



The Official  
Zine

# Dear Reader,

Welcome to the official zine of KiScon 2011! This zine is filled with stories and artwork that capture the beauty and soul of Kirk/Spock in all of its forms. You'll find stories and artwork within that explore both the universe introduced in the latest Star Trek movie and the original Star Trek universe from The Original Series. I am proud to present to you a zine that is inclusive of both!

There are so many thank-you's to give out. The biggest thanks goes out to Amanda Warrington and Rhaegal. Without you two, KiScon 2011 would have never even happened, and there wouldn't have even been a zine! I very much appreciate the hard work that the both of you put in to organize this event, and I know that the other attendees do as well.

Another huge thanks goes out to each and every author and artist. Your extraordinary stories and art make this zine very special indeed. The readers are in for a wonderful surprise, and it's all thanks to you!

To the beta readers who edited the stories; both the authors and I thank you a million times over! Your help does not go unnoticed or unappreciated.

I truly hope that you, the reader, enjoy this zine as much as I have enjoyed compiling it. Thank you for reading!

arminaa

(formerly ashleyj28)

**\*Out of respect for the authors and artists, please do not copy or reproduce any part of this zine online. Thank you!\***

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1      *BEGINNINGS* BY CATALENAMARA (TOS)  
An AU fic inspired very loosely on the Harve Bennett proposal for a Star Trek TV series titled "The Academy Years", with TOS elements.

- 12     *ONE QUOTABLE PHRASE* BY ALLOCIN (REBOOT)  
Call him selfish in his old age, but when Jim Kirk invites him on a whistle-stop tour of Earth, Spock Prime can't help but say 'yes'.

T'HY'LA ASHAYAM [ART]  
ALICIA AMADE

- 24     *A GENTLE NUDGE* BY RHAEGAL (REBOOT/TOS CROSSOVER)  
A transporter malfunction sends Kirk and Spock to an alternate dimension in which their counterparts act very strangely indeed.

- 47     *CHANCES* BY T'RACIONN (TOS)  
A first time moment.

COME, BELOVED, AND PLAY WITH ME [ART]  
T'RACIONN

- 50     *CONTACT* BY BLACKBIRD SONG (TOS)  
Kirk needs a way to work out mental and emotional stress, but Spock's offer may not always be a good idea.

MARKED [ART]  
PRINCESS OF SWORDS

- 77     *CUMULATIVE EVIDENCE* BY JAYLEE (REBOOT)  
Apparently Jim wasn't as straight as he had previously thought.

SPORK [ART]  
AJA

- 90 *IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH* BY SPIRKTREKKER42 (REBOOT)  
Twelve year-old Spock is sick with the Vulcan flu. Can his best friend Jim help him feel better?
- SUBMISSION [ART]  
ALICIA AMADE
- 96 *THE TELEVISION AND THE CHOCOLATE* BY NOLA FRAME-GRAY (TOS)  
Fannish whimsy which teaches us that where there is television, slash lovers dreaming of chocolate can't be far behind.
- AU REBOOT [ART]  
MATSUTAKEDO
- 98 *GRASP THE THORN* BY RAGDOLL (REBOOT)  
While accompanying his parents on a routine visit to Earth, a teenaged Spock meets a fascinating young boy named Jim.
- FIRST LOVE [ART]  
ARMINAA
- 118 *TWO MEN* BY T'RACIONN (TOS)  
Two worlds, two men, one future.
- COMMAND ME, MASTER ME, LOVE ME [ART]  
T'RACIONN
- 120 *TRUTH BE TOLD* BY LYRICOLORATURA (REBOOT)  
When they took their host's truth serum, neither Jim nor Spock had considered what kind of "truth" they might reveal to one another – and themselves.
- 151 *BABEL* BY SEPERIS (REBOOT)



# Beginnings

## CatalenaMara

*fuckin green blood bastard go home.*

Cadet Kirk saw the laser-etched scrawl on the men's room wall as soon as he stepped up to the urinal – and simultaneously realized the only Vulcan attending Starfleet Academy was standing at the urinal next to him.

Finished, he moved over to the sonic hand-cleanser. As did the Vulcan.

He turned and met the Vulcan's gaze. They shared no classes, and though Kirk had occasionally seen him walking on the campus grounds, they had never met.

The Vulcan's face was as stony and expressionless as everyone said. Not a hint of emotion altered the lines of the stern face, the closed gaze.

"We're not all like that, you know," Kirk said.

Something flickered in the Vulcan's eyes and disappeared. "It is of no consequence."

"My name's Jim Kirk." He didn't offer his hand. *Do not touch a Vulcan without their consent.* Prof. John Gill had run through Xeno etiquette in regards to current non-Human Academy attendees – all three of them – in record time. The slightest coldness in his voice had clearly stated his impatience with having to deal with the subject matter at all.

A fleeting expression crossed the Vulcan's face, so quickly Jim could barely believe he had seen it, much less interpret it. "I am Spock."

"It's good to meet you, Spock."

Spock inclined his head in a brief bow. "Jim Kirk. You are on command track training."

It didn't surprise Kirk that Spock knew this – his reputation for being knowledgeable about all aspects of Academy life was often speculated about. Kirk's roommate Gary Mitchell shared a class with Spock. He had told Kirk that this professor was always trying to catch the Vulcan in error about some aspect of Academy history or life; Spock had yet to show ignorance in any area.

"And you're in sciences. Prof. McHenry is always using you as an example we should look up to."

Again, the slightest trace of an expression crossed the near-motionless face. Could Kirk interpret it as surprise?

"If he's right about the future of warp drive technology, one day we may be able to go beyond Warp 6." Kirk lost himself for a second in imagining piloting a ship with that much speed.

"Indeed," Spock said. "The odds that starships will be able to exceed warp drive 6 within the next five standard years are 97.5%."

"97.5?" Kirk replied, amused. "You're sure of that?"

"Affirmative," Spock said, and Kirk recognized the glint in his eyes as being that of a true techie. "Taking into consideration that..."

They continued their conversation in the hallway, then outside into plaza. It was a typical San Francisco day, grey, drizzly and chilly, and Kirk noticed that Spock immediately sealed his Academy jacket.

They were deep into a discussion about astrophysics when they met Finnegan and a couple of his flunkies heading in the opposite direction.

Finnegan stopped dramatically and pulled a face of mocking shock. "Well, well, well, if it isn't our resident wonder boy." He altered his voice into a high falsetto. "Looks like he's made a new best bud." The other two men flanked him, making a big show of looking them up and down. "Careful, Jimmy, of the company you keep. I've heard these green bloods have weird habits."

Fury filled Kirk. He kept his voice calm. "Ignore them," he said to Spock, who had gone very still.

Finnegan snickered. "I always knew you were an alien lover, Kirk. I wonder what Vulcan dick looks like?" he remarked conversationally to one of his companions.

"Like limp celery?" Branson offered. They guffawed.

Kirk stepped closer, getting right into Finnegan's face.

Finnegan smirked. "Ah ah ah, Jimmy-boy. You're just a plebe, remember that."

Kirk's right hand clenched. He felt the light touch of a long-fingered hand on his shoulder and heard Spock's ultra-controlled voice. "Cadet Kirk, Academy Regulation 137.5 specifically prohibits the physical assault of one cadet by another."

