

INTERLUDE

by
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Something *touched* her, and she came awake with a sensuous stretch, without fear – which was odd, because she was supposed to be alone in—

She sat bolt upright, and the name tumbled out – “Spock?”

And even as she said it, she knew it wasn’t necessary, that he couldn’t hear the sound of her words; didn’t need to hear them.

//I never did get the hang of this link, you know.//

//I know.// She felt the smile, and it shocked her more than the touch had.

//Where are you? Are you here, on Hadrian? What’s going on?//

//I am coming to you.// And that quickly, he was gone from her mind.

She got up – mostly to assure herself that she wasn't having a particularly pleasant dream, and dressed in the predawn dimness, puzzled. There had been no sexual urgency in the link, no incipient and unscheduled fever of the blood. And if the Kohlinar discipline had been successful, there would be none in the future. So ... why?

She didn't care about the why, she realized. She knew only a trembling deep within her soul, a feeling she thought she had put away forever, and a hammering excitement in her chest.

//He's coming. But when?//

And answered herself – *//I don't care when ... except ... God, I hope it's soon.//*

In the end, it turned out to be three days – three days during which she gave the Chief of Staff at the hospital where she was stationed a heads-up about requiring some personal time while remaining vague about how soon, how long, and how personal; passed along all but her most critical cases to colleagues and cleared the decks of any nonclinicals that could be postponed indefinitely; fretted over being unable to initiate the link; and generally shot off enough pheromones to make every man she passed lift his head and wonder why he suddenly had the urge to run

home and get naked with someone.

The last 24 hours were the worst. She was convinced she had hallucinated the entire thing. Spock was on Vulcan, seeking to purge the last remnants of the emotionalism that had dogged his life, looking for the peace of pure logic. She was on the planet Hadrian, working pediatrics in the women's and children's hospital there.

They had been married for nearly a decade but had spent less than half that time together – first on the *Enterprise* in a welter of mixed messages, crossed signals, and devastating miscommunications, then on Vulcan during the most trying period since Surak's early reforms. After that, the tides of war carried them apart, and then there was The Black Time – a period which she still stepped around as fearfully as she would step around an adder on the path. And finally the brief season afterward, when Spock had taught her, with infinite patience and infinite gentleness, that her body could again know pleasure, followed by their second – and she thought, last – pon farr before she sealed up her heart and pretended she wasn't dying inside as he chose – *chose!* – to turn away from any remnant of Human emotion.

So why now? Why the cryptic message and the undercurrent of what seemed – incredibly, incredulously –

joy from this man who claimed never to have known it – to be incapable of knowing it.

It must have been a dream. Several times, she started for her communication console, once getting as far as calling up the protocols and filepath to send a message to his family on Vulcan before her courage failed her, knowing that she could not bear the humiliation of having her fantasy revealed for the foolishness it must surely be.

She was just shutting down the commcon, her mood plummeting with the end of the work day, when Katt, the ward clerk slid through the door to her office, leaning against the panel as it closed and looking like she'd just found a pony under the Christmas tree.

“You have a visitor,” Katt announced. “And he’s . . . oh, *wow*. I’m gonna want a full report.” The door shimmied against her back, and she stepped aside as the tall, robed figure came into the office. He looked briefly at the short, plump redhead before his gaze, ebony and serene, settled on Lara.

He extended one graceful hand, the dark sleeve of the k’viet swaying with the movement.

“My wife, attend.”

Katt peeked around his back and mouthed “*Wife?!*”, then scuttled away at Lara’s stricken expression.

Knees shaking, she came around the desk and moved toward him, her heart hammering in despair. His expression was unreadable, and she was sure, so sure, that she must have misread that last mind-touch. That nothing had changed. That they would be back again in that stalemate which neither could break and neither could alter.

Then her fingers crossed his outstretched ones and the jolt that surged through her was so powerful she was sure she was going to burst into flame. She couldn’t separate words or discrete images; she could only let the jumble wash over her as she wordlessly followed in his wake down the hall, through the lobby, across the gathering dusk of the hospital’s campus to her own quarters. That Spock’s mind, so disciplined, so precise, should erupt in this frantic collage of color and light, this feeling of being lost in an immensity, of faces, of alien landscape and lightning jolt and a sheet of coruscating blue, terrified her. Was this what the Kohlinar had done to him? Was he mad?

