be any misunderstanding, I was not implying that Trip blamed T'Pol in any way. His anger was reserved entirely for the extortion Koss used. Trip told T'Pol afterward that he was proud of her for what she did. But that (In MY opinion) does not mitigate the offense Koss committed.

On 06 October 2006 at 02:06 PM Linda said:

Riviting! Please send next chapter soon so I can see that my dear Soval is safe again.

About Koss, do with him as you will, but still, within the confines of his culture, I think he acted correctly. And you can see, if you look closely at the episodes, that the actor played him as really caring for T'Pol. And about the blackmailing her into the marriage, that seems an act of the entire family or clan, not just Koss's decision. And remember, he did release her, which in my ST universe, he did against the wishes of his family. Koss has honor and compassion, in my book, well I haven't got a

book yet, so in my stories, anyway, LOL. Though I thoroughly enjoy the male loyalty and protective reactions you put into Trip. It is comforting to know that we women are cherished and protected by our males?

Old 'Bat' of a Vulcan matriarch? Is that a reference to the theory that Vulcans are descended from those creatures of the night? Who came up with that one anyway? Fascinating. I love it. Do Vulcans have a primal urge to hang upside down in caves like humans do to climb trees, LOL? Hey, that is food for another story, hint, hint, HINT!

The medical explanations seemed real believable and I'm waiting for Dr. Distracted to confirm that. And the environmental effects on Vulcan make sense to me. And heck, Niagra Falls needs a dome. Can you also fix it so the Canadian falls keep their horseshoe shape forever? Okay, okay, I realize you are not a Q. But you are a WRITER, and that is better than being a Q, right?

Your story here is just great in all its refreshing details, even without those excessive? commas that I keep mentally putting in. So a spear works better than a phaser on Vulcan? Hmmm, I will have to remember that next time I go there.

On 06 October 2006 at 02:11 PM Linda said:

Oh, I meant for that to be an exclamation not a question mark in the sentence "It is comforting to know that we women are cherished and protected by our males!"

On 06 October 2006 at 03:06 PM Blackn'blue said:

That was the first thing that hit my mind when I leaned over the railing on the Canadian side and looked down into the mist of horseshoe falls. "There oughta be a huge dome suspended in front of that thing, made of crystal so everyone inside could look out directly at it." Glad you agree :)

On 06 October 2006 at 03:16 PM Blackn'blue said:

Anyway, that your remark illustrates my point. Men and women seem to look at the Koss situation a bit differently. Some of us do anyway. That's all I meant. Now I will drop the subject. Anyone that wishes to is welcome to flame away. I predicted on the comments to my last one that I would offend some people with this story, but I honestly expected to offend some of the ladies rather than men. Instead, of the five women who have given me feedback, either privately or publicly, none have been offended. Whereas so far the only one who has been angry at me was male. Go figger.

shrug

Time to get back to writing more provocative, politically incorrect stuff. You don't have any problem if Soval kills someone do you Linda?

On 06 October 2006 at 03:23 PM Blackn'blue said:

OK, one more, THEN I will drop the subject. It is possible that I identify too closely with Trip simply because he comes from the same sub-culture that I do (SE USA, good ole boy, pan-fried catfish type). Maybe I just take it personally. Where I come from, where Trip comes from, what Koss did would be inexcusable. Perhaps my ethnocentrism is showing. Shutting up now.

On 06 October 2006 at 05:02 PM Rigil Kent said:

Heh. I had Soval mind frak Tolaris in "Endeavour: Vigrid" and no one complained. Distracted had him shoot a Romulan spy. Since he was an intelligence operative in his youth, I think you can get away with having him kill someone.

And I have to side with Blackn'blue on the point of Koss. Perhaps within the confines of his cultural upbringing, what Koss did was correct but to me, it was reprehensible. If he TRULY cared for T'Pol as

you say, Linda, he would have extended his family's protection for T'Les without requiring T'Pol to marry him. I interpreted his decision to "release" T'Pol as his recognition that she already had a bond with Trip. As it is, I'm mildly contemptuous of him and would probably be of the same mindset as Trip is in this fic had I been in that situation.