"How sweet. The green blood is concerned for you. Where *do* you get the time, Jimmyboy? You're Pike's pet; I thought he kept you plenty busy."

"Cadet Kirk," Spock said again, tightening his grasp on Kirk's shoulder.

"They're just like robots, aren't they? Why don't you just go get a mechanical doll, plebe? Better than *that*." He aimed a contemptuous glare at Spock.

Kirk shook off Spock's touch. "Screw regulations."

\*

It had been pure pleasure smashing Finnegan's face in, plus doing the same to his two compatriots for good measure. Scrubbing out the Science Building's lower floor by hand sucked, as did Janice's fury over their ruined weekend plans and her diatribe over his lack of consideration for her feelings. But what kept his mind occupied during the length of his menial punishment was the memory of what he had seen after he stepped back from the fight. All three of his opponents lay groaning on the ground, but when Kirk had looked at Spock he'd seen an unfathomable expression in Spock's eyes.

The stone façade had dropped, revealing... what? There *had* been an expression in those dark eyes. The look wasn't disapproval, or disappointment, or censure.

Had the look had been one of surprise? Astonishment? Gratitude?

What did a Vulcan feel anyway?

Speculation on the meaning of Spock's expression – and the memory of the touch of that hand on his shoulder – filled his mind the entire time he spent kneeling and scrubbing, kneeling and scrubbing.

\*

He'd decided to go for a run near Telegraph Hill, but was just warming up when a familiar figure stepped out of the vegan restaurant to his left.

He stopped in surprise, realizing he'd never seen Spock off campus.

Spock stopped and regarded him with dark eyes that no longer seemed quite as unreadable. "I regret being the cause of your demerit."

"Finnegan was the cause of my demerit."

"He is an upperclassman, and it is my understanding they are permitted great latitude in both verbal and physical abuse of underclassmen."

Kirk, remembering Finnegan's bloody and bruised face, shrugged. "He had it coming. I guess things like this don't happen on Vulcan – it's not very logical, is it?"

Spock hesitated a moment longer than necessary. "No. It is not logical."

His gaze hinted at some hidden pain. Kirk wondered suddenly why he had thought the Vulcan was completely unreadable.

Silence stretched out. Kirk broke it by glancing at Telegraph Hill. "I was thinking of climbing up to Coit Tower. Want to join me?"

Spock contemplated the white tower on top of the imposing slope. "I would like to view the historic structure. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century construction. I understand it has a number of art murals of note."

"That it does, but the view from the top of the hill is the best part of going up there." Kirk headed toward the footpath leading to the summit. Spock fell in by his side.

The sidewalks were crowded at this time of day, the shops and restaurants busy. And yet there was always room for them to pass others on the sidewalk. Kirk noticed the subtle, or blatant, ways people flinched back from Spock.

Spock seemed unaware of their response. Kirk bit back his words. "Tell me what space is like," he said instead. "What are the people like out there? Have you met people from other planets – besides Vulcan and Earth, that is?"

"Indeed," Spock said. "My father is an ambassador. We have been to many worlds..."

\*

It was, unusually, a gorgeous clear sunny day, and the view from on top of the hill was spectacular. Spock had spent the ascent telling him about many of the peoples he had met in his childhood, and then had proved knowledgeable about the murals inside the tower. He was equally knowledgeable about all the structures of interest visible from their vantage point, reaching from the Golden Gate Bridge to Alcatraz Island.

Kirk, for his part, pointed out the many makes and models of sailboats and other watercraft dotting the Bay.

"Let's sit here and watch." They settled on the sun-warmed grass, a light breeze caressing their skin and sifting through the leaves of the trees behind them.

"Look at that one." A ship, rigged out with the masting and sails of centuries past, sailed regally toward the bridge.

"A historic recreation for the exhibition on the 24<sup>th</sup>," Spock reported, but Kirk noticed the trace of a gleam in his eyes.

Kirk followed the passage of the ship. "The ocean was endless back then... all those years ago. You'd set out with no idea of what you'd encounter, what people you'd meet, what the places would look like. You'd set out to sea with no idea if you'd ever return."

"Infinite possibilities."

Startled at this evidence of imagination, Kirk turned to contemplate the angular profile next to him. Spock was watching the ship as it headed for the ocean, but his eyes seemed fixed on some further shore.

"You feel it too."

Spock turned to him, a raised eyebrow signaling indignation as clearly as if he had said it out loud.

Kirk laughed. "Sorry. I meant to say, the prospect of exploring deep space and encountering new life and new civilizations holds intellectual appeal for you."

Spock raised his other eyebrow. "You are most perceptive, Cadet Kirk."

"Call me Jim. That's what my friends do."

"'Friends'," Spock said, as if tasting the word. "A term denoting a close acquaintanceship."

"That it does, Spock."

"Then I will do so, Jim."

Silence reigned for a moment, and Kirk turned his attention back to the bay. "Look – there's an MX-3000." He pointed out a sleek powerboat cutting through the waves. "I'm going out with some friends on one of those during the next break. We're going up the coast for the weekend. Want to join us?"

"I – " Spock uncharacteristically stammered, then fell silent.

"You can join us just for the day if you like, and then take a landtransport back home," Kirk said encouragingly. "Or the entire weekend, if you prefer."

"I... appreciate the invitation," Spock said slowly, picking his way carefully through the words, as if he had suddenly lost his command of Standard. "However, I must decline."

"Next time, maybe?" Kirk knew he shouldn't feel disappointed. A casual invitation to a casual acquaintance shouldn't seem so important. "And it doesn't have to be with a group. We could take one out on our own."

"Perhaps." Spock turned his attention back to the sun-dazzled water and took refuge in asking questions about the various watercraft models and their capabilities. Since Kirk also liked to expound on that subject, it was easy to get lost in mechanical capabilities and specifications. When at last they left, Kirk realized he was starved and suggested the same vegan restaurant Spock had patronized earlier. To his surprise, Spock agreed.

\*

The band hit several thunderous chords and took their break. Kirk, Janice clinging to his arm a bit too tightly, headed back from the dance floor to their table. Just ahead of them, Carol dislodged Gary's hand from her ass, and took her seat. The servo delivered another two pitchers of beer to their table, and they quickly refilled their glasses.

Kirk took a long draught. Janice, already drunk, downed a third of her glass in a nanosecond.

Mitchell leaned forward. "Did you hear the one about the Vulcan and the Andorian?"

Mitchell reached the punchline and Janice shrieked with laughter.

"I've got one!" Janice countered with a joke of her own, all about Vulcan genitalia, and Mitchell howled with laughter.

Carol sat back in her chair and folded her arms. Kirk had already heard Gary's side of their latest argument.

"I plan to be captain of a starship one of these days," Lester proclaimed, jumping completely away from the current topic of conversation.

Mitchell groaned. "You can be my first officer," he said magnanimously.

"No," Kirk interrupted. "I'll be captain. You two figure out who's going to be my first."

"In your deluded dreams," Mitchell treated them to a condescending smile. "I can fly rings around both of you any day."

