

aberrant

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Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: Enterprise
Relationship:	Charles "Trip" Tucker III/T'Pol
Character:	Charles "Trip" Tucker III, T'Pol
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Soulmates , Mutual Pining , Human/Vulcan Relationship(s)
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of the ever-fixed mark
Stats:	Published: 2024-09-06 Words: 8,201 Chapters: 1/1

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Summary

Humans, always romantic call them soul-marks. The Vulcan Science Academy has designated the markings ‘bond-success predictors.’ But Vulcans do not bond with humans. Her mark is an aberration.

Notes

Also includes two classic features of Enterprise: the decon chamber and Vulcan neuropressure!

Humans, always romantic, call them soul-marks. The Vulcan Science Academy has designated the markings ‘bond-success predictors.’ When an infant is born, his or her marking is recorded in a central registry. When there is a match, the registry alerts the families of both children; a childhood betrothal typically follows, if the children are otherwise appropriate mates.

Not all children are matched this way. T’Pol’s bond-success predictor mark does not match anyone else in the registry, and so she is betrothed in the ordinary way, through an agreement of her parents and another suitable family. This does not indicate a deficiency, her mother explains. And, like any Vulcan with a modicum of mental control, T’Pol can mentally suppress the physical appearance of her mark. Most Vulcans do so, to keep such matters private.

Humans like to show off their soul-marks. One of the first things that everyone aboard the Enterprise does is to compare marks to see if they match. T’Pol does not participate in this performance, and she must be intimidating enough that no one is willing to ask her. She has a headache anyway, in this very human environment—she may have exaggerated a little, for effect, but humans do smell much stronger to her Vulcan nose than they do to each other. Archer, for example. T’Pol wonders if he realizes how strongly he smells of his dog and the cheese that he feeds it, on top of the usual human body odor. Reed—the product he uses in his hair is almost acrid to her, even if it smells pleasantly spiced to him.

And then there is Commander Tucker. Always with just a touch of engine lubricant, a hint of plasma and crackling energy and, absurdly, something very sweet that she later learns is pecan pie. She can only assume that he eats so much of it that it’s begun to leach out of his pores.

Commander Tucker wants to know what her mark looks like. She can see it in the way his eyes dart to her skin, whenever any part of it is bare, almost hungrily. The first time they’re in the decontamination chamber together, his gaze is searching. “I believe it is considered polite not to stare while in the chamber,” T’Pol reminds him.

“Sorry,” he says, and she wonders if it was unconscious. The human desire to find matching marks appears to be a very strong one. When he pulls his own shirt off, he reveals an expanse of skin and— “Now you’re the one who’s staring.” Commander Tucker preens a little, throws his shoulders back to better display the shape just above his human heart.

“It is unexpected.” T’Pol’s mouth is dry. “Do you know what it means?”

He traces it, and her fingers itch with the desire to touch it herself. “Just a shape, far as I can tell.” He frowns. “Does it mean something?”

“Commander, Subcommander, I must remind you that the chamber will only work if you apply the decontamination gel.” The doctor’s voice suggests that he finds their conversation tedious.

“T’Pol?”

T'Pol passes a jar of gel to Tucker and considers what to say. Vulcans do not lie, but there are many ways to tell the truth. "It resembles a pictograph I have seen before." An ancient Vulcan pictograph, but he does not need to know that.

"Huh." Tucker frowns. "Maybe I should've paid more attention to languages in school." As he rubs the gel across his chest, the slight sheen only heightens the contrast between the vivid dark pictograph and his skin. "Do you know what it means?"

"I do not believe it is from a modern language." Truthful.

He frowns again, absently gesturing for her to turn so that he can smear the gel across her back. His fingers are firm and calloused, with a few little scabbed nicks that catch against her skin. "What about you?"

She does not stiffen. "Please re-state your query, Commander."

He heaves a sigh and they turn again, so that she is massaging the gel into his shoulders. She is familiar enough with human anatomy to feel the strength of the muscle there, and the knots produced by repetitive uneven motion and poor posture. "What does your soul-mark look like? Do Vulcans even have soul-marks?"

"I do not bear a soul-mark," she says. She considers this honest, honest enough to put him off until she can escape this room. He must infer some nonexistent emotion from her voice, because he falls silent. She permits herself to feel relief when Commander Tucker instead tries to start an argument about the Vulcan treatment of Captain Archer, and she responds in kind.

It is only much later, when T'Pol is alone in her quarters, that she removes her jumpsuit, looks into the mirror, and releases her mental grip. Her mark flickers back into visibility, and it is logical for the pit of dread to form in her stomach as she examines it. There, low between her breasts—it would be illogical to deny the fact that it is indeed identical to the mark on Commander Tucker's chest.

She exerts control over her mind again, and it takes a little longer than it should, but her mark disappears slowly, like ink being absorbed into her skin. It means nothing. The Vulcan Science Academy has deemed them bond-success predictor marks, but Vulcans do not bond with humans. It is an aberration.