I do kind of wonder about the "filtration" idea that you floated here, Blackn'blue. Since Vulcan is a desert planet and we know from the "Super!Archer & Sidekick!Polly's Excellent Desert Adventure" that they have really powerful storms that kick around a lot of dust and the like ... so it seems likely to me that native Vulcans would have an extensive filtration system themselves...

On 06 October 2006 at 05:12 PM enterpriseScribe said:

Looky all the people up earlier than me just chattin' away here. Love the West Coast. You get to sleep in longest.

I agree. The comments section is not for un-constructive criticism. And part 2 rocked.

And the falls needs a dome.

Liked the omnivorous talk with Phlox. :-)

On 06 October 2006 at 05:12 PM Blackn'blue said:

A valid point. I wasn't thinking so much of the coarse filtration, like nose hairs and such, as I was of the mucus membranes and the interlocking system of sinus cavities. Aside from temperature regulation, sinuses help filter out the micro-organisms that are rife in Earth's atmosphere. I was operating under the theory that since Earth air is moister than Vulcan, and is also less prone to being hammered by disinfecting solar radiation like UV rays, that it would be more saturated with mold spores, and bacteria, and other nasty crawly bugs. But you are quite correct that Vulcans probably have a very good coarse filter system. Like camels have flaps over their noses to protect them from sandstorms. I had not considered that aspect of things....

Hm... I need to work that in somehow. Thanks for the suggestion.

On 06 October 2006 at 05:23 PM Blackn'blue said:

I figured I owed it to you eScribe, after unknowingly stepping on your tofu enhanced toes last time. *evil grin* Feel free to smack me if you wish. Just please don't have T'Pol force Trip to give up his catfish in your fic!

On 06 October 2006 at 07:16 PM tracy-the-cubedone said:

Oh this is a fabulous continuation of a great story.

My heart is pounding from Trip's fight with the beast, his anger over Massario, and Soval's hopeful escape.

On 06 October 2006 at 09:39 PM Linda said:

I think you guys are on to something with Vulcan noses. Is canon silent on this? Vulcan eyes have a special shielding, so why not the nose? It seems logical to me.

On opinions about Koss, (and I will shut up now about it too), maybe this is an ethnic difference among earthlings. And I sure would rather have one of you guys protecting me than Koss, LOL. So lets leave it at that because it is really an IDIC universe where all opinions matter. Peace and long life, guys!

Its ok by me if Soval has to kill someone - as long as he has a logical reason, of course. And as someone else said, in his pre-ambassador days he must have injured and even killed. In Cease Fire he said he hadn't touched a weapon in, was it 30 or 50 years? Laudable, but that statement admits he did at

one time touch a weapon, and with the implication that he probably had to use it.

Impatiently waiting the next chapter. Waiting... waiting...still waiting. Are we there yet, huh?

On 06 October 2006 at 10:46 PM Blackn'blue said:

Patience Lady, patience. "If you eat the apple before it is ripe all you get is a stomach ache," as Rex Stout once wrote. In other words, I know what's gonna happen, but the words ain't polished yet.:)

On 07 October 2006 at 02:08 AM Distracted said:

I'm REALLY late to the party due to RL issues, but I wanted to say how thoroughly impressed I am with this story.

The sinuses are not only used for the filtration of particulate matter, BnB. They're also primarily used to humidify inhaled air, otherwise a really dry atmosphere might cause dehydration of the lungs. Alveoli must remain moist to work efficiently. This is why mouth breathing dehydrates a person. Anyway, I would think that some sort of humidification system would need to be in place due to Vulcan's extremely dry climate, and there would also need to be protection from all the dust blowing around. I suppose it doesn't have to be sinuses. They might just have a really huge single nasal cavity full of folds of mucus membranes... like a big sponge with holes in it, or the surface of a brain maybe... and muscles capable of closing the nostrils like a porpoise does. Just a thought.