"It takes a lot more than that to be a good captain," Kirk insisted. "There's a big universe out there, filled with all kinds of people – and we can learn a lot from all of them."

"Yes, like where the best dilithium fields are," Janice offered, eyes gleaming as she contemplated the prospect. "Though the new sensor technology and satellite-based mining means we won't have to do a lot of diplomacy – assuming anyone's at home to protest. Besides, we can give them a few trinkets and they'll be happy."

"Leave diplomacy to the losers in Xenolinguistics. They'll like what we have to offer." Mitchell smiled smugly.

"There's more to the universe than dilithium," Kirk countered. "And we can't count on humans being superior to any race we come across. Remember, the Vulcans made it to space before we did. We'll get a lot better results approaching other people with respect."

"Is that why you're sucking up to that Vulcan?"

"I'm treating him with the respect that he deserves."

"Well, aren't you the sensitive hero." Mitchell regarded him appraisingly. "Why are you sticking out your neck for him, anyway? Vulcans don't give a crap about us."

"They act like we're dirt anyway," Janice chimed in.

"Not Spock," Kirk said quietly.

“Don’t you see the way he looks down that nose of his? He’s probably some kind of spy. Why is he in Starfleet anyway? They have their own ships. They don’t need to mix with us.” Janice looked at him challengingly.

Carol slid out of her chair. “Back in a minute,” she said, and disappeared into the crowd. Gary, thinking along similar lines, got up as well.

Janice fixed Kirk with a hard glare.

“Why are you spending so much time with that Vulcan anyway?”

“Is this about last weekend? I’ve already said I was sorry I couldn’t go on the boat trip. But how about we go for the weekend after mid-terms? My first sim test is next week.”

“You’ve only told me that 20 times.”

“Janice,” Kirk said coldly, “what’s this about?”

Janice swallowed more beer. “Finnegan’s been saying a lot of trash about you and the Vulcan.”

“Finnegan’s an ass. And ‘the Vulcan’ has a name – he’s Spock.”

She slammed her glass down, spilling beer. “Just my point exactly!”

“What the hell are we talking about?”

“Him! That Vulcan! Why are you hanging around with him anyway? You said you had to do that extra work for Professor McHenry, but Amelie told me you were playing chess with the Vulcan in the library.”

“Spock’s his new TA. We needed a break.”

“What could you possibly have to say to him?”

Kirk barely glanced at Gary as he settled back into his seat and picked up his glass. “He’s interesting,” Kirk said. “He knows a lot about ships. Do you know he already knows how to fly an F-3100? I’d kill to fly one of those babies. We’ll be taking Ms. Gardner’s class in piloting together next semester.”

“Ah, Ruth Gardner. That is one hot woman,” Gary said admiringly.

Kirk privately agreed with Gary, but he knew better than to say so. Janice fired a murderous look at him anyway.

“You still talking about Spock?” Gary asked, just as Carol rejoined them. “Well, he is a smartass, loves to show off everything he knows in class, but if he can handle an F-3100...” Gary whistled in admiration.

Music blared again. Janice grabbed Kirk’s arm and levered herself to her feet. “Let’s dance.”

He shook her off, suddenly repulsed at the sight of her. "I'm going home. The Astrophysics exam is tomorrow."

"You'll ace it anyway. You've spent half this week on your padd."

"Night, Janice."

"I know something you don't," she blurted in a singsong, nasty voice.

"Janice..."

"Finnegan was talking with his friends. They said they were going to get the Vulcan."

Alarmed, Kirk asked, "Did they say what they were planning to do?"

She shrugged, smiled, and fixed him with a jealous glare. "They said behind the baseball field. Tonight."

He shot to his feet and headed to the door. The crowd drowned out the noise of Janice shouting his name.

\*

Bright security lights illuminated the deserted baseball field. Kirk raced through it, toward the wooded area climbing up the hill behind the Academy grounds. Breath loud in his ears, he stopped, scrutinizing the pathway and the surrounding trees, trying to see into the nearly impenetrable blackness. He listened intently for any sound.

"Finnegan!" he shouted. "If you're here, come out. We need to talk."

Dead silence.

"Spock!" he shouted.

No response. A breeze briefly rustled leaves and died again.

Standing still, he realized he'd forgotten his jacket, and the chill and the damp quickly penetrated his thin shirt. Maybe Janice was lying just to get a rise out of him. Maybe Spock wasn't out here. Maybe...

Nothing. No sound. Blackness surrounded him as he carefully stepped forward. Thin moonlight illuminated a bit of the path before him, and then it rounded a curve and disappeared into further darkness. No one was there. And yet...

Yet something was.

Kirk strained, listening for even the slightest hint of sound. Nothing. And yet he suddenly knew where to go.



Wishing he had a laserlight – anything – he cut away from the path and onto the uneven forest floor. He picked his way cautiously. Deceptive glints of moonlight penetrated at odd places, illuminating bits of branches, gnarled roots thrusting up through the earth.

Over there. A small clearing. Something.

A darker shape, pressed against a tree.

No. Lashed to a tree.

Adrenalin pumping, he crossed the remaining ground in two strides,

Thick rope bound Spock tightly to the tree. His head lolled over his chest. The side of his face Kirk could see was black with blood.

Kirk, heart jolting, reached for Spock's neck. Did Vulcans have a pulse like humans? The answer was immediately apparent – a rapid thrum pounded beneath fever-hot skin. "Spock?" he whispered. Then louder, "Spock!"

No response, but he could hear the sound of Spock breathing. Kirk reached for his communicator. "Emergency services."

"We have your position," a female responder replied. "What is the emergency?"

"A cadet has been beaten, bound to a tree."

"On our way."

Kirk pressed one hand against Spock's arm. "Spock, if you can hear me, help is on the way."

He felt a shudder go through the other man, heard a deep intake of breath. Spock attempted to lift his head and mumbled something harsh in Vulcan.

"It's me, Jim Kirk. I found you. Don't try to move. You've been beaten and tied to a tree. Help is on the way."

The moonlight showed a gleam of eye. A ragged breath, another. And then, barely audible. "Jim...?"

"Yes. Jim Kirk. Help is on the way."

"They..." Spock paused to swallow.

"Was it Finnegan?"

"Yes."

"And Morris and Branson?"

“Yes.”

Spock shifted his weight slightly, and let out a tiny gasp. Spock’s hands were tied behind the tree. Kirk found one of his hands, laid his own over it. “They’ll be here soon.”

It seemed like forever before two figures sparkled into view. An instant after the transporter effect ended they were at Spock’s side, scanners working. One of them barked into her communicator, the other continued scanning.

“Alien,” the man with the scanner said to the woman.

“Vulcan,” Kirk clarified.

“Acknowledged,” she said, and spoke into the communicator again.

“How is he?” Kirk asked.

The man looked up from his scanner. “I don’t understand his readings. We’ll transport him to the Vulcan Embassy.”

Shimmer and sound, and two more people transported in, along with an antigrav stretcher.

Feeling helpless, Kirk watched as two people supported Spock while another cut him free from the tree. They gently placed him on the stretcher.

One more communication, then the three of them and the stretcher vanished from view.

“Come with me,” the remaining responder said. “We’ll need your report.”

\*

Thirteen messages arrived from Janice that night. He deleted them all.