At that thought, she hesitated, faltered, nearly broke the contact between them, her sudden irrational terror sheeting

red-orange through the link and drawing into her mind the single command – *//WAIT//*.

Then they were through the door and into blessed privacy, and she did break the touch, stepping away from him and wringing her hands together as the gooseflesh rose on her forearms.

“Spock, I don’t know why you’re here. I don’t care. You can tell me anything – no matter how awful it is – but please, Spock, please. If you don’t make love to me – *right now* – I’m going to explode.”

He bent his head to that angle ... to that precise angle that always made her heart stop, and she still couldn’t read what was behind his eyes as he spoke for only the second time since arriving.

“Lock the door, Lara.”

She spoke the command words and heard the tumblers drop, and he stepped back from her, closing his eyes and centering himself. It was if she could see – actually *see* – him gathering the tumultuous energy she had seen in the link, coiling it away, pulling it back into some deep recess of himself and sealing it up harmless. He took a deep breath and jerked his head slightly, like a man seeking to

escape the pinch of a too-tight collar.

And then he was there – *Spock* was there, dark flames of secret amusement dancing behind his eyes, mouth softening into a smile that was more of the mind than muscles. She flew into his arms with a force that staggered them both back against the locked door, and he tucked her head under his chin and simply held her, stroking her hair as she babbled her fear and relief and desire, busy hands burrowing for the k’viet’s fastenings.

He lowered his mouth to her ear. “My wife ... do you not think this is better done in a bed?”

She fisted the robe and began backing through the room, pulling him along, caroming off furniture until they bumped through the bedroom door and the edge of the mattress hit the back of her knees.

They fell across the bed, twisting as they went, landing with Lara atop him. He took her face in both hands and captured her mouth, warm and soft, coming home to a harbor he had sought time out of mind, drinking of her scent, her taste, her essence, breaking free only when her seeking hands penetrated to bare skin.

“Lara—”

“No. Don’t go. Don’t—” She sought his mouth again, and he moved his head.

“Lara! Clothes?”

She faltered, then started yanking at her lab coat, popping buttons in frustration as it twisted under her torso, finally rolling free far enough to sit up and yank it over her head along with her shirt and send the twisted-together bundle flying across the room. His breath caught in his throat at the sight of her and he sat up, catching her wrists before she could continue disrobing. She twisted as if to break free, and he shifted position, swinging one leg over her, then bearing her back on the mattress and pinning her hands over her head as she squirmed against him.

“Slow down,” he said. “I am here. I shall be here for some time. I wish to look at you. To savor you. May I do that?” He could see the pulse hammering in her throat, felt her shudder beneath him.

“Yes. Anything. Just get rid of that damn robe.”

He pulled away, rolled them both off the bed to their feet and did as she asked as she shimmied out of her skirt, shoes, and underwear.

And stopped her again as she would have pulled him down.

“I have never told you,” he said, “how beautiful you are to me. How much pleasure it gives me to just look at you.”

At another time, in another place, those words would have been rain to the desert of her soul. But here, now, she barely heard them over the blood pounding in her ears.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “We gonna talk or we gonna ... savor?”

“Savor,” he said, following her insistent tug. “Definitely savor.”

X X X

Later, in the moonlit room, she woke him with her hands, mapping the contours of his body in a voyage of rediscovery, as if she could see through the skin of her palms.

He came awake to return the exploration, nuzzled softly into her hair, pressed lips to her temple. “Good morning,” he said.

She looked over his shoulder at the clockface. “Actually, it’s only midnight.”

“Even better.” With a quick twist, he shifted position to lie facing her. “That means we can say good morning again later.”

She moved hopefully against him.

“Much later,” he said.

Boneless, floating, she lay quietly enjoying his scent and the feel of his bare skin against hers. Drifting, only half awake, she finally pulled herself back from the edge to ask, “Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“Eventually.” He ran one hand down the length of her back, snuggling her closer.

“Now would be good,” she said. “Unless...” And she spidered her fingers up the inner surface of his thigh.

“Now would be good.” He paused, moving away from her. She could feel him gathering his thoughts, trying to explain. “At Gol,” he began, “I became aware of a ... presence. A ... seeking consciousness, but one without form. And as it grew, it pulled at me. Pulled at my mind.

Until I knew, and the Masters knew, that the answers I sought were not there.”

In the darkness, in the quiet around and within them, he told her of V’Ger’s search, of its contact with the *Enterprise*, of his renewed service on the ship and of the awareness that came to him when he attempted to meld with the vast consciousness. “V’Ger was sterile,” he said, finally. “With all its vast knowledge, it did not know...” He raised the hand that clasped hers. “Touching another. Caring for another, opening oneself to that caring. And I realized I had been as empty, as barren, as V’Ger. Searching for more of what I already had – knowledge – without realizing knowledge would never make me whole. Once I understood what I was really seeking, my path was clear.”

“So you came halfway across the sector just to get laid?”

He came up on one elbow to look at her as the first hints of dawn stole into the room.

“I came halfway across the sector to find the rest of myself. To find the wellspring of the deepest joy I have ever known.” He traced two fingers down her breastbone, across the soft roundness of her belly. One eyebrow climbed sardonically. “And to get laid.”

“Damn, I’m glad I was home.”

X X X

The Vulcan language has no terminology to express the human notion of *honeymoon*; however, that was precisely what was going on. It may have been a decade late; the two of them may have had to cross an ocean of misunderstandings to arrive on that shore, but there was no mistaking it.

They spent hours on the beach, walking, talking, basking on the black sand. Or rather, Lara basked and Spock lounged, since he adamantly refused to remove his k’viet, or to go into the cold and choppy water. He also declined her invitation to make love there, despite Lara’s assurance that they would be uninterrupted. “Not only is our privacy not assured,” he said, “but I have it on good authority that such an activity tends to lead to sunburn and to the collection of sand in places where it is most definitely unappreciated.”

They poked through small shops in the city and Lara, delighted to find a rare bottle of nathuria oil, was gleefully shocked to discover Spock purchasing another. They had dinner with Lara’s closest colleagues from the hospital and

accompanied them to a play afterward, sneaking out after the first act to race for the privacy of home, guilty and giddy as adolescents. But most of all, they began to understand one another in ways that should have happened years earlier.

Lara was astonished and entranced to find the wry humor which she had often suspected, but had never been able to confirm, and was taken breathless – often in the literal sense – by the sensuality she had frequently tried to awaken in Spock, flowering now with an intensity and sense of play that both astounded and delighted her.

Spock also found himself shaken by the intensity of the emotions their lovemaking could evoke. He had known the blood fever, the simple quenching of physical fires, had given and received comfort and release with this woman. But to make love simply for the pleasure it produced, to be able revel in sensation, to be certain enough of himself and his partner to be playful with their bodies, was a revelation. He still found in himself an occasional disapproval of his own actions, but chose to still it by being the reserved, emotionless Vulcan in public. In private, it was a different matter.

In the past, he had always told himself that his occasional attraction to a particular woman was circumstantial – with

Leila, it was the spores; with Zarabeth, the travel into a time period when his own ancestors had been buffeted by uncontrolled emotions. He had struggled most deeply with the very real sexual response he'd had for Charvon, the Romulan Commander, and still felt shamed that he had used both her body and her trust dishonorably. And most of all – most of all – he had built a monument of self-deception around his marriage to Lara.

He had been stunned by the depth of the marital bond – she a non-Vulcan and he, only half. At first he tried to tell himself that the desire he felt for her was only a hormonal echo of pon farr; later, that when he made love to her it was at her urging and simply part of the duty he had assumed when agreeing to the marriage. It was not until he faced the very real threat of her death during the upheaval on Vulcan, driven by the agan-tuá, that he had to acknowledge to himself – to her – that he did indeed love her. He had not lied here, on Hadrian, when he called her the wellspring of his joy.

What he was still coming to terms with was the reality that it was not a new development.

He had been attracted to Lara from the very beginning. Part of it had been recognition of her annoyance at being pressured into that first meeting, but he was also delighted

by the way her mind worked – though of course he had refused to admit that to himself, delight not being a part of his functional vocabulary at the time. Whether it was delight or surprise, he definitely recognized her sharp-tongued quips as a defense mechanism against her feelings of being in a situation beyond her control, in much the same way he himself used purposely literal interpretations of statements he very well knew were meant as metaphors or rhetorical questions. And there were the unmistakable signals she had sent out, most of them beyond her conscious control, from the pinking of her complexion, to the increased body heat that had made her perfume bloom like a jala vine in the night garden. His mistake might have been – no, it definitely was – telling himself he could function in a marriage with this human; could easily maintain his emotional control when faced daily by human inconsistencies, uncontrolled passions, and flawed logic. His father managed it. At least, he thought his father managed it. He had never seen signs otherwise.

All in all, it was voyage of discovery for both of them, but not without mishap, and the worst squall came out of nowhere – at least as far as Spock was concerned.

They were lying spoonwise, each half awake but disinclined to move as the red-tinged morning light crept up the foot of the bed, when Lara mentioned that a larger

housing unit was coming vacant.

“Are you dissatisfied here?” He was slightly distracted by the discovery of a trio of moles under her right shoulder blade, begging to be touched by the tip of his tongue.

“No. It’s just a little cramped for two people.”

He pulled her closer, her back snug against his chest. “I find it eminently satisfactory.”

She firmly removed the hand that was wandering in a most distracting manner. “At some point, my darling, we’re going to have to get out of bed. And you’re going to want space for your things when they arrive.” The hand, suddenly, became very still, and the warm breath that had been teasing her ear likewise stopped. She scooted out of his embrace and sat up, pulling the sheet over her breasts. “You *are* moving in, aren’t you?”

His silence was her answer

“I see.” But she didn’t.

“I have been offered a field command.”

She felt her heart plummet. She was committed to two

more years at Hadrian, and after that there would be long separations if she couldn't post with him; even if she could, there would be the struggle of maintaining their relationship in the fishbowl of a closed starship society.

“How long can you stay?”

“A few more days. Then I need to return to Vulcan to resolve some business. I left rather abruptly.”

“Don't you think maybe you should have mentioned this before now?”

She watched him struggling to frame an answer, sitting with his back propped against the headboard, and almost felt sorry for his discomfiture.

Almost.

Finally, he began, still striving to put his thoughts into words without stepping on any more marital landmines.

“My contact with V'Ger taught me that logic is only the beginning of wisdom.”

//And?// The mental touch surprised both of them; Lara could seldom initiate it outside of the most dire

circumstances.

“But I find I must make my way to that goal alone.” He reached out and took her hand; another surprise. “I should have initiated this discussion as soon as I arrived. There were, however ... certain ... distractions.”

Lara found her mind flooded with intensely erotic images and took her hand away, fighting less successfully to shut out the sense memories.

“I said I have been *offered* a field command. I did not say I had accepted the offer.”

“But then—”

“There is also the strong likelihood that I will be offered a teaching position at the Academy.”

“Back on Vulcan.” The flat tone of her voice said much about her dissatisfaction with that notion.

“No. Starfleet Academy. On Earth. San Francisco. And ... I would like to have you there with me.”

Somehow, this admission which she had never before been able to pry from him without the confluence of extreme

circumstances, made her suspicious rather than happy.

He picked up on her body language and cocked his head in puzzlement. “You are not pleased.”

“I’m ... curious. Why the Academy?”

“I have never—”

The chime of the commcon interrupted, and Lara turned with annoyance, until she saw the annunciator panel. “I’ve got to take this,” she said.

“Sorry, Dr. Merritt,” came the voice, “but you said you needed to know. Sherjil was just admitted and Dr. Omari says this is it.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.” She flipped the sheet back and hit the floor already running.

Spock got up, pulled on his trousers, and leaned against the bathroom door as she stepped into the shower.

“I presume this is a special case,” he said.

“Cross-species pregnancy,” she replied, raising her voice to be heard over the drum of the water. “Mother’s Andorian,

father Human. She's had a tough time, and we had to go in at 22 weeks for an intrauterine heart repair on the baby. I'm sorry, Spock – but I have to be there for the delivery.”

Wordlessly, he handed her a towel as she stepped out. She rubbed briskly, wrapped the towel around herself and reached for her toothbrush.

“You did not consider transfer to a surrogate?”

“Can't.” She spat into the sink and shot him a curious look. “Nobody's ever successfully transferred an Andorian fetus after it's implanted.” She ran a comb through her hair, looked in the mirror, and shrugged. “I don't know how long I'll be,” she said, pulling on shoes and scrubs.

He was donning his k'viet and searching for boots. “May I accompany you?”

“Not into delivery. If you want to get some breakfast, I'll meet you in the cafeteria after.”

X X X

He had time, as it happened, not only for breakfast but to begin thinking seriously of lunch, before she bounced into the cafeteria wearing the biggest grin he had ever seen on

her face.

“I take it the delivery went well,” he said.

“Textbook perfect. Beautiful baby girl, healthy and pink. Cutest little sensing antennae you’ve ever seen. Daddy was touch-and-go for a while, but I think he’ll pull through.”

He motioned toward the table. “Have you eaten?”

“Had some juice upstairs. Come on, let’s go for a walk on the beach – I can’t sit still.”

The crossed the campus and descended the long flight of stairs to the black sand beach. Lara jittered next to him for a few paces and then broke into a run, unable to contain herself any longer. She flew over the sand, arms wide, face tilted up to the sun, almost out of sight before she returned and ran back toward him, meeting him at a rocky ledge that jutted out above the high tide mark. She hoisted herself up onto the natural bench and patted the rough lava.

He stood for a moment, watching her. “I have never seen you so happy,” he said.

“I never thought, really, that I’d get such a kick out of pedes. I knew this would be a good long-term posting, and

I thought – okay, sick kids, I can deal with that. And it’s ... it’s heartbreaking when you lose one, but when you can be involved in something like this, this morning – it’s just indescribable. They wanted a baby so bad. Had tried so hard, and Dr. Omari is nothing short of genius. I try to get the pediatrics consult on all her cases.”

Spock moved to sit next to her on the ledge. Had they not been in public, he might have put an arm around her. As it was, he simply watched the surf and enjoyed basking in the aura of her contentment. She leaned against him anyway, and he surrendered to the inevitable, putting one arm around her and enjoying anew the pressure of her body against his.

“Why did you ask me, this morning, about using a surrogate for Sherjil’s baby?”

“It is not uncommon in cross-species pregnancies.”

“Studying obstetrics now, are we?”

“No. But ... the subject of cross-species pregnancy has ... been on my mind of late.”

She went very quiet in his embrace. Her inability to conceive had long been an area around which they trod

very carefully.

“Is that why you didn’t accept the field posting?”

“In part. I have never sought command. And as you have said, it is difficult to the point of impossibility to establish a workable relationship in the artificial confines of a starship. A planetside posting would be far preferable...” He let the thought trail off, and continued to keep his eyes on the line of surf.

“Vulcan culture,” he said, finally, “has long been obsessed with the continuation of genetic lines and with the survival of the clans. To that point, our definition of parenthood often goes far beyond simple biology. Many forms of conception and parturition are acceptable. And many new techniques are being developed as interspecies matings become less rare.”

She pulled free of his embrace, braced her palms on the ledge, and studied the toes of her shoes.

“I’m committed to two more years here.”

“Yes. I would not ask you to abandon that responsibility.”

“So what *are* you asking?”

“That you consider the possibility of children.” She did not answer, but he could feel the top layers of her mind, racing from point to point like a wild animal suddenly caged. There was very real fear there, he realized – fear of failure, of abandonment, of inability to nurture, of the restrictions a child would put on their lives. He put his hand over hers on the stone; wished for privacy and a true link, and attempted to send reassurance and comfort through flesh-touch alone.

“You really think you want that?” She broke the physical contact. “The little vine-covered cottage and baby makes three? And a puppy, too, I suppose.”

“Sehlat.” The word was out of his mouth before he could stop it.

She turned to look at him for the first time since they settled on the ledge, one corner of her mouth quirking in amusement. “What the hell’s a sehlat?”

“An eighty-kilo teddy bear with six-inch fangs.”

“Oh, well, we’d certainly have to have one of those.”

She gave a short, sharp sigh, and leaned against him. And

Spock, abandoning all discretion, put his arm around her, pulled her onto his lap, and tucked her head under his chin. It wasn't a true link; nevertheless he could see the top layers, and the utter panic of a few moments ago had faded somewhat. There was still apprehension and uncertainty and – yes – fear. But not panic.

“Just ... think about it?” she asked. “That’s all you want me to do?”

“For now.”

“And ... you’ll still take the planetside posting if it’s offered? Either way?”

“Either way.”

She sat still for a moment, then moved against him with unmistakable intent. Neither his mind nor his body needed a link to interpret it.

“Are you attempting to distract me?”

“Yup. How’m I doing?”

In answer, he stood up, spilled her off his lap, and straightened his k’viet. She looked up at him, uncertain, a

bit apprehensive. He shook the wrinkles out of his sleeve and extended one hand, palm up.

“My wife, attend.”

Smothering a smile, she looked down, then laid her fingers across his. Together they climbed the stairs, crossed the campus, and with serene single-mindedness went into Lara’s quarters.

Which, if not exactly a vine-covered cottage, was at least a step in that direction.