I am from the south as well, and I found Trip's reaction believable... but perhaps a little overdone. I have known men who react that way when they're really angry. I generally try to stay away from them. They usually end up in the ER for the treatment of a boxer's fracture (or a broken nose if the other guy was faster) or in jail for assault and battery. The civilized southern men of my acquaintance all stopped behaving that way about the time that they stopped going to all night keg parties and got a regular job. That being said, it was still an exciting scene.

I really like "combat Soval". Can't wait to see him kick butt. ;)

On 07 October 2006 at 04:04 AM Blackn'blue said:

Well... He DID go into the other room didn't he? And he apologized afterward. I have seen women throw conniptions just as intense, in all fairness. It just doesn't get the same degree of censure as when a man does it.

On 07 October 2006 at 04:13 AM Blackn'blue said:

Hey Dis,

You wrote:

"The civilized southern men of my acquaintance all stopped behaving that way about the time that they stopped going to all night keg parties and got a regular job."

If I may quote myself, taken from part one of this same story:

"Trip's face darkened. "With those..." He stopped himself. "I'm sorry. T'Pol keeps telling me that cursing is offensive to Vulcans as a sign of emotional immaturity. I suppose I am just a kid at heart, because sometimes the temptation is overwhelming." He took a deep breath. "But I am trying. If I am going to be living on Vulcan, even part time, I refuse to shame my wife and daughter by acting badly. I have got to purge the habits that will make things harder for Elizabeth. It will be rough enough for her as it is."

Soval inclined his head in respect. "The path to enlightened self-discipline is never an easy one Commander. But I have always found it to be worth the trip."

See? Trip recognizes that he has anger issues, and he is working on them. Remember his reaction to his sisters death? Remember how when the Xindi tried to help out in the Expanse by giving them a portable power supply, Trip kicked it across the deck and said he didn't want it?

Trip is a man who feels deeply, and who places loyalty to his own above all else. That is the way I perceive him anyway, and that is the way I write him. In other words, he is a man who, even in the 22nd century, still lives by the old code of the South - honor, clan and country. In that order. Although in Trip's time it would be honor, clan and planet. But you get the idea.

That is the way I see him, and that is how I am writing him anyway.

On 07 October 2006 at 08:48 AM TLR said:

Poor Trip being stuck with all those vulcan females. You got some kind of mean streak I don't know about. (Hee Hee) Didn't you think he had enough to deal with when he met T'Les? Great part 2, keep up the good work. T.

On 07 October 2006 at 04:39 PM Distracted said:

A lot of people have anger issues, BnB. Most of them don't punch marble tabletops and metal cabinets. I really don't have an issue with the cursing. Despite the fact that I personally find the practice distasteful, and usually consider it to be the refuge of persons with an inadequate vocabulary for self-expression in a more polite fashion, there are times when only a curse is adequate.

I agree that women can often get away with more physical expression of anger without getting in trouble with the law, but it's often because they do less damage than a man does, and people don't take them seriously. I know I probably sound hypocritical here. I mean, I DID have T'Pol beat her hands to a bloody pulp on a metal door in one of my previous stories, but Vulcans are SUPPOSED to have dangerous and destructive emotions kept safely at bay only by intense meditation and constant effort. My attempt there was to give a poignant physical demonstration of the depths of her despair following the presumed loss of her mate AND a child she'd grown to love as a daughter. I just don't see Trip's motivation being that extreme here. The intensity of his outburst made me have the same reaction that Rigil did to my recent "Trip crying" scene. I thought, "Why is he acting like a tantruming teenager?", and it pulled me out of the story.

What I just said about Vulcan emotions, though, makes me think that MAYBE he's got more than just his own emotions to deal with. Is that where you're going with this? Is some of the anger T'Pol's?

On 07 October 2006 at 05:24 PM Blackn'blue said:

Now you are beginning to get a clue :)

Anybody ever think about the fact that in humans, most of the anecdotal evidence for telepathy relates to emergency communications being powered by the energy of the flight-or-flight mechanism? Specifically, most spontaneous telepathic incidents reported by humans are reported in conjunction with some emergency. I am referring to the kind you read about here on earth now, here in the twenty-first century.