\*

When Kirk walked into his astrophysics course ten days later he stopped. As the new TA, Spock was in his customary place at the front of the room. As soon as Kirk entered, he turned and met his gaze.

Kirk smiled, and Spock responded with the slightest possible softening of his expression.

Kirk usually was completely absorbed by Professor McHenry’s lessons, but found he couldn’t concentrate. Class time dragged until it was time to leave, and then he was instantly on his feet and by Spock’s side as they walked out into the plaza.

Kirk indicated a bench by the fountain. They moved over to it and sat down. Kirk noticed that Spock looked quite pale and was even more thin than he ordinarily was.

"How are you feeling?"

"I am recovered."

"I tried to visit you at the Vulcan Embassy. But they said you were unconscious – in a trance, was the wording they used – and could not be disturbed."

"It is a Vulcan healing technique which requires privacy."

"You heard that Finnegan, Branson and Morris were expelled."

"Affirmative."

"It wasn't hazing. It was assault."

"I understand it has created quite a controversy in your news media."

"That it did. Videoreporters were crawling all over campus, and it seems everyone on Earth has been posting their opinion."

They were silent for a moment. Spock's gaze seemed focused inward; Kirk was content to just be in his company.

"I wish to say 'thank you'," Spock spoke at last. The words sounded awkward. Spock did not look directly at him. "I know that the is appropriate wording."

"Yes. It is the appropriate wording," Kirk said warmly.

"I wish also," Spock paused, "to state that your presence was welcome. I also wished to ask," Spock met Kirk's gaze, "is your invitation for a boat ride still open?" Again the hesitation as Spock contemplated wording. "I would welcome the opportunity to spend time in your company."

Kirk smiled, surprised by just how much joy he felt at that prospect. "It is indeed. How about the weekend after mid-terms? I think I can get one of the new MX-4000s. I hear they handle like a dream. Just wait until you see how the coast looks from the ocean..."

He began describing points of interest along the coastline. Spock seemed intent on every word. And when Kirk gave him a big grin, Spock's lips curved slightly upward.

# One Quotable Phrase

## Allocin

Call him selfish in his old age, but when Jim Kirk with his bright blue eyes and quicksilver smile invites him on a whistlestop sightseeing adventure on Earth, Spock can't help but say 'yes'. Earth is the only home he has left – in any universe – and Spock counts it a fortuitous second chance that he might get to see it in the company of his old friend.

With only a scant few months until repairs on the *Enterprise* are complete, and even less time before Spock must assume his new mantle amongst the Vulcan survivors on their new homeworld, Jim doesn't plan an itinerary so much as show up at Spock's doorstep with biker-boots on and a duffel bag slung over one shoulder. He wears an easy grin.

"Ready to go?"

"I am."

"Alright then."

Jim's bike is a rental, some sleek black thing that purrs in idle and roars at full throttle. Spock is both bemused and not. His Jim was not one for bikes. They were too flash, too light. Ships were his thing, or else cars; antiques from before World War Three.

Still, with Jim handing over a helmet streaked with decorative fire, Spock can only put aside his musings and swing his leg over the bike behind Jim. It's decidedly uncomfortable, with not nearly enough space for a full-grown Vulcan – or any species, save perhaps the Ferengi – to perch. He places his hands carefully on Jim's hips and closes his mind to the discomfort of his body. Jim revs the engine and they're off.

Spock is wise enough to recognise the feeling bubbling within him as exhilaration, an emotion he has not experienced in decades. It courses through him and he lets it, feels it lift his spirit higher with every kilometre that skids beneath their wheels.

The sun zips overhead to drown in the Pacific Ocean. Jim rides south for hours without stopping, plowing into the indigo dark with single-minded focus. Spock remains quiet in the pillion position. He is content to watch the scenery pass, arid California brush along the old I5 climbing into the dry mountains rising like a knobbly spine down the length of the western seaboard.

They coast down the mountainside into the desert beyond, distant cities glittering like jewels on the flat plain. Jim weaves around slower aircars, but mostly the road is empty except the two of them pressed chest to back on the bike. When they turn off the highway to climb higher again, desert turning to reluctant woodland, all other traffic disappears.

It's very late when they finally, finally stop, in a tiny town whose name takes all the surprise out of their destination. Jim pulls the bike off the road at the sign for Grand Canyon Village and kills the engine. The hum of the road buzzes in Spock's legs, and it takes him two attempts to lever himself

off the bike with considerably less grace than he mounted twelve hours prior. He feels old, older than he has since he arrived in this bizarre universe. His back aches, and his hips, and knees.

"You okay there?" Jim asks. Spock is gratified, at least a little, to see that even Jim is hunched over with sore muscles.

"I am well," Spock says. Very carefully, he flexes the tension out of his back, wincing at the pop and crack of his vertebrae. "Was there any particular reason for our haste?" Jim shrugs, a rustle of leather. His skin is lit in strange hues by the glare of neon light.

"Motel or tent?" he asks. Spock has not stayed in a tent since that one trip with Jim and Leonard McCoy and 'Row Your Boat' by the fire. He toys with the idea of camping with this Jim, but his old bones let out a chorus of protest. Jim, too, looks tired, and it's the familiar compunction to aid and assist his friend that makes Spock's decision.

"I would rest better in a bed," he says, because his Jim never liked to be coddled, and he has deduced the same aversion in this new Jim.

"I'll go get us a room then," Jim says. He rests the bike on its kickstand and jogs across the street to the motel, sign loudly claiming a VAC ANCY.

Left alone in the dark chilled night, Spock takes a moment to reflect on the strange turns of his life. Twenty-four hours ago, whilst in discussion with the Vulcan elders, he received a surprising message on his comm from one Jim Kirk, inviting him on this impulsive trip. Twenty-three hours ago, he ended his discussion and agreed to Jim's proposal. Fourteen hours ago he packed a small bag of essentials. Twelve hours ago he climbed on the back of Jim's bike. Not once has he looked back.

It doesn't matter, so long as going forward feels right.

"Room six," Jim says, coming up beside the bike. He rocks it off the stand and pushes it towards the motel. Spock keeps pace, one ear alert for traffic that isn't likely to come at this time of night.

They leave the bike in the demarked space, over a large white '6' painted on the tarmac, and go inside. Spock is grateful for the sudden warmth. At this altitude it is cool, surprisingly so for summer in Arizona, and his Vulcan blood is thin with age. Jim cranks the heat up without asking. It clunks to rumbling life.

"I need a shower," Jim says, sniffing himself and grimacing. "D'you mind?"

"Not at all," Spock says, with a gesture to the bathroom. Jim disappears inside.

It's been a long day filled with hard travel, and Spock is weary. There's time enough for light meditation, and then sleep. He has never viewed the Grand Canyon in person before, and acknowledges the desire to see it with a clear and centred mind.

Sitting cross-legged in the corner of the room with eyes closed, Spock barely rises out of his light trance when Jim pads out of the en suite. His presence is soothing, his quiet movement about the room familiar background noise. When Spock leaves his meditative state, Jim is lying sideways in bed, sheets to his waist and hair darkly damp, watching Spock. He looks on the cusp of asking something, and Spock would welcome it, but all Jim says is,

"Do you want to see it at dawn?"