Fortunately, it becomes very clear, as their mission continues, that her assessment of the situation is correct. Any bond between herself and Commander Tucker would be—laughable, if she laughed. He is boorish bordering on xenophobic, more interested in the workings of the ship itself than the culture and science to which the humans can be introduced via the ship. Certainly, his appearance is pleasing, but that is hardly remarkable. When he speaks to her, she's never sure whether he's mocking or sincere. He has no sense of tact or diplomacy, and a complete inability to hide any passing emotion. Together with the captain, they build a working relationship, but it is nothing like a—bond—between herself and the commander.

When they meet the rogue Vulcans, the—melders, T'Pol knows that she is making a severe error in judgment by allowing the meld with Tolaris. In the meld, he sees her own vision of Commander Tucker's mark and he *digs*, claws through her mind in search of its significance, as she struggles to fend him off. There's a gleam in his eye, when she finally escapes, that suggests he found what she was looking for. But the captain expels Tolaris and the rest of the melders from Enterprise before Tolaris says anything—she hopes—and she is left with this damaged place in her mind. Pa'nar syndrome, she realizes later, and perhaps she should not be surprised. Her mark is an aberration, and Tolaris's search for it has infected her.

Dr. Phlox tries to help her. It is a strange contrast, as the doctor tries to trick the Vulcan scientists into providing their research to treat her damaged mind, while his wife pursues Commander Tucker relentlessly. "Your wife appears very—interested in Commander Tucker," she says, when Dr. Phlox has fallen silent after describing his most recent attempts to obtain the necessary research. "Forgive my lack of understanding, but—"

He accepts her desire to change the subject. "Oh, no, not at all. Denobulan marriage customs can be very confusing to outsiders." He beams at her. "Denobulans have more than one bond-mark, you see." The doctor rolls up one sleeve so that she can see a constellation of marks on his forearm. "It's common to have three primary bonds—I have three wives, and each of my wives has three primary bonds herself. You see?" He gestures at the smaller, fainter marks that branch from the darker ones. "We're happy to share our loved ones with the ones that they deem worthy."

"That is—very different from human behavior. I believe," she adds.

"Hmm? And Vulcan too, I know." He looks at her a little shrewdly. "I suppose I should let Commander Tucker know that he shouldn't feel uncomfortable about returning Feezal's attentions."

"I do not believe Commander Tucker to be open-minded enough to overcome his reflexive application of human norms to alien situations." She realizes that her tone was a little too sharp, and blames the Pa'nar syndrome. Dr. Phlox is still regarding her with a mix of emotions—somewhere between understanding and sympathy and pity, and she dislikes them all. "Your wife is unlikely to be satisfied by his response."

Dr. Phlox frowns. "You may be right, but Feezal deserves the chance. I'll alert him."

She doesn't know what the doctor says to Commander Tucker, but the next time she walks past the infirmary, he appears a little less uncomfortable with Feezal's attentions—or at least, he's allowing her to stroke his chest without trying to escape. The place where T'Pol's mark should be burns a little when Feezal's hand passes over the corresponding mark over Tucker's heart. Tucker says, "Mrs. Phlox, I'm very flattered, but I'm not available," and T'Pol slips away before he says anything further. It would be logical to conclude that there was some causal link between the physical contact with his bond mark, her physical reaction, and his verbal reaction, but T'Pol does not have adequate data to formulate a hypothesis and certainly does not plan to seek out further data.

The Xindi attack changes Commander Tucker in a manner that T'Pol does not fully understand. Is the desire for vengeance logical? Is vengeance in this circumstance nothing more than deterrence, prevention—not retribution, and so not an illogical emotional reaction? His

personal reactions are not necessarily *productive*, but does it follow that they are not logical? They are consistent with all available literature on human behavior that T'Pol has consulted, but humans are frequently illogical.

She hesitates when Dr. Phlox approaches her about performing Vulcan neuro-pressure on Commander Tucker. It is not merely, as she reminds the doctor, that she has never heard of the application of neuro-pressure to a human. It is that she does not know how she will react, with her fraying mental control, to the extensive physical contact required. But Tucker walks around the ship like a ghost, the hollows beneath his eyes gone dark with exhaustion, and he burns himself—significantly—due to his inattention. It is for the benefit of the ship that T'Pol must agree to this, and indeed, must persuade him to agree as well.

She lures him to her quarters with a lie, tells him that she's having trouble sleeping and asks for *his* assistance. She tightens every mental defense she has before removing her shirt and allowing him to touch her. His fingers are hot against her skin, and the contact sends a shiver through her entire body. He is good, too good, and when she puts her shirt back on, T'Pol releases her breath in a gasp and feels her mark reappear unbidden.

"Now, remove your shirt," she tells him, and she sees the weariness in his movements. The mark over his heart is as sharply defined as ever—she will be careful not to touch it during these sessions. Human literature suggests that the touching of a—soulmate's mark has very obvious physical and emotional triggers associated with it. It is a poor time to risk such triggers.

"Now what?"