On 07 October 2006 at 05:26 PM Blackn'blue said:

Besides Dis, Massaro had the stated intention on Enterprise of deliberately murdering Elizabeth because Paxton ordered him to. The only reason Trip didn't kill him then was because Archer hustled him off the ship before Trip had the chance to get his hands on him.

On 07 October 2006 at 05:33 PM Blackn'blue said:

Sorry about that, I accidentally hit the submit button before I was done. I was going to add that as a father, knowing that a man whose stated intention was the murder of my daughter was free and clear with effectively no consequences coming to him would be more than enough to drive me into rage. And yes, it may mean that I am emotionally immature, dangerous sociopathic, or whatever. But I wouldn't blame Trip for wanting to kill a man to prevent him from harming his child. Would you?

On 07 October 2006 at 11:26 PM HtH2k4 said:

Wow! I really like the different perspective presented here. I guess I may be somewhat schizo here as I can rationalize both perspectives enough to understand them but also agree with the guy perspective BnB paints here maybe not entirely but mostly.

I find Trip as a real male complete with backbone and sometimes poor behaviour refreshing as I can relate.

I really enjoy the bits of T'Pol really being alien to Trip and vice versa but they can learn to understand and appreciate the differences and each other and by extension each others race and ways.

Good work, Keep them coming.

HtH

On 07 October 2006 at 11:35 PM Gammaent said:

I really liked this part and especially the small touches that you threw in. I finally liked that fact that humans had an evolutionary advantage over Vulcans, really nice touch. I personally agree with Distracted and thought that Trip was a bit over done but really like this version of him, with an appropriate anger. I also liked his monologue after coming back from the fight. Overall an exciting story and I definitely can't wait for the next part!

On 08 October 2006 at 03:11 PM justTrip'n said:

OK, I am a slow reader. (I like to savor a good story, not "waste it.") So I'll just comment on the first half of this chapter:

I love the humor: "I am honored," [Trip said]... T'Para's expression told him he certainly had better be.

I loved the fight with the reptilian cat and how the couple admits to being turned on by Trip's winning the fight.

I loved Trip's bitter memories of the events of "Home."

I like the explanation for how Massaro gets out of jail.

I approve of your relaxed way of portraying T'Pol. (You are not afraid to break the fan fic convention that she is betrayed no emotions, except through her eyes.) I'm glad she smiles at Trip in private.

It's all VERY, VERY good! (Something almost too obvious to state.) I bet you write great technical manuals! Thanks so much.

On 08 October 2006 at 06:14 PM justTrip'n said:

Wow, I just finished the story and the extensive comments. I didn't expect anyone to have a problem with the outburst or the anger at Koss. Forgiveness is overrated. (How's that for politically incorrect?)

BTW, human evolution is one of my interests. Your speculations about Vulcan versus Human evolution are fun. Here's a theory I came across in my reading at work (economics strangely enough): Why did human cultural evolution begin to take off during the ice age? Because the ice age was a lot harder on human predators (saber-tooth tigers and the like) than it was on humans, who could clothe

themselves, build shelters, and use fire. So, with predators dieing off or moving South, for the first time humans could go out one-by-one to do their berry picking, huntinng, trading, etc. They no longer had to travel in packs, just for protection, like babbons. The result: division of labor, greater efficiency, spread of culture over long distances. Everything took off.

I see Vulcans still have alot of wild animals around. Maybe that's why they evolved to be more communal, while humans evolved to be more independent. That works right?

And Vulcans, coming from a hot planet, wouldn't have needed fire quite so badly. How did fire affect Human and Vulcan evolution? Fuel for more speculative nonsense!

On 08 October 2006 at 07:10 PM Blackn'blue said:

Eureka! THAT'S what Vulcans place such a premium on family cohesion and obedience.

Thanks. You have just given me an idea....