"I understand that it is a sight of great beauty," Spock says. He stands, conscious of his lack of fluidity, though not shamed by it. In minutes he, too, is under the covers. The heater is still pumping out warm air amidst a rattling cacophony.

In the dark, Spock finds himself listening to Jim's breathing. It has a whistling, restricted quality to it that his Jim's did not have. An odd thing to notice, Spock is sure, but it unbalances him on a level deeper than logic, and it takes a long time for him to fall asleep.

\*

They wake simultaneously. Spock does not read too much into the fact, but it does comfort him nevertheless. It is still dark outside, the air damp and cold in Spock's lungs. Overhead, a patchwork of clouds blocks most of the stars, a restless wind hiding and revealing distant constellations at random.

"We'd better hurry if we want to snag a good spot," Jim murmurs, voice hushed outside the other darkened motel windows. Spock is puzzled, as the residents of the town all appear to be asleep in their homes, but he does not comment as Jim rocks the rental bike off its stand and wheels it in a tight arc to the road.

Once again pressed to Jim's back, Spock shivers against the sharp wind cutting through his many layers of clothing. He wishes for the gloves his Jim bought him once, long ago and a universe away, thick mittens with a sinfully soft inner lining. The sweater under his touch now is coarse and pilled with long wear, only slightly warmed by the skin beneath.

It's not long before they cross the park border. A burly guard with a thick beard and bags under his eyes barely looks at them as Jim swipes his ID card for entry. They ride on, towards the red glow limning the clouds ahead. There are a few vehicles parked at the visitor's centre, and Jim coasts into an empty space before killing the engine. The silence seems all the greater afterwards, in that strange dawn hush.

"This way," Jim murmurs.

"I shall follow."

The path weaves through the trees. Spock minds his step, but Jim leads him safely through to the other side.

In the dim light, it is at first difficult to see anything past the row of thin trees clinging tenuously to the side of the path. Then, as Spock's eyes adjust and the clouds part a little, he sees a distant wall of striated colour, pinks and browns and greys. He stops to focus more carefully, his eyesight struggling with depth perception over such a distance. And then it clicks, that what he is seeing is the opposite cliff face of the Grand Canyon.

Despite himself, despite all he has seen and done in his long years of travel across the galaxy, Spock feels his breath catch. The sheer scale of the chasm is utterly immense, his keen mind can barely grasp it. And in the growing light, it is very beautiful, the colours reminiscent of dawn in the high

mountains on Vulcan.

Jim comes to stand next to him, craning into Spock's field of vision to catch the same view. "You didn't come here with your Jim?" he asks.

"My Jim," Spock says, with a small smile at the possessive pronoun, "visited a great many places with me, but this was not one." He observes the side of Jim's face, pale in the weak light. "I gather that you have?"

"Yeah, once," Jim says. He grins suddenly at Spock. "C'mon, I'll show you a good spot. You can see the whole valley lighting up."

The good spot is an outcrop of rock some twenty feet down from the path, and a further fifty feet from the main cliff. Spock would be quite content at the viewing platform he can see a little way up, despite the few tourists leaning against the safety barrier with cameras in hand. But Jim is already scrambling down, out of sight but still audible. Spock follows.

It is a good spot, as Jim said it would be. He's already sat on the hard ground, feet dangling over the lip of the outcrop without a thought to the hundreds of metres of empty air beneath the soles of his shoes. He thumps his heels against the rockface.

"Sun's coming up," he says, as Spock gingerly settles next to him. Between gaps in the cloud cover, golden light shines through, chasing away the shadows and the cold. Spock watches Sol ascend the sky, feels it warm his skin even as Jim sits next to him pulsing out his own peculiar heat, and breathes deep.

\*

They sit for maybe an hour as the altitude chill burns off in the face of the desert sun. Spock basks in the peace for as long as he can ignore Jim's fidgeting, but eventually his companion stands. Somewhere a mile below them, the Colorado river snakes between pillars of rock.

"So!" Jim says, shattering the quiet calm. "Do you want to hike down? We could probably make it to the bottom if we pushed it."

"I fear that would be unwise," Spock says delicately. "I am not so young and spry as some." Jim scoffs, but doesn't argue.

"We could ride the shuttle. It takes the road all along the edge."

"That would be acceptable."

It's a pleasant way to spend the day. Jim procures snacks from the visitor's centre – Spock sticks to trailmix, picking out the chocolate so as to remain uncompromised – and they ride the shuttle from one end of the route to the other. The view is always spectacular, a myriad of colourful layers sometimes a mile away, sometimes much closer where the canyon narrows. Spock enjoys the thick dry heat at midday and the way it eases the stiffness from his muscles.

Most of all, though, Spock watches Jim.

The roadtrip was spontaneous – Jim told Spock that himself – and it was equally spur-of-the-moment to invite Spock. He has yet to divine why. Jim seems content enough to ride the shuttle. They make small talk about the history of the canyon, repairs on the *Enterprise*, the planet upon which the new Vulcan colony will be built. It's almost easy, except Spock can sense the undercurrent of tension. Casual conversation with this Jim takes effort, like speaking with a new acquaintance. It shouldn't surprise him. It doesn't – he is fully cognizant that this Jim is not his Jim – but Spock acknowledges the bitter tang of disappointment nevertheless.

At twilight, Spock follows Jim off the bus and down the side of the canyon once more, until they are perched back atop the outcrop from this morning. The sky overhead has cleared to a bright blue the same shade as this Jim's eyes, though in the west Sol tinges the horizon a Vulcan desert red. The canyon walls shimmer and bleed in the dying light.

"Jim," Spock says, as the last rays fade, leaving Venus alone glittering in the wavering atmosphere. Jim turns his head. There's a distant, polite curiosity on his face that stings Spock, just a little. "Why did you invite me here?" To his credit, Jim doesn't try to evade the question, or respond with a glib answer. Spock watches the tense lines of his mouth and waits.

"Well, Bones is off seeing family, and there's no way I'm going back to Iowa." His eyes flutter shut against a sudden blast of dusty wind. "Anyway," he says when it's passed, "I'm going into space for the next five years. Figured I'd better see what I can of Earth before I go. Y'know, just in case."

It's an answer, and yet not. Spock is no more enlightened as to why he was selected. But Jim is standing up again, that restless energy back under his skin, tan leached from him by the dark space overhead. "I'm starving," he says. "All that candy's making me sick."

They ride back to Grand Canyon Village, entering a little restaurant bedecked in stuffed creatures. Spock imagines his younger self would be nauseated by such décor. He isn't exactly sanguine about it himself. Jim frowns at the eagle frozen regal and proud in death by the entrance, then at Spock before leading them back out. There's a little shop further along the road, where they buy pre-packaged meals to take back to their room.

Jim puts on a movie, a spy thriller with an attractive Betazoid female in the lead. They eat in silence and go to bed the same. As the heater cranks to life again, Spock allows himself a moment of grief for a friend long gone, mourns the loss of that relationship. It hadn't always been easy, as willful as they both were, but even when they were at odds Spock knew what was going through Jim's mind.

In the other bed, Jim wheezes.