"Sit down, facing away from me," she says, and flexes her fingers a little, out of his view, before she touches his skin. It has been some time since they were last alone in a decontamination chamber—some time since she touched his bare skin. She isn't sure if they both flinch when she first makes contact, but she pushes through it. He's half-asleep by the time he leaves her quarters, and T'Pol has the absurd impulse to suggest that he sleep there—no, not so absurd, it would be most efficient, but it would mean something to Tucker that she does not wish to imply.

Her trellium-D exposure—unintentional at first, and then intentional—makes her reckless about her mark. Of course, when her clothes are off, she is certain to suppress it. But she releases it the rest of the time, permits its lurking presence, and *she* feels the difference even if no one else knows. It throbs when she eats the peaches that Tucker brings her, whenever she touches him outside of their neuro-pressure sessions. Sometimes he gives her a strange sidelong look while it is happening and she wonders if the same thing is happening to him—if he suspects anything.

The only time she admits it aloud is when Sim comes to see her, just before his brain tissue is harvested to save Tucker. This clone wearing Tucker's face asks her, "Was there ever anything between you and Trip?"

"No," she says, and her throat closes as she says it, because it is a lie. "You—know what his soul-mark is?"

"Yes." Sim puts a hand over his heart. "I have it too, you know." He says it almost defiantly.

"So do I." It takes a moment for him to understand what she's said.

"I don't—he doesn't know—" Sim looks young, and hurt, and confused, and it is well beyond T'Pol's expertise to fathom what is happening in his psyche.

"It would be illogical to tell him when I do not intend to pursue it further."

"But I'm not him anyway, so no harm there." His voice is rarely bitter, but it is now. "Can I see it?"

"It is in a private location," T'Pol tells him. She will never allow Commander Tucker to discover this truth, but neither does she wish to allow someone else to see it before him.

Sim nods miserably. "The reason I ask is—well, you're all I think about, if you know what I mean. And I'm not talking about an adolescent crush. This is much more serious, the way I feel about you. And—what's driving me crazy is, I don't know if these feelings are mine or his." He looks away, then back at T'Pol. "If it's that there's some kind of—bond that exists and he's just learned to tune it out, and I can't, or if it's—something else."

"I can't answer that." She knows it's unkind but she can't bear to say anything else.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," he says. "I just—felt like I should tell you."

She learns, later, that he is going to die during the operation. She goes to his quarters and asks, "May I come in?" When he nods, she adds, "I—wanted to tell you how much your absence will affect the crew." She takes a deep breath. "How much it will affect me."

"I appreciate that," Sim says.

T'Pol puts her hand on his shirt, just over the spot where his mark sits. He breathes in sharply when she takes his hand and presses his knuckles to her own mark, and even through her clothing, something feels *different*—she catches flashes of his emotions, of the determination and the grief inside him, the confusion, and—suddenly—joy. "I am sorry," she says, and lifts her own hand away.

Sim is beaming now. "All in all, I guess I've had a pretty good life. Couldn't've asked for a better going-away present."

* * * * *

When Tucker opens his eyes again, he frowns at her as though he doesn't recognize her. "A little fuzziness is to be expected," Dr. Phlox says.

"No," Tucker says, "it's not that." He rubs at his forehead. "It's like—another set of my own memories, almost, but they feel like dreams. I

can't tell what's real and what's not."

There is ice in the pit of T'Pol's stomach. Somehow, she did not consider the possibility that Tucker would receive any of Sim's own memories. "Perhaps it is best to focus on creating new memories," she says crisply.

"S'pose so," Tucker agrees, though he still looks a little suspicious. "I imagine there must be all kinds of things to get done."

"Light duty!" Dr. Phlox insists. "And a neuro-pressure session with Subcommander T'Pol tonight. Yes, yes, you were in a coma, but you need all the sleep you can get to recover."

Dread is an emotion, but T'Pol feels it nonetheless as she waits for Tucker to arrive. When he does, he leans in the doorway just as Sim had. "You may enter, Commander," she says.

"Did we—have a conversation here today? Like this?" He frowns again. "I could swear we did."

"A brief one," T'Pol says. She has to proceed carefully. "Sim asked whether you and I had ever been romantically involved. I told him we had not. Sim believed that he had developed—an attachment to me and was unsure whether that was pre-existing. I told him that it was not, to my knowledge, and that his emotional reaction was likely due to his particular development and experiences."

Tucker looks a little like he's been hit between the eyes. "Did you—did he say something about soul-marks?"

"He wanted me to know that he had the same mark as you," T'Pol says.

"Did you—say something about your own mark?"

She arranges her face into a confused expression. "I do not have a soul-mark, Commander." She has a bond-success predictor mark. They are not the same.

"And you didn't—touch his?"

"It was my understanding that touching another human's soul-mark was an extremely intimate act," T'Pol says carefully.

"Oh." Tucker frowns. "Because I have this memory—it feels like a memory—" He touches his hand to his chest. "I guess maybe he just wanted it real bad."

"If you are experiencing one of Sim's fantasies, then I suspect so." T'Pol has yet to tell a falsehood. "Dr. Phlox said that it was important to perform neuro-pressure tonight, Commander."

"Right." Tucker pulls his shirt off over his head, and his movements are stiff. T'Pol's eyes go helplessly to the mark on his chest as he settles onto the floor across from her. Tucker catches her looking and then says, slowly, "Do you want to touch it?"

All the air leaves her lungs. *Yes*, she does, and that alone is dangerous. "I was told—"

"You told me that neuro-pressure requires intimacy," Tucker says.

"Yes." T'Pol looks from the mark to her fingers. "Very well." She is about to do something very foolish, and yet she appears to be incapable of stopping herself. "Come closer." He scoots a little closer, until he's kneeling in front of her. T'Pol grazes her fingers over the mark, just once, as lightly as she can, but it still feels like a bolt of electricity has gone through her, and she gets a rush of *Trip* in her mind for an instant. She hides it as well as she can—Tucker's eyes open very wide and he gasps in a huge breath of air. "Commander! Are you all right?"

His chest is heaving. "You—did you feel that?"

Vulcans do not lie. "I felt your skin."

"Nothing else?"

Sometimes there is no other option. "No," she lies.

Tucker glances down at his lap, then turns red and looks away, carefully not meeting her eyes. "I'm not sure neuro-pressure is a good idea tonight," he says in a strangled voice.

Oh but how she wants to touch him again, even if not there. "It will be brief," she assures him. "Turn around. I can see that you are—in pain from lying immobile." She carefully avoids the word *stiff*, which might prompt a joke about his current state of arousal. "Begin the breathing."

Tucker turns his body until he's facing away, though the blush still goes down his neck. He startles visibly when she touches him again, but there is no corresponding sensory rush. By the time she finishes, he's loose, relaxed all over. "Thanks," he murmurs, and it's almost slurred.

"You should sleep here," she finds herself saying. "Tonight. These quarters are more conducive to sleep."

He turns and looks at the bed. "What about you?"

"Vulcans require less sleep than humans. I plan to meditate and I have other tasks to complete." Both of these statements are true. She's somewhat surprised that he's considering it, though. He must be very far from equilibrium, after everything that has happened.

"People'll talk," he says, though he's already making his way to her bed. "Don' wanna—ruin your reputation—"

"As you have pointed out, there is already gossip among the crew about our lengthy visits. If anything, they will believe that you have

progressed past the point of refusing to spend the night after a liaison.” He makes an outraged kind of squawking noise and falls face-first into her pillow, limbs barely arranged on the bed.

And now what? She had somehow thought that when he was in her bed, she might meditate easily, but it’s clear now how wrong she was. He does not snore, his breaths deep and even. He rolls over and T’Pol watches the steady rise and fall of his chest, almost hypnotically rhythmic. She finds herself slipping into the meditative state.

The world is clean and empty all around her. There is no feeling, no thought, no emotion—and then Commander Tucker saunters over to where she sits, his arms crossed. He’s dressed in his ordinary uniform, and he looks confused and a little displeased. “Why are you here?” T’Pol asks.

“I was about to ask the same thing,” Tucker says. “Is this a dream?”

“I’m meditating.” Her voice is not as even as she would like. “This is where I go in my mind when I meditate.”

He looks unimpressed. “I would’ve thought you’d pick a more interesting place. Like the beach, or one of those strange fire places on Vulcan.”

“*Please leave,*” T’Pol hisses.

Tucker looks around. “Exactly where am I supposed to go?”

“Away.” She has no better answer. She only needs him out of her mind.

“This is my dream! You go away!”

T’Pol startles out of her meditative state a half-second before she hears Tucker’s breath catch. It gives her just enough time to hide her discomfort and assume a serene expression before he says sleepily, “What—?” She keeps her eyes closed and her breathing slow and steady, as though if she cannot see him, he will not suspect. “T’Pol?” He says it louder this time.

She makes a show of moving slowly, of opening her eyes and blinking and saying, with no little irritation in her voice, “Yes, Commander?”

“What just—” He’s having trouble finding the words. “Did something just—happen? Were you in my mind?”

T’Pol does not want to make the commander believe that he is having neurological difficulties, but neither can she admit to what has just happened. “Contrary to your human myths, Vulcans do not have the ability to—reach across space to invade another person’s mind. I have been meditating.”

He manages to frown and look a little shamefaced at the same time. “I didn’t realize I’d be kicking you out of your own bed. There’s enough room for two,” he says, sliding over even as he gestures at the space next to him. “Or I can go to my own quarters, I’m sorry, I never should’ve —”

“The doctor’s orders were explicit. It is important that you rest.” T’Pol stands. From the stiffness in her own limbs, she has been meditating for several hours, despite how brief it seemed. “If it will make you sleep, I will join you.”

Tucker makes a kind of sleepy satisfied noise as she climbs gingerly into bed with him. “Not very gentlemanly, dispossessing a woman of her own bed,” he mumbles, and thankfully he rolls away so that his back is to her as she lies down.

T’Pol is certain that she will not fall asleep in this manner. She has never slept with a man in her bed, let alone a human man. Her awkward huddle with Captain Archer at P’Jem was born of necessity and was deeply uncomfortable. This close, she can smell Tucker even more strongly—her bed will be thick with the scent of him, in the morning—and she finds that she wants to press her face close into his neck. But she does not. She curls up small, facing away, and exerts all of her mental control to hide her mark. There is no reason that Commander Tucker would see the place where it lurks, but she does not even want it present, this close to him.

She wakes slowly in the morning, a strange thrill running through her body. Tucker has curled around her in the night, breathing into her hair. One hand has slid a few centimeters up from her hip, beneath her pajama shirt—an innocent touch, to a place that he has touched before, and yet it feels entirely different.

“Morning,” he says against her hair, and T’Pol rolls over to face him without thinking about how close it will bring their faces together. When she does, he removes his hand carefully from her hip, apparently able to sense how acutely uncomfortable she is, and eases back. “I should get going.”

“Yes.”

He gestures a little awkwardly. “I can’t get out unless—”

“Of course.” He is trapped between her and the wall. T’Pol slips out of the bed quickly. “Do not allow me to keep you further.”

“I appreciate the—bed. The neuro-pressure, and the bed.” Tucker looks around. “I suppose it would’ve been good if I’d brought a uniform with me instead of just my sleeping clothes.”

T’Pol checks her chronometer. “It is twenty minutes past the beginning of alpha shift. The majority of the crew should be at their stations. If you leave immediately, you may not encounter anyone else.”

He frowns at her. Commander Tucker has many different frowns. This one indicates that he is having some—difficulty understanding her. She doesn’t know why. Her statement was very clear. “All right, then. See you later.” He leaves abruptly.

Tucker avoids their next two scheduled neuro-pressure sessions. She meditates and finds herself in one of his nightmares, watching his sister Elizabeth die as he reaches for her, and then he turns to T'Pol and demands, "What are you doing here? Get out of my head!"

"I am not trying to be *in* your head," T'Pol tells him. There is ash drifting through the air as they stand at the edge of the new canyon created by the Xindi weapon. "I am not here."

He reaches out and grabs her arm, incautious in a way that he never is during a neuro-pressure session, and his grip is rough. "It feels like you're here."

"You are dreaming," T'Pol reminds him. "You are not here either."

Tucker wipes his face. His hand leaves a smudge of ash through the tears there. "I'd damn well rather neither one of us be here."

T'Pol doesn't know how, but she escapes his dream then and comes back to her own body in her own quarters. It feels selfish to be glad that she's not in his mind anymore, particularly, when she suspects that Commander Tucker is still experiencing his dream. Still, there is no reason to risk him suspecting a connection between her meditation and her presence in his dream, so she hurries to sickbay and makes herself useful in case Tucker comes to her quarters to ask after her.

Dr. Phlox looks mildly surprised by her presence, but happily turns over the feeding of one of his animals to her. That, in turn, means that she is very obviously occupied when Commander Tucker walks into sickbay and says, "Doc, you have to—" He pales a little when he sees her, and T'Pol wonders if she has chosen this location unconsciously, where Tucker would be most likely to go after waking from a nightmare. "T'Pol."

"Commander Tucker," she says stiffly. "You have missed several neuro-pressure sessions."

There's something a little frantic about his eyes. "I—yes." He rubs his eyes. "I was busy."

"Commander!" Dr. Phlox looks betrayed. "You told me that you had been engaging in neuro-pressure nightly."

Tucker holds up his hands. "Tomorrow night, I promise." He looks miserable and something clenches in T'Pol's stomach, as though she's doing something that perhaps she should not be—but no, it would be far worse to reveal their shared mark, and any admission about their—shared dreaming would lead Tucker down that path. She should never have touched his mark, should never have revealed the truth to Sim.

* * * * *

It would not be logical for T'Pol to have an—emotional reaction to Tucker's relationship with Amanda Cole. Which means that her reaction is not emotional, but is premised on concern for the safety of the ship's personnel, of course.

"Dr. Phlox asked that I speak to you regarding Corporal Cole," T'Pol tells him the next time that they're alone together. "He believes that your performance of neuro-pressure is causing her headaches."

To his credit, Tucker looks dismayed. "She never mentioned headaches—why would neuro-pressure have given her headaches? When you do it to me, I feel—" He swallows the end of the sentence.

"It should not be performed by novices. When you perform it on me, I am able to supervise." Though his performance has always been exemplary, as far as she is concerned.

"You want to supervise me and Amanda?" There are notes of confusion and humor verging on hysteria in his voice. T'Pol is growing increasingly able to identify these emotions in Commander Tucker.

"No," she says, perhaps a little too vehemently. "You must cease your sessions with Corporal Cole."

"Amanda won't be very happy about that." Now there's something else in his tone, something that she doesn't entirely understand.

"Perhaps it will be for the best. You have demonstrated a—lack of discretion in your interactions with Corporal Cole." Tucker looks a little outraged, and she adds, "Last week you were eating together in the mess hall, and in the training session yesterday, she—touched your behind." Said aloud like that, it sounds a little ridiculous.

"You've been keeping a pretty close eye on—us."

"You are hard to miss," she says, and almost stumbles over it. "Your behavior," she adds. "It is inappropriate for a senior officer to fraternize with a subordinate."

"We—just share a lot of interests, that's all. We're both from Florida, I can talk to her—" He stops himself. "She's not Starfleet. There's nothing inappropriate about it."

"Nevertheless," T'Pol says. She doesn't have an end to that sentence.

Corporal Cole comes to her later, by Dr. Phlox's order, so that T'Pol can repair whatever damage Tucker has done. Cole says some nonsense about how she grew up close to Tucker, that he's a gentleman, and T'Pol remembers him drowsy in her bed, mumbling that he'd been ungentlemanly by taking the bed. "Ow!" Cole exclaims, and T'Pol forces her mind back to the task at hand. She does not wish to paralyze Cole, after all.

There's a kind of nervous energy building in her body when Tucker comes to her quarters for neuro-pressure that night. He sprawls out and says, "Between all this training and the extra shifts in Engineering, I've been looking forward to this all day." After a moment of silence, he adds, "You're not saying much tonight. Don't tell me you're still upset about me and Amanda."

“I have no reason to be upset about your relationship with Corporal Cole. Sit up.”

He does sit up, but he eases close to her instead of assuming the next position. Her eyes flick down to the mark above his heart and then back to his face. “Why’s it such a big deal, me putting my hands on a MACO?” He is making it sound cruder on purpose, she knows. “Unless you’re a little jealous.”

“I do not—” Vulcans do not lie, except when it is necessary. “I do not experience jealousy.”

He fixes his eyes on her own. “You’re doing a fair imitation.”

“I am not, in any way, jealous of you and Corporal Cole. That would require—”

“What? Emotion? Attraction? Come on, admit it, you’re a little jealous.”

“I believe you are mistaking who is attracted to whom,” she says, and she can hear the tension in her own voice.

“Why?”

She had expected him to deny any attraction. “You will need to be more specific with your query.”

Tucker’s voice softens a little. “If you’re not jealous—why aren’t you? You must care at least a little, to do this for me every night. You asked me to sleep in your bed.” It still smells of him. She has not washed the sheets. “You—touched my mark, and I don’t know how the hell you didn’t feel anything, but for me, it was like—” He touches his fingers to his mark. “I can’t describe it. It’s never felt like that before.”

“It is a common practice of yours, to invite women to touch something so personal?” She fumbles for something to dissuade him from this course of inquiry.

“My—clone, Sim, he wanted you to touch our soul-mark. Did you?”

She lied to him before, by omission. Implied, at least, that she had not. “I placed my hand on his clothing atop the mark,” she admits now.

“I *knew* it,” Tucker says. “I can’t believe—I’m jealous of myself, that he got to feel it first.”

“He admitted his attraction to me,” T’Pol says, before she realizes that this will have the opposite result from the one that she intended.

“You need me to say it too?” Thankfully, Tucker doesn’t push further on the rest of the memory, of her admission to her own mark. “All right, T’Pol, I’m—very attracted to you. Tell me you don’t feel anything like that.”

“I—am attracted to you as well,” and how strangely formal that sounds, how inadequate.

He looks delighted, though still a little confused. “So—are we—did we—?”

T’Pol can’t resist, because she suspects he will not take the next step unless he does. She leans forward the last few centimeters and touches her lips to his. Tucker inhales a long shaky breath and surges forward to meet her. His hand on her back, pulling her against him, is firm, even as his mouth is gentle, almost seeking. He kisses her as though he’s searching for something, his hands roaming from her shoulders and down her spine, like an ersatz neuro-pressure session.

T’Pol stands up and takes a firm mental grip on her mark, forces it deep down below her skin. Tucker gazes up at her as she slips out of her pajamas, revealing her bare skin, and she *feels* the pressure of his gaze. His eyes roam from her face to her collarbone to her breasts, and then to the spot between them where her mark sits, invisible—where she had pressed Sim’s hand in a fit of foolishness. He stands too, kisses her again, down her neck, and then half-bends to press his mouth to her invisible mark.

T’Pol cries out and the world—tilts. Her ears are roaring, her entire body flooded with something new, and she dimly realizes that she’s fallen back onto the bed, clutching Tucker’s head to hold his mouth where it is. He sucks at the spot a little and it’s some wild kind of feeling inside her, the desperation to put her hand on his mark at the same time—that’s how humans consummate the bond, she knows, and she *knows* that everything will change if she allows it. She forces all of her concentration into—ignoring that demand inside her; she guides his mouth elsewhere, down and away from her mark, and that’s a different kind of satisfaction. Something less than what would happen if she gave in, but intensely pleasurable nonetheless.

Later, they’re saved the potentially uncomfortable discussion of whether Tucker should spend the night by a comm summoning him to Engineering. It takes him a minute to register it, but then he’s sliding past T’Pol, saying, “Sorry,” with a soft kiss to her cheek, and scrambling back into his uniform. Only when the doors have closed behind him does T’Pol release her mental control with a gasp of relief, and her mark burns back into sight.

* * * * *

She works hard to regain her composure by the next morning. She encounters Commander Tucker in the mess hall, and after he’s followed her to a table and they’ve exchanged various updates about the state of the ship, he says, “So I guess we should talk about last night.”

T’Pol knows exactly what he’s talking about, but she sips her tea calmly and does not allow her face or her body to betray the storm of—emotions, weakness—inside her. “I have been briefed on the situation.”

“Well, I was referring to what happened between us—in your quarters?” He waits a beat and then says, “I guess I’ll go first.” She can see the moment when he starts to speak—to admit something, she thinks—and then changes his mind, when he amends it to, “Actually, why don’t you go first?”

She sips her tea again. "I suppose I should thank you."

A boyish grin spreads across his face, and he ducks his head a little as though he's embarrassed. "Well, no need to thank me," as though she's about to express appreciation for the orgasms.

T'Pol takes another sip of her tea. She is working very hard to maintain a perfect façade and this is the moment in which she cannot allow it to slip. "For facilitating my exploration of human sexuality."

The grin melts from his face. "I'm not sure I follow."

"It's one of the many aspects of your species which I've been meaning to explore since I left the High Command." If she were human, she would feel terrible about what she's doing. It's unkind, when she knows how Tucker feels—but then, it would be unkind, to both of them, to encourage him. She should not have allowed last night to happen, and the only recourse now is to couch it in the most Vulcan terms she can think of. The mark burns beneath her clothing.

"Sounds like you're saying last night was some kind of—experiment." His voice roughens on the final word.

"I would not use that term." Another sip of tea. And another.

"But that's the general idea?" He's having trouble hiding his emotional reaction. The strength of it makes clear that T'Pol is making the correct choice, cutting this off before it can go further. Even if she should have exercised more self-control earlier. She curses herself again for saying anything to Sim.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," she says, her voice as emotionless as she can make it.

He looks away. "Forget it." The silence lasts as he gulps down his coffee and then he says, "I'd appreciate it if we could keep this between us. In fact, we probably should forget it ever happened."

There is no reason to regret her words. "Agreed," T'Pol says. And then, in defiance of all good sense, she adds, "That does not mean we should cease the neuro-pressure sessions. Unless you will find it emotionally taxing—"

Tucker drains his coffee and sets the mug on the table. "Us humans do have an awful lot of emotions, don't we—but I don't, not about this--experiment."

"I will see you tonight, then."

He shakes his head. "Still mopping up after the number that the alien did on our systems. Tomorrow night, if things are running smoothly."

T'Pol doesn't want to admit it, but she could use a night free of Commander Tucker's presence, to recover her—emotional control. "Very well."

* * * * *

She sees now that it was unrealistic to believe that she could keep it from him forever. They are in the decontamination chamber when it finally happens. They were both doused in some kind of alien fluid as they transported off the planet, and Archer orders them both directly to the chamber. "Please remove all of your clothing," Dr. Phlox says through the intercom. "The fluid appears to be mildly acidic." His advice is unnecessary; they can both already feel the way that the liquid is beginning to eat through their uniforms. They've only just removed every scrap when Dr. Phlox says, "The gel is ready. I encourage you to move swiftly."

"Your encouragement is unnecessary." T'Pol is already slathering the gel on her body as rapidly as she can, even through her hair. Tucker is doing the same, and when the doctor turns on the ultraviolet light, there is an immense sense of relief as the burning stops.

"T'Pol," Tucker says, and there's a choked note in his voice that draws her eyes to him immediately. "What."

In that instant, T'Pol realizes the gravity of her error. She has not exerted her mind to hide her mark, and it is starkly visible now. She struggles to hide it, but it only fades for a moment and then reappears. She crosses her arms across her chest instead. "Commander—"

"You said you didn't have a soul-mark—you told me! Over and over, you told me every time I asked!"

"It is not a *soul-mark*," she says. Tucker's expression does not waver. "Humans have soul-marks. Vulcans have—bond-success predictor markings." Her voice sounds thin to her own ears.

"So your *bond-success predictor marking* just happens to match mine, and you didn't think it was worth saying? You—hid it somehow?"

T'Pol would like to turn away from him, but she feels that it would be cowardly. "The Vulcan Science Academy has determined that bond-success predictor marks are—meaningless, when they are cross-racial. Vulcans do not bond with humans."

"And you can make it disappear?" He rubs his hand over his face. "I knew—the way you reacted when I kissed you there, the way it felt when you touched mine—"

"Keep your voice down," she hisses. She forces herself to uncross her arms, and Tucker's eyes go immediately to the mark. "Yes. A Vulcan with reasonable mental control can—suppress the appearance of the mark."

"I thought you had a Vulcan fiancé? What was it, Koss? Did he know what it was?"

The ultraviolet lights turn off. "Commander, Subcommander, you'll find fresh uniforms just outside the chamber," Dr. Phlox announces.

“You’re safe to leave.”

They dress without speaking, and T’Pol determines that her quarters will be the most private place to have this discussion. Tucker follows her there, nearly stepping on her heels. Inside, he sits on the bed and drags one hand through his hair. “You’re telling me that you’ve known since the first time we were in decon together that you and I—”

“That is when I became aware,” T’Pol confirms.

His mouth tightens. “And for three years, you didn’t think I was worth—you didn’t think I could handle hearing it?”

T’Pol tries to choose her words carefully. “I am—aware that humans place greater significance on matching marks than Vulcans do. It is highly romanticized in human culture.”

“You thought I would get emotional about it?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Damn it, yes!” He doesn’t stand up but she sees the way he grips his thighs as he shouts it. “Yes, T’Pol, I would have! It means everything, and you were just going to keep that from me—you hid it, on purpose, when we had sex!”

She remembers, viscerally, the feeling of his lips on her mark. “I,” she begins, and struggles to find the words. “The Vulcan Science Academy —”

“Bullshit.” There’s real pain amidst the anger on Tucker’s face. “You did feel it, when you touched my mark. Something beyond *just skin*. You made me think Sim had imagined it, touching you—is this why you keep showing up in my dreams?”

T’Pol is standing ramrod straight, and can think of nothing else to do. “At times, when I meditate, you—appear in my meditation session. Several times, I believe that I have accessed your dreams instead.”

Tucker laughs harshly. “So we have the same mark, and it just about blows the top off our heads when we touch each other’s marks, and we’re walking into each other’s dreams, but it doesn’t really mean anything.”

It’s harder to deny the significance, when he phrases it that way. “You would not have wished to consummate a bond with me, when we first became acquainted.”

“That was three years ago, T’Pol. A lifetime ago. You still think of me as the guy you first met?”

“Are you saying that you do wish to become—joined, as—soulmates?” The word tastes strange in her mouth.

“What do you think?” His fingers play with the zipper of his jumpsuit. “What do *you* really think, T’Pol? God knows that’s the only thing that matters.” The anger has drained from his voice, leaving something between pain and—T’Pol refuses to think of it as longing.

“I find you very distracting,” she admits. “When you are not with me, I think about where you might be. I—enjoy spending time with you.”

“That how they declare love on Vulcan?” He doesn’t quite look at her as he says it. “Would you let me see it again?”

Now that he has seen it, there’s little that T’Pol wants more. She lifts her shirt over her head and casts it to the side. Her breath catches with the intensity of Tucker’s gaze. “You could,” she starts, and he does unzip his own uniform to the waist, strips off his own shirt, and there, she can see his mark, bright against his skin. “It is a Vulcan pictograph,” she admits.

“What does it mean?” He raises his eyes to hers.

She is tempted to answer “frustration” or “madness,” but instead she says, “Fidelity,” and sees the corner of his mouth quirk a little. “Come here?” The question mark at the end of her instruction reveals too much of the emotion in her.

Tucker springs up and closes the distance between them in a long step. T’Pol reaches out and touches his chest a few centimeters away from the mark and watches goosebumps appear on his skin. He mirrors her action, laying his hand just below her collarbone. “We’re really going to do this?” he asks.

It is hard to imagine doing anything else now and there is certainly nothing else she wishes to do. She wonders if perhaps other Vulcans feel this way, when they touch their—bond-success predictor matches, whether there is an almost magnetic pull to this place that denotes some heightened connection. “If it is—acceptable to you, I will,” she says, and it should sound more clinical than it does, the hitch of eagerness evident in her own voice.

“Very acceptable,” Tucker says. He leans down enough to press their foreheads together. “Count of three?”

“Three,” she agrees.

“Two,” and he is counting down, this is not a count of three, but it doesn’t matter—she feels the slow slide of his fingers toward the mark, drags her own closer, and on “*one*,” she presses her fingers to it fully—

She can feel Trip *inside* her mind, warm and soothing in a way entirely unlike Tolaris’s invasion, and somehow, she is in his at the same time. Dimly, she knows that their physical bodies are pressed close together now, but here in her mind she has a strong sense of him, of the delight that she sees sometimes, of the deep sorrow for his sister’s death, of the clever way that his brain pulls apart and fits together engineering problems—and beneath it all, an unwavering affection for her. The ragged places where the Pa’nar has festered are rapidly healing themselves.

Are you in my mind? Trip asks. She smells plasma, peaches, sweat, key lime pie. Feels the way he is always attuned to the ship and its particular quirks. She sees herself through his eyes and would blush if this were in her own body.

You are in mine, she tells him, and offers her memories of the Fire Plains on Vulcan, the—emotion she feels when she hears his drawl, the tight control that she has gradually yielded.

All right then. She doesn't know who moves first, but they pull each other into a kiss and their joined minds soar. She would not hear a red alert, like this, certainly would not care, and she knows at the same time that Trip would feel any change to the ship and react and she—loves that about him.

Later, when they are in her bed again and the sweat is drying on their bodies, Trip says, “So the Vulcan Science Academy says a Vulcan can't bond with a human?” She can feel his laughter in her mind.

“Perhaps the Vulcan Science Academy was—” and he kisses her before she has to try to say the word “wrong.”

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