On 11 October 2006 at 04:15 AM Blackn'blue said:

The deed is done. I submitted the conclusion, part 3, to Bucky tonight. We shall see what happens. It is by far the longest chunk I have ever written. It is also rated R. *fingers crossed*

On 11 October 2006 at 07:40 AM enterpriseScribe said:

OOooooooh! So excited!

Part 3 Commentary

On 12 October 2006 at 12:55 AM Rigil Kent (the Bloodthirsty Misanthrope) said:

First of all, I fraking LOVE your Section 31. Hell frak yeah ... that's the way to deal with pieces of crap like TP. And I LOVE that Sec31 is going to be taking out the trash with that whole organization. And Harris knows Soval, huh? Heh.

Good job with the combat scenes. Those things are difficult to write and I think you did an excellent job.

Was glad to see that those SOBs who hit TnT's house got what they deserved although I was kind of hoping that Davis would suffer a bit more. Thus should ALL rapists (or would-be rapists) perish.

This was a very enjoyable story, BnB, and I really hope it's only whetted your appetite. I would love to read a continuation of this. There are enough dangling plot threads to almost demand it...

On 12 October 2006 at 02:09 AM Blackn'blue said:

Whew. Thanks Rigil. I was nervous about those fight scenes. All I know about combat came from careful listening to men who have been in it, and reading about it. Plus what bits I have picked up from personal spats here and there, but that barely counts.

RE: Sec 31 - I just got tired of the relentlessly anti-establishment message that the Bobsey twins preached. It's not the 60's anymore guys. Like it or not, some things in life are not pretty. But that does not mean that they are not necessary.

I would gladly have had T'Pol inflict significantly more damage, but she was in a hurry. You understand how it is when one lacks the time for finesse, I am sure.

I gotta take a break for a while. My circuit breakers need to be reset. I will kick back and read your work, and TLR, and eScribe, and everyone else. I am eager to see what you end up doing to poor long-suffering Harad Sar. Poor bewildered SOB is caught between a rock and a hard place no matter what he does, isn't he? :)

On 12 October 2006 at 02:11 AM Windrider said:

Eeeeeeeexcellent. Really unbelievably amazing. I hope this isn't the end of your story, it's far too good to stop here. And you've set yourself up so nicely for another part! How lucky are you? The luckiest! Keep it coming, BnB, and soon! :)

On 12 October 2006 at 04:08 AM Mitchell said:

OH Yeah!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Normally im not one for the Extream "Cloak an Dagger" stuff done by nonexsistant branches of Governments(I much rather always liked covert ops carried out by special forces, But I have to say I love section 31's way of handling things. An prety damn good writin BnB.

As to the near rape scene, Hell I was suprised you didnt just have T'pol rip everything off. But it makes sence that she didnt take her time, since her family was also in danger. Revenge has to come 2nd to the saftey of ones family after all.

Pluss I just have to say, I love that Trip isnt made into a weekling, an he can handle himself when its required to. an the guy can handle himself on Vulcan to. I love that. ;) A Country boy can survive.

Also loved how Humans have better night vission then Vulcans. I never even thought about that before this story, but really it dose make sence. Cool. They cant be better in every single aspect.

Oh an T'Para has got to be one of the coolest Inlaws ever. LOL

Loved this fic, an the one before to.
Thanks for writin them.

On 12 October 2006 at 01:42 PM Linda said:

Goody. Just found part 3 up and have printed it off. Unfortunately, will have to save it for lunch reading - no breaks this morning as one job at work went down last night and it was prereq for a bunch of other jobs. We in the data center have our hand full this morning! But I will have a nice reward waiting to be read after everything is cleaned up.

On 12 October 2006 at 06:17 PM enterpriseScribe said:

It's here! Okay, I'll go read now! I love the rating (Cruel Laundry Stains).