\*

"We're going to the best city on Earth," Jim declares the next morning over breakfast. Spock glances up from his porridge, one eyebrow quirked.

"That descriptor does not narrow the list of possible destinations," he says with dry humour. Jim grins at him.

"Good food, good alcohol, lots of fun and exciting people doing fun and exciting things!" he says.



Spock is none the wiser. Jim rolls his eyes. "New Orleans. That's where we're going next."

"Ah. The crescent city, in the state of Louisiana. A popular tourist destination," Spock says.

"It's awesome," Jim agrees. He's packing his bag with yesterday's shirt, to store in the bike for the long ride south-east.

"I do not believe that you – the other you, that is –" Spock pauses at his inadvertent slip – "had any affinity or attachment to that city."

"I lived there for a bit," Jim says with a shrug. "It was a good place to get lost in."

He leaves before Spock can comment, and they hit the the road soon after. The sky is only just blushing with dawn light, clinging to the night's chill. Spock wraps in as many layers as he can. He can't excuse the sudden lump in his throat when Jim, returning from the motel reception, tosses a pair of gloves at him.

Two thousand five hundred kilometres stand between their current location and their destination. Spock swings his leg over the bike and doesn't mention that it would be far more simple and convenient if they transported to New Orleans directly. Though his bones ache at the mere thought of two days' hard travel astride the bike, Jim's words from the previous evening have struck a chord. Like Jim, Spock will be away from Earth for an indeterminate amount of time. Quite possibly, he might never return, and as Earth is the only home planet he has now, he feels a strange sort of obligation to see it as they drive through.

As before, Jim rides hard. They stop for lunch at midday, but apart from that the roar of the bike is the only noise in Spock's world, the only speech the conversation of wheels over tarmac.

High altitude desert turns into low altitude desert, variations of sand and sun, too yellow to remind Spock of Vulcan. They stop in a little motel outside Wichita Falls, eat in its greasy diner – a burger for Jim, pasta for Spock – and bid each other quiet 'good nights' before sleep.

Spock can feel the tension building in Jim's body, pressed tightly to his as it is, on the second leg of their journey. Were it his Jim, Spock would brush his fingers over bare skin to gain a sense of clarity, but he resists the impulse. It would be an unwanted intrusion here. He remembers their first and only mind-meld, on an iceball billions of miles away. Jim's mind was alien to him, filled with unfamiliar angles and shards. Even the first time Spock had melded with his Jim, it was an easy mingle of thoughts and sensations.

He has the distinct impression that nothing is easy with this Jim.

\*

New Orleans is the antithesis of the Grand Canyon. It is hot and stifling, a sticky pervasive heat that worms under Spock's clothes. Sweat beads on the back of Jim's neck, and the tang of it is salty in Spock's nose.

The roads are a confusing twist and loop to Spock, but Jim seems to know where he's going. The bike follows the path of an ancient tram rattling along old steel rails, passing clapboard houses with

rocking chairs on their porches.

It's like no city Spock has ever been to, on Earth or any other planet. Logic dictates that Spock make detailed observations of the city, its climate and its inhabitants before coming to an opinion. There is still history here, when so much of Earth is sparkling new, when Federation spaceships and colonies and allied planets are filled with novel technology and the urge to renew. Here, everything maintains that aged feel, grimy and damp and worn, pockmarked with scars from years gone by.

Despite the history, he does not think his Jim would have liked New Orleans. Spock finds a fascinating affinity as the bike bumps over potholes in the road, but Spock is a different person to the one that served with his Jim Kirk. His Jim admired great heroes of bygone eras, emulated powerful leaders and sought to learn the lessons of the past. New Orleans does not give the first impression – impulsive and illogical as it might be – of lessons, learnt or learning.

Jim pulls the bike to a halt in front of a small wooden B&B painted in a shade of dark red like dried human blood, frilled with skeletal railings. As the engine stutters to silence, thunder rumbles over head, and the sky opens. Spock is used to rain now, the frigid sting of a San Francisco downpour as familiar as the blistering heat of his homeworld, but New Orleans rain is different. It's warm, bathing his skin, almost too soft to notice.

"Shit, c'mon," Jim grunts, grabbing their bags and making a dash up the creaking stairs to the covered porch. Spock follows, though he is in no hurry. The novelty of such a storm is surprising to him. Like the city on which the rain falls, Spock has never experienced similar in all his long years of travel.

After shaking the worst of the water from his hair and skin and entering the B&B, Jim rents a twin room from the receptionist. It is on the top floor, which Spock's hips do not appreciate, but it commands an excellent view of the cityscape, the tallest buildings in the financial district blurry shadows through the rain and the streetcar rails rolling past in the middle of the road below.

"It'll probably rain like this on and off all night, if you wanna stay here," Jim says. Spock turns from his observations to watch as Jim shucks out of his t-shirt and jeans, both creased and dirty from the highway.

"You are not staying," Spock comments. Jim buckles his belt through a clean pair of jeans and pulls a spare tee over his head, heedless of the splotches of water that spread like dark stains across his shoulders and around the collar. His eyes are startlingly bright in the gloomy room.

"Hell no. This is like home turf. Old stomping grounds and all that." He grins. "A little rain can't keep me inside."

"Then I shall go with you," Spock says. It's forward, certainly, even rash. But his association with this Jim Kirk began with a wave of shock and a touch meant for lovers; forward is the only direction in which he can move.

Jim shrugs, slides his jacket over his arms. "Sure," he says, though it sounds a little strained. "Whatever you want."

They take the trolley seven blocks to the centre of the city where it curves around the river. The old French Quarter suffered significant damage during the last World War, and the subsequent floods before climate control was implemented, but it is still a marvel that draws so many visitors like

moths to flame, despite the incessant rain.

Jim leads Spock from the main road into the tight grid of streets, packed with humans both old and young, and a not-insignificant number of other species Spock quickly discerns. The atmosphere is thick with more than just moisture. Spock has to work to block the smell, vomit and urine and sun-warmed garbage, as unusual and old-world as the city itself.

On the Rue du Bourbon – which of course brings the good Doctor McCoy to mind with a touch of fond emotion – most of the bars are already operating, doors wide open and music pouring out: some live bands, some recorded music, some alien, some human. Spock can feel an eyebrow lifting when they stroll past several strip clubs, and a sex shop advertising 'Free Cock Ring With Every Purchase'. His Jim might have blushed, or laughed a little awkwardly, but this Jim doesn't even seem to notice. His single-minded intensity takes them swiftly through the swelling crowd to Pat O'Brien's bar.

Jim stakes out a table just as its previous occupants are leaving. "Wait here," he tells Spock, voice raised over the music and the roar of conversation. As he meanders to the bar, Spock wonders if this Jim is aware of Vulcan immunity to alcohol, or the weakness to chocolate.

The absent question is answered when Jim returns with a tall glass of water, with a frilly orange umbrella listing over the edge. For himself, Jim has a cocktail that is frighteningly pink. Spock watches as he sucks half of it down through a translucent straw with apparent relish.

"I hope you're hungry, because I ordered food," he says as he settles in the seat opposite Spock.

It's difficult to make conversation in the oppressive noise of the bar. Spock watches Jim watching the bar patrons, his eyes narrow and shadowed, a look Spock knows well from difficult diplomatic situations, when the other side had something his Captain wanted and he was trying to divine the best method of acquiring it.

Food is red beans and rice. The flavour is intense, almost too much for Spock after so many years reacquainted with the delicate palate of traditional Vulcan dishes, but he has also been an Ambassador for many years, developing the useful ability to muscle through any number of awkward meals with inappropriate fare. After a few mouthfuls, the spicy burn mellows, and Spock can enjoy it in full.

Night falls, and the city awakens to dance in the balmy rain. Jim leads them back to the Rue du Bourbon. The press of scantily-clad, touch-happy and intoxicated beings is a trial on Spock's mental shields as he follows Jim, keeping his soaked cloak wrapped tight around him and his hands hidden in his sleeves. Even so, he cannot help but sense the buzz of the crowd, the joy for life and the willful abandon of selves. There are dark edges to this city, sharp corners and shards of glass, but it seems all washed away in the cleansing downpour.

And then Spock loses Jim. With the ebb and flow of the wet crowd, coupled with the pressure on his telepathic abilities, Spock is distracted and Jim is gone. There is absolutely no cause for alarm. This is not an alien planet. Jim knows this city, knows its quirks and its people. The chances of harm befalling him are slim. Logically, Spock knows this.

Doesn't stop that habitual, split-second of panic because Jim is gone – GONE, lost and alone and in trouble and Spock has to find him save his Captain his greatest friend –

"Here! I got you some too!" Jim appears seemingly out of nowhere, grinning from ear to ear. There are a dozen beaded necklaces hanging around his neck in a rainbow of metallic colours, with a half dozen more clutched in his hand. Spock is still trying to work through his brief emotional moment when Jim steps closer, reaching up to loop the beads over his head. His fingers brush Spock's cheek, just a tingle of warmth, but it's enough. Connections open like floodgates, empty riverbeds suddenly spilling over with thoughts and feelings that spark like electric currents between them.

Spock gets a brief bombardment of Jim, too much and not enough, confusion and lust and anger and joy and sorrow all rolled together into a knot that pulses at the heart of Jim, achingly familiar and yet utterly different. It's as if the universe took the same basic building blocks of one man and stacked them in a brand new order, infinitely diverse carbon chains the difference between diamonds and carbon fibre and raw, elemental coal.

Jim pinwheels backwards with that same breathlessness as on Delta Vega. Spock's still reeling when Jim turns tail and runs, gobbled up by the rain-damp, partying crowd.

\*

Dawn is a washed out affair. Spock watches from the window as the clouds break up, blown away by a fresh breeze from the Gulf, allowing the sun to pierce the sky in pale shades of blue and gold. A few early risers weave and leap between vast puddles on their morning runs, but Jim is not among them.

Jim did not come back last night.

Spock's comm trills once for an incoming text-only message. *An urgent situation regarding the colony requires your immediate presence. Sarek.* Spock sends a brief reply stating that he will be with them by the day's end. His bag is already packed. He is only waiting for Jim.

As if summoned, the man in question walks through the door. They eye each other across the room, weighing and measuring and checking for hurt. Finding none, Jim heaves a small sigh and closes the door. His clothing is soaked, dripping onto the carpet, and his biker-boots squelch when he walks to stand at Spock's side. Spock expects him to smell of alcohol, or of sex, blood, some combination of the three, but he mostly smells of rain and wet leather, and a little of the miasma of the Rue du Bourbon.

"I wanted to get to know you," Jim says, without any preamble or forewarning. Spock tilts his head to indicate that he is listening. "I – On Delta Vega. With the mind-meld. I learned a lot about you, really quickly, and then shit happened and I never really got the chance to process it until now. And I just thought – I dunno." He sighs, a deep puff of breath that fogs against the window pane.

"I owe you an apology," Spock murmurs. He cuts off Jim's protest. "My intention was only to inform you of Nero's plan. I had not foreseen any further consequences to my actions, though you have suffered them."

"I wouldn't say 'suffered'," Jim counters. His brows are drawn close over his eyes. "It's just – confusing."

They stand in silence, watching the first aircars glide quietly past, followed by the rattle and bang of

the streetcar. Spock's thoughts circle around ideas of change and continuity and connections rekindled.

It is time for him to go.

"My father has requested that I return to San Francisco. There is an urgent matter that requires my attendance."

Jim nods as if expecting it. "I'll give you a ride to Louis Armstrong."

It's a matter of minutes for Jim to pack, and they vacate the building with as much discretion as they entered. Jim rocks the bike off its stand and angles it towards the road. Spock swings his leg over the back and settles behind Jim, hands on his hips covered by the wet, clinging t-shirt.

It's a new familiarity when the engine growls to life beneath him, the vibration buzzing through all his limbs. Jim pulls down his visor and coasts onto the shiny tarmac, weaving around ponds where potholes used to be. Where their journey from California had been fast and unforgiving, Jim now seems content to take his time. Spock can't say that he minds. The logical fallacies of humans are something with which he is well acquainted.

\*

"I wanted to show you more of Earth," Jim says with a frown when they are standing in the line for a transport to San Francisco. "I wanted to see more of Earth myself. Australia. Japan. Egypt."

"Jim," Spock says softly. He catches Jim's blue eyes and holds them. "Before this week I had never ridden on the back of a motorcycle. I had never seen the sun rise over the Grand Canyon, nor eaten in a traditional diner in Texas, nor witnessed the living history of New Orleans. I am gratified to have experienced these things with you." Jim blushes, light pink under the bronze of his tan.

"Me too," he mutters.

Spock shows his ID card to the hostess checking him onto the transport. Jim has elected to stay, claiming the bike as a reason, though Spock is reasonably sure the rental does not need to be driven back in person. He does not raise the point with Jim though. His Jim, he might have argued in the name of logic just for the thrill of verbal foreplay, but this Jim. This new and fragile Jim. They are not the same person; similar facets meshed together to create a different whole.

He turns to Jim and lifts his hand in the ta'al. "Live long and prosper," he says, and means every word. Jim copies his motion, and then he reaches two fingers out to brush against Spock's lowering hand.

Sparks tingle up Spock's arm, sensations of Jim singing in his nerves and through his marrow and under his skin. His heart beats to the thud of Jim Jim Jim.

Wide eyes meet his, thin blue iris around a blown black pupil. As they disconnect, Spock receives a last fleeting thought from Jim's mind to his own, more imprint than coherent idea. This feeling that Jim has is not his own, but he *wants* it, *yearns* for it with a strength of passion that is surprising. Spock's love for his Jim has transcended the universe, transcended death, to lodge within the young

heart of a man who is almost – but not quite – Spock's Jim. If he stays, there's a chance Spock could capture something of what was; there's a chance Jim might have what he knows his counterpart had, a universe away.

An old Spock and a new Jim in a different combination, because full steam ahead is the only way either of them can fly. But it wouldn't be the same. Not quite.

Jim steps back, tucks his hands into his damp jeans. "I'll be seeing ya," he says, and grins.



# A Gentle Nudge

## Rhaegal

"Ready, Spock?"

Jim could barely conceal his excitement as he leaped onto the transporter pad. His enthusiasm was met with a disapproving eyebrow as Spock sedately took his position.

"Energize," Jim called to Scotty.

He felt the familiar tingling sensation as the transporter beam rippled through him and stood still, waiting for the planet's surface to materialize. The transporter room started to flicker in and out of focus. Jim looked up at Scotty in alarm – it didn't usually take this long.

Suddenly, everything went black. There was a momentary pause in darkness, and then color started to filter back into the world. However, the shapes that appeared around him were only those of the transporter room.

How typical that the transporter would start acting up when he was heading off to spend an afternoon on a nice, quiet planet. Jim shot a scowl towards Scotty, and only then realized that something was very wrong.

This was not the transporter room he'd left behind. The basic layout was the same, but the colors were darker, the simple touchscreens of the console had been replaced by unwieldy buttons and dials, and Scotty seemed to have aged a decade in just a few short moments.

"What the...?" Jim stepped down from the transporter pad and looked around.

"Captain?" The older Scotty sounded as confused as Jim felt. "I dinnae know ye were on the planet... Ye look... Are ye all right, Cap'n? Mr Spock?"

Jim looked over at Spock, who was still standing on the transporter pad, his hands clasped behind his back. His eyebrows were drawn together, and his eyes were darting around the room. Jim actually felt relieved; at least he wasn't the only one who thought there was something wrong here.

"Doctor," Scotty said to the comm pickup. "I think ye'd better head down to the transporter room. The Captain and Mr Spock are actin' a wee bit strange, and they look..." he trailed off, shaking his head.

"Scotty...Jim's right here," came McCoy's response.

Jim felt the blood drain from his face. "Um...what?" he said weakly.

"Captain," said Spock, stepping down from the transporter pad at last and coming to stand beside him. "It would appear that we have been transported to a parallel dimension."

"Oh, crap," was Jim's succinct response.



"Indeed."

Scotty was staring at them as though they were insane. "From a parallel dimension, ye say?" he repeated with a feeble laugh.

"Para-what?" came a weirdly familiar voice from the doorway. The speaker took one step into the transporter room and stopped dead, an expression of horror on his face.

Jim was sure that expression was replicated on his own face. Pretty exactly, he supposed, since this man appeared to be...him. Older than he was now – and a little heavier, too; perhaps he should listen to McCoy's nagging about his diet after all. But despite those differences, he had no doubt that he was staring, slack-jawed, at himself.

That certainty was solidified when, moments later, another familiar face appeared. The second figure was undoubtedly Spock. Again, he was older than the Spock Jim knew, though not nearly so old as the other Spock he'd met on Delta Vega – and really, how many Spocks did the universe need, anyway?

"Fascinating," both Spocks said in unison, then glared at each other.

Jim stifled a chuckle, and realized that his alternate self was doing the same. They exchanged an amused glance.

"This is too weird," said Scotty, who was staring at them, an expression of horror on his face.

"You don't say," another voice drawled from the doorway. This universe's McCoy looked much older than the one Jim knew, but wore a surly expression that he would have recognized anywhere.

"Hey, Bones," Jim greeted him with a broad grin. McCoy's scowl only deepened.

The older Kirk looked around at the scene, apparently struggling to reign in his amusement. At length, he assumed his 'captain' pose (Jim made a mental note to check that his own 'captain' pose didn't look so...camp). "Scotty," the elder Kirk barked, "Why did this happen? And how do we fix it."

"Gettin' right on it, Cap'n."

That was strange – Scotty's accent was markedly different in this universe. Jim wondered idly how his life had been different to that of the Scotty he knew.

That was when it occurred to him: was this the Scotty who had invented transwarp beaming? Jim's eyes darted over to the elder Spock, who was regarding his younger counterpart with something that looked remarkably like derision. Was that the same Spock who would eventually meet him in a cave on a world of ice?

"Jim?" The elder Kirk's voice interrupted Jim's thoughts. "Perhaps you two should come with us?"

Jim looked over at his Spock, who nodded his acknowledgement, and they followed Kirk out of the transporter room. Jim couldn't help but notice that the elder Spock walked close by Kirk's side, and was sure he saw their hands accidentally brush together. He wouldn't have considered that odd, except that he was all too aware of how weird Spock was about touching.

The Spock on Delta Vega had been all right with touching him, though, which lent credence to the idea that this was a younger version of the same Spock. Jim grinned, pleased; he'd liked that one, he was much less uptight than his own Spock.

"Captain," his Spock said in a low voice, apparently not wanting to be heard. "This does not appear to be the *Enterprise*."

Jim's brow furrowed as he took in their surroundings. The layout of the corridor was familiar, but it was gray and red where the *Enterprise* gleamed white.

"Or maybe this universe just doesn't have such good interior decorators?" Jim suggested.

"Gentlemen," Spock said, louder. "What is the name of this ship?"

The Kirk and Spock in front of them turned their heads slightly, and Jim realized only then that they had been having a hushed conversation of their own.

"This is the *USS Enterprise*," Kirk replied, beaming with pride.

Jim glanced at his Spock, who replied by raising an eyebrow. Jim was about to ask further questions, but their counterparts had come to a halt outside a briefing room. Kirk led them inside.

Jim couldn't help glancing around curiously. Again, the layout was familiar, but the décor quite different, a continuation of the grays and reds of the corridors. The center of the room was taken up by a large table, like their own briefing rooms, but upon the table sat a bulky computer terminal that Jim would have placed in a museum before his own ship.

"Well," said Kirk, gesturing for them to sit. "This is... sure to be interesting." His lips quirked in amusement. "I've never met another... me before."

"Indeed, this is quite unusual," the older Spock said. "In our previous experience with alternate dimensions, the persons concerned were exchanged with their counterparts. I had not thought it possible for one to meet one's counterpart in another universe."

Jim sniggered and fell into a chair. His Spock immediately took the seat beside him.

The other Spock looked confused by Jim's amusement. "This is not your experience?"

"Uh..." Jim self-consciously rubbed the back of his neck. "Not exactly. But that line, about not being able to meet your counterpart.... Remember that. You'll use it on me one day."

The other Kirk and Spock exchanged a bemused look.

"Jim," said his Spock softly, "This is not the same individual that you encountered on Delta Vega."

"Why not?" Jim eyed the other Spock carefully. He certainly looked the same, though it was hard to tell how that face would change with the passage of years.

"Hang on." Kirk finally sat down opposite them, and the other Spock slid into the seat beside him, shifting it closer to the captain, Jim noticed. Kirk leaned back, and seemed unconsciously to lean towards Spock. "You mean to say," Kirk continued, "that you've met another Spock?"

"Yeah," Jim grinned. "This one, I think." He jerked his head towards the other Spock.

The older Spock raised his eyebrows. "I assure you we have not met," he said. "I have had occasion to meet only one other James Kirk, and you – thankfully – bear little resemblance to him."

"We haven't met," Jim said breezily. "Yet."

"Jim," his Spock prodded, "this is not the same reality from which the Ambassador originated."

Jim shrugged. "Let's see, shall we?" He turned to his counterpart. "Uh...this will sound like a strange question, "but in your world, do – did? – you know your dad? And is Vulcan still...you know, there?"

The elder Kirk and Spock exchanