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INVITATION TO THE DANCE

by
Lynda Carraher

Lara Merritt stretched luxuriously in the widening patch of sunlight that picked out the colors of the bedspread, and watched through half-closed lids as the young man in front of the mirror tried unsuccessfully to tame his unruly auburn cowlick, gave it up as a bad job, and jammed his cap over it instead.

He crossed to the rumpled bed, sat down on the edge of the mattress, and dropped a quick kiss on the top of her ear. Lara gave up the pretense and opened both eyes.

“Time to go,” he said.

“I know.”

“So ... I’ll see you next time I’m on-planet?”

She pulled the sheet around her shoulder and gave what might have been a shrug. “Maybe.” She nestled back into the pillows. “Safe trip.”

“Well ... okay, then.”

She felt the mattress shift as he stood, heard the click of the door as it opened and closed, then tossed the sheet back and headed for the shower, shaking her head. God, would she never learn? The young transport pilot was an enthusiastic and generous lover, but he was dumb as a box of rocks. After two days in his company, she thought her own IQ had probably dropped twenty points.

Still ... he had been fun. Sometimes, you had to settle for what was out there. And on Vulcan, what was out there could be slim pickings indeed.

* * *

The afternoon shadows were lengthening as she got out of the skimmer in front of the Embassy gates. Her own shadow preceded her up the wide stone steps, and its length told her she was running late. She dropped her bag at the

foot of the stairs and turned to cross the wide hallway, into the library.

“There you are,” her father said, setting a crystal decanter on the sideboard, only to pick it up again and fill a second glass and hand it to her.

“Sorry I’m late, Papa.”

“Don’t mention it. How was the conference?”

“Fine.” Neither of them hesitated in the slightest at the polite fiction. They sat in companionable silence, enjoying the moment and the sherry, and then Frederick Merritt pulled a pipe out of his pocket and began packing it with care. Lara allowed herself a mental eye-roll. *Here it comes*, she thought.

“Next tenday, I’d appreciate it if you’d hold the evening for me.”

“I think I could do that. What’s up?”

“Ambassador Sarek is hosting a small dinner party. I’d like you to accompany me.” He didn’t look at her.

“Uh-huh. And what fine diplomatic hanky-panky am I going to be party to this time?”

“None at all.” He gave full attention to getting the pipe lit and drawing. Lara continued to look at him, waiting. Finally, he exhaled a small, elegant smoke ring. “Just an intimate evening, actually. His son is home on leave, and--”

“Is this a fix-up job? With a Vulcan?”

“Not exactly.”

“Oh, yes, exactly. I don’t believe this!”

“Lara – let me explain.”

“Besides, I thought all Vulcans got married before they were out of diapers.”

“That’s not true. Most of them are betrothed as children. It’s traditional for the parents to make the arrangements. But they don’t marry until they’re adults.”

“So ... he’s not an adult yet? How old is he – twelve?” She crossed to the decanter. “I think I need another drink.”

Her father held out his glass, and she filled them both.

“No. He’s a Starfleet officer who’s been off-planet for several years.”

“And his betrothal?”

“Sometimes these things don’t work out. Sarek and Amanda would like to begin to investigate alternative arrangements.”

She eyed him over the rim of her glass. “Alternative ... Oh, no. No, no-no-no. What century are you in, Papa?”

He put his pipe down and she realized with a chill that he was absolutely serious.

“This one. With you. And, Lara ... you’re just marking time. Your career is going nowhere—”

“Excuse me? The research I’m doing at the Vulcan Science Academy is”—

“Is about to be de-funded. At which point, Starfleet will reassign you, God knows where. Any affiliation with Sarek’s family, no matter how slight, could make the difference between your getting a prestigious shipboard assignment and getting stuck off at the backside of nowhere.”

“Maybe I’d LIKE to be at the backside of nowhere. Maybe ___”

“Or maybe not. Maybe your service record is already a little spotty. Maybe I had to pull some strings to get you that research spot. And maybe it’s time for you to decide what you’re going to do with the rest of your life.”

The words stung. And the truth of them made the sting particularly sharp. Stalling for time, she crossed to the window and looked out into the compound.

“Lara ... Just come to dinner with me. That’s all. The worst thing that can happen is that you’ll make a social contact with someone who could advance your career.”

“Just dinner.”

“Yes.”

“And that’s all.”

“Yes.” She could hear him fiddling with his pipe again. “But it would help if you’d wear that burgundy gown.”

* * *

The skimmer slowed, halting at a gate with an intricately carved jade lintel. Frederick Merritt held his daughter’s hand as she exited the vehicle. The gesture was only part social nicety. The other part was to make sure she did in fact get out.

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this. You so owe me big time.”

“Put it on my tab.” With an almost imperceptible tug, he led her under the gate and into the outer garden, lit with a combination of glow-lanterns and firepots. Half a dozen couples moved along the pathways, speaking in soft and formal tones.

“An intimate little dinner?” She cocked an eyebrow at him.

“For Sarek, this is about as intimate as it gets.”

“Frederick, how delightful to see you.”

Lara turned at the voice and bit back the exclamation rising in her throat. The woman coming toward them was definitely Human. She slid a sideways glance at her father. “Are you using me as a beard? You sneaky old—”

“Lady Amanda!” Frederick Merritt’s elbow made definite contact with his daughter’s ribcage as he stepped forward and took the hand the woman offered. “May I present my daughter, Dr. Lara Merritt. Lara, this is Lady Amanda, who is Ambassador Sarek’s wife.”

The older woman’s blue eyes made a quick reconnaissance of the slim form, the rich burgundy fabric of the gown, and

the quick parade of multiple emotions that passed over her guest's face.

"I'm so pleased you could join us, Lara. Your father has told us much about you."

"Thank you. For the invitation." She shot her father a venomous glance and was rewarded with his most disingenuous smile.

Amanda clearly saw the look, and chose to ignore it, leading them through the other guests, stopping to make introductions as they moved toward the double doors leading to the dining room.

Lara was already plotting how quickly she could manage to slip away when she spotted a tall form in a Starfleet dress uniform, dark head bent as he listened to what a rotund Muranian was saying. *My quarry for the evening*, she thought, and then he lifted his head and she actually felt her breath catch in her throat at the intensity of his velvet brown gaze. The heat was instantaneous, spreading up and outward from her belly and she forced herself to breathe again, to quell the trembling in her legs as she followed her father's guiding arm from the room.

* * *

Spock saw her as she entered, a petite Human woman in a burgundy gown that flowed over her slim form as if it had been poured from a wineglass. He saw his mother turn away from the young woman and the short, stocky Human who accompanied her, and thought *This one?*, then decided there was no reason for that notion to arise.

Perhaps it was only the obvious and instantaneous sexual signals emanating from the young woman. Her eyes locked with his, appeared to become larger and darker in her face, and spots of red blossomed on her high cheekbones. She turned quickly away and put her hand on the arm of the older man as they turned to perform the social formality his mother called mingling.

When eventually the currents of the party drew them together and he was introduced to the stocky man as the Earth Ambassador, and to the young woman as his daughter, another logic gate closed. And the final one fell into place when they went to table and Dr. Lara Merritt was across the cloth from him.

T’Pau, he thought, *you are losing subtlety*. He wondered for a moment how much involvement his mother had in the selection, but dismissed it. Politics was Sarek’s milieu, and T’Pau’s. And though Amanda must certainly know, he doubted somehow if the choice originated with her.

* * *

Okay then. Officially a set-up. But actually ... he's not bad. In fact, he is very easy on the eyes. Nice hands. Long fingers. Does that mean the same thing in a Vulcan man that it does in a Human one?

Lara felt her face warming again and sipped at the water in her goblet. She had hoped for a moment, considering the mixture of races and cultures represented on the guest list, that something alcoholic might be forthcoming, but that did not appear to be the case. Which probably meant that the plate now being placed before her was not going to carry a nice rare slab of prime rib.

“*Vashla*”, he said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The entrée.” He inclined his head a bit toward her plate. “It is a kind of summer squash. And the sauce is—” He made a noise that sounded like someone smashing a wine glass. “It is quite spicy. I would recommend caution.”

“Thank you.” Apparently *k'xgashk* was a food name, not an esophageal spasm. She scraped most of it off before tasting the bright red *vashla*, but still felt her breath catch at the back of her throat and tears spring to her eyes.

“Here.” He handed her a fragment of flatbread, and she chewed until the rawness subsided.

“Good God. That stuff should be covered by the chemical weapons ban. Does Ambassador Sarek always try to—” She broke off, remembering too late that she was insulting not only her host but this man’s father.

“It is a Muranian delicacy. My mother always acknowledges the guest of honor by her selection of the main dish.”

Aha. So she had also managed to insult his mother. *Ah, shit, Lara. Try to get through the rest of the meal without putting your other foot in your mouth, please.*

She concentrated on keeping her eyes on her plate, conveying the side dish of roasted grain pilaf into her mouth with minimal spillage, and scrupulous avoidance of that incendiary sauce. Conversations in several languages eddied around her head, and occasionally she heard Spock’s deep voice make a contribution, which she resolutely ignored.

Eventually, the plate was removed, replaced by another course, then another, until finally a pale lilac sorbet appeared. She inhaled the delicate scent and then the fresh sweetness gratefully. Not only was it quite good, but – more importantly – it signaled the end of this interminable

meal. She was breathing an internal sigh of relief when the touch of his fingers to the back of her hand made her jump. She looked up, startled, to find his amused gaze on her face. Her mind was stuttering until he touched the tip of one long finger to the corner of his own mouth. She grabbed for her napkin and touched it to her lower lip. The large lilac-tinged splotch on the beige cloth confirmed her own worst suspicions.

She pushed her chair back abruptly, barely missing a server clearing the table. “If you’ll excuse me—” She whirled away, hoping she could make the sanctuary of the women’s room without additional humiliation.

Sarek, watching her go from his position at the head of the table, made a mental note to contact T’Pau in the morning with the suggestion that they continue their search. He knew Amanda was fond of Ambassador Merritt, but this young woman was manifestly inappropriate for their purpose.

* * *

Lara seriously considered spending the rest of the evening in the lounge of the women’s room. Actually, she had been hoping to find an exit in the vicinity. Surely there would be a cruising skimmer in the area. If not, she would simply abandon her stylish but uncomfortable gold sandals and hike barefoot back to the Embassy.

Eventually, she heard musicians tuning up, and ventured out of her sanctuary, trying to orient herself for the nearest exit.

“There you are!” her father’s voice said.

Busted.

He held out a squarish glass. “Compliments of Commodore Stolichnaya,” he said. She raised a questioning eyebrow at him and he nodded, patting the front of his formal jacket which Lara knew from experience held his personal flask.

“Okay, I won’t kill you. Tonight.” She took the glass and sipped. “But no guarantee about tomorrow. How the hell did I let you talk me into this? And how soon can we leave?”

“Not just yet.” He raised a hand at her objection. “That’s what the Stoli’s for.”

“You think you can bribe me with a double vodka?”

“That was the general idea.”

She made an indeterminate noise and found a small bench semi-hidden by a tall vase filled with feathery grasses. “Ten minutes,” she said, kicking off the sandals.

“Thirty,” he said, and moved away before she could argue.

The musicians began playing something atonal, and most of the Muranians moved onto the dance floor, weaving complicated patterns. Some of the other guests joined them, including her father with Spock’s mother – a development which made her profoundly uncomfortable – but none of the Vulcan guests indulged.

From the other side of the vase, Spock watched through the feathery fronds of *jezza* grass as she sipped from a glass of icewater with a wedge of *shasli* floating in it. No, he realized as the acrid and slightly medicinal odor impinged on his consciousness. Not water – one of the colorless alcohols, then; the type Humans tended to choose under the impression that others wouldn’t recognize it as liquor. He wondered where she had obtained it, since alcohol was a rarity in his mother’s kitchen.

He realized vaguely that he was enjoying himself, enjoying watching her carelessly graceful movements and the way the slick burgundy fabric outlined her slim form. Her sometimes unexpected comments had surprised him, and several times already this evening, he had needed to suppress an improper – but nonetheless enjoyable – response.

She kept working steadily on the liquor until there was nothing left but the *shasli*, which she had scooped up on her index finger when he skirted the vase to stand before her.

“Would you like another?”

She jumped, and the fruit wedge fell onto her lap, then bounced onto the floor. Spock scooped it up with a napkin and dropped the messy packet into the vase.

“Not unless you have one laced with arsenic.” She shielded her eyes with one hand in embarrassment.

“Why would you choose a poisoned beverage?” The purposeful misunderstanding was out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“To put us both out of our misery?”

He clasped his hands behind his back and bit down firmly on the edge of his tongue. “I am told that arsenic poisoning produces an extremely painful death. Perhaps an opiate that depresses the respiratory function might be a better choice.”

The hand came down and she looked at him speculatively. “You’re teasing me,” she announced. “That’s not nice.”

“Guilty as charged.”

She scooted to one end of the bench in a clear invitation which he accepted. She looked at him with frank curiosity in her greyish-blue eyes.

“You’re not at all what I expected, Commander.”

“How so?”

“I looked you up, you know.” He recognized that the statement required no response, but canted his head and raised an eyebrow anyway. “I thought you’d probably be on the new *Intrepid* or one of the other dedicated scientific vessels. Why a Constitution class cruiser with a mostly Human crew?”

He thought about it for a moment. It was an honest question, and he found he wanted to answer it, even though it was certainly a violation of his privacy.

“To surround oneself exclusively with people from one’s own culture,” he said slowly, “is to inculcate a ... closed mindset. It is counter-productive in any search for knowledge.”

“But a ship of the line? One that goes into battle situations?”

“Enterprise is primarily a ship of exploration.”

She touched the ribbons on the front of his dress uniform, and he surprised himself by not moving away from the inappropriate contact. “They don’t hand these things out for discovering a new asteroid.”

He was saved from answering when the movements of the dance carried his mother past them. As always, he was awed by the complicated messages she could convey with the twitch of an eyebrow, the clench of lips, the position of her head.

“I seem to be remiss in my duties,” he said. “I believe at this point I am supposed to invite you to join the dance.”

“I don’t think so. It looks pretty complicated.”

“Not really. It is a formalized Muranian mating ritual. It merely returns the dancers to their original positions after a certain amount of prescribed posturing.”

“Oh. Kind of like most diplomatic procedures.”

Spock’s molars were becoming intimately acquainted with the edge of his tongue. He said nothing as she buried her face in her hands. Even the rounded tips of her ears were bright pink. When she showed no sign of coming up for air, he decided some statement was necessary.

“I have always felt that growing up in the home of a diplomat tends to create a certain level of cynicism. Much of which is fully justified.”

She sighed and surrendered, sitting up. “I always knew I was growing up warped. It’s nice to have confirmation.” She looked at him, suddenly pensive. “What else did you learn there, Commander?”

It was his turn to hesitate, to feel ill-at-ease. He clasped his hands together for a moment, organizing his thoughts.

“I have learned...” he finally said, “...that it is sometimes necessary to conceal one’s intent.”

She rolled the empty glass between her palms. “Even when the other party is aware of the real goal?”

“Especially when the other party is aware,” he said.

“It’s just a different kind of dance, then, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes.”

What she might have said, what she might have done, was abruptly altered when Amanda approached them again. Apparently feeling her message had perhaps been ignored

or misinterpreted, she placed her hand on Spock's shoulder.

"I believe Dr. Merritt is in need of a bit of fresh air, Spock. Why don't you show her the night garden?"

He resisted the urge to shake off her hand, rising smoothly. It was necessary, sometimes...

He realized Lara was gritting her teeth against a sharp retort as they strolled casually through the plantings and settled on the rim of a fountain.

"Well, that was certainly subtle, wasn't it?"

He inclined his head slightly, but did not otherwise answer.

"And you don't object to it?"

"No."

"I don't believe this." She leaned back on the fountain's rim and the fabric of her gown slid across her thighs like a shadow. "Maybe I should trot around the yard, and then you can examine my teeth."

He was genuinely puzzled. "Why would I do that?"

“That’s how the gentry used to examine horses before buying new breeding stock.”

“Dr. Merritt—”

“Lara. I’m sure your mother would encourage you to call me by my first name. And my teeth, by the way, are fine.”

He waited for her to address the rest of it, but she didn’t. And he couldn’t comment on it, of course, without revealing that he, too, had made an investigation of the most likely candidates before this night.

They sat, wordless but not uncomfortable with the silence. Insects sang, and the fountain plashed. Lara wriggled her bare toes in the sand of the pathway. Finally she said, “Do you suppose we’ve sat out here long enough?”

He listened for a moment. “I believe the musicians are still playing.”

“How much longer?”

“Based on last night’s reception—”

“*Last night?* You mean you’ve been dragged to more than one of these already?”

“I have been on Vulcan for 10 days. This is my sixth such dinner.”

“You have my deepest sympathy.” *Sarek and Amanda would like to begin to investigate alternative arrangements*, her father had said, and she felt a twinge that she had not been particularly singled out for the attention. “So ... all the eligible maidens of the kingdom are being summoned to the palace for the Grand Ball. How many have left a glass slipper behind?”

“Thus far, none. Are you planning to be the first?” He looked pointedly at her bare feet, and she tucked them furtively under the hem of the gown.

Seeking to distract him, Lara said, “How do you tolerate it?”

“What?”

“The meddling. The presumption that someone else has the right to determine what you do with your life.”

“I am a Vulcan, Dr. Merritt. The presumption is yours – that they do *not* have that right.”

“So you just...” She moved her hand in a vague gesture.

“No. I found a way to ... function within the system. A compromise, I suppose one could say. As the daughter of a diplomat, you should recognize compromise.”

“I recognize manipulation.”

“There is a difference between allowing oneself to be manipulated and using compromise to maneuver oneself toward a goal.”

“And your goal is...?”

“To satisfy the terms of the agreement and then to return to the life I have chosen.”

She felt the approach of those terms of the agreement and shied away from them like a skittish horse. His closeness in the darkness, the heat coming off his skin, her own almost uncontrollable desire to reach out and touch him, were both overwhelming and terrifying.

Did she want this?

He hadn't asked.

Would he ask?

And if he did, would she accept? More to the point, would she accept through inaction – would she let this nascent but

undeniable connection be shaped by the actions and expectations of other people entirely? And if she did, what would that shape be? Where would it go?

“That life...” she said. “The one you’ve chosen? It isn’t here, is it.” The last was not a question, but he answered it anyway.

“No. Not ... now.”

“And in the future?”

“I do not believe in precognition, Dr. Merritt.”

“You’ve never made an educated guess?” He looked mildly insulted. “Never ... thrown yourself into the dance without knowing the pattern?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

She could hear the music again, changed now to something less alien to her sensibilities, but still unfamiliar.

“Because it’s not always a set pattern, you know. It doesn’t always bring you back to the beginning. Sometimes you have to listen to the music of the spheres and just ... throw yourself into it – into that space – and trust that you’re creating something rare. Something of beauty. Haven’t you ever heard that music?”

“Of the spheres?” He shook his head. “It does not exist, Dr. Merritt. It is an old, old philosophical concept – on Earth, as well as on Vulcan. But it is a metaphor only.”

“I know that. But ... have you heard it?” She angled her body toward him, moved her head to hold eye contact, knowing that she had to push. Had to take that chance. Had to make that leap. *“Have you?”*

He held her gaze for a moment, then looked away and made a sound that was not quite a sigh before meeting her eyes again.

“Yes.”

A breath she hadn't known she was holding made a slow escape, and she could feel the steady thrum of her own pulse as she stood up.

“Well, then, there's just one question, isn't there?” She extended her hand to him, her bare arm luminescent in the starlight.

“Mr. Spock – would you care to dance?”