On 12 October 2006 at 06:37 PM Archangel said:

Dude that was freaking AWESOME!!! T'Pol with her "castration," even though I'm a girl, that just sounded unbelievably painful! But seriously, I just wish it was longer, cos that was slamming! Sorry, a lot of exclamation I know, but it deserves it, and although I do not believe in capital punishment, it was understandable for you to want to end Terra Prime, because they are nothing more than the KKK, or even Al-Qaeda with fancier weapons, but essentially the same ideals, and this world, and the future, ir should never be tolerated. So thank you for a great story, and a very fitting ending, it was quite fabulous! :)

On 12 October 2006 at 07:10 PM enterpriseScribe said:

“Three times human strength they say,” he remembered.

You saucy monkey! :D It's 2.75!

Mike & Joe freaked me out more than a little bit.

Awesome ending all round.

On 13 October 2006 at 05:12 PM Linda said:

Wow, you breathe a fresh breath of air into ST! The characters can almost walk off the page, and I can almost rub shoulders with them as I walk right past them into the Vulcan desert or your earth scenes and live there. Great settings - panoramic and close up. Great details like the marriage certificates. And the bad guys - really frightening and so breath stopping to think there are really people like that out there in the RW. I'm addicted now, you naughty boy!

On 13 October 2006 at 05:47 PM Blackn'blue said:

OK, that's better now. :)

(I sent Linda a PM whining for feedback so she threw me a bone.)

pants happily and wags tail

On 13 October 2006 at 07:12 PM Linda said:

You sent a PM? I will have to go see it!

I had been trying to read your story but kept being rudely interrupted by failing computer jobs and by The-Needs-Of-The-Boat. Das boot, we just got a month ago, comes out of the water on Saturday (tomorrow) by crane and needs 6"x6"x6' timbers for under the skid - to be hauled in my little Saturn today (or else) says the Keeper of the Boat Storage Area. Gosh, you'd think it was a starship, the care it needs! I'm revising Surak: "The needs of the many (humanoids) or the one (boat) outweigh the needs of the few or the one (humanoids)". So your story was a treat to be digested in momments stolen from

das boot.

On 13 October 2006 at 08:25 PM Blackn'blue said:

Egad. When all you have is a flat bottomed aluminum rowboat, such issues never arise :)

On 13 October 2006 at 11:07 PM justTrip'n said:

OMG! I think you should write for HBO. Quit your day job!

On 13 October 2006 at 11:38 PM Blackn'blue said:

Ain't got no day job. I'm retired on disability. Nothing else to do with my time but sit around and daydream.

On 14 October 2006 at 06:37 AM Sash said:

Wow! This had me glued to the screen . . . can't wait for your next story!

On 14 October 2006 at 07:31 AM graybear said:

Excellent. Everything tied up so very nicely. You have a superb, completely appropriate response to the idea of rapists.

More, please.

On 16 October 2006 at 12:17 PM Distracted said:

Well, all I can say is that you do cloak and dagger amazingly well. Your descriptions are vivid, and your action scenes are easy to visualize and flow smoothly. I still prefer the more amusing domestic scenes, like Elizabeth's "baby giggle seizure"... but death and violence are usually not my preferred subjects for light reading. This story was nevertheless quite impressive. You should seriously think about writing something for publication. Wow.

On 16 October 2006 at 03:01 PM Blackn'blue said:

stares fixated at the screen, dumbstruck

On 17 October 2006 at 03:59 AM Jeff said:

I haven't read this submission yet (waited until complete), but the stinky-poop story you're trying to recall is "She's What?" by Favors. The first part appeared 13 MAR 2005.

In that, I loved the p*ker game progression after Trip told T'Pol "let's make this personal".

On 17 October 2006 at 05:50 AM Blackn'blue said:

That explains why I couldn't find it. It isn't there anymore. Must have been taken down because it wasn't going to be finished. :(*sigh* It had such a good start too... Oh well.

On 20 October 2006 at 02:27 AM Dinah said:

Great story! Congratulations on making Terra Prime genuinely evil. I'm looking forward to your next installment in this saga.

On 28 November 2006 at 09:41 PM enterpriseScribe said:

Just re-read it and dontcha guys think it's fun to watch BnB just spreading his little ficcy wings to the skies? And Father to the Man gets even better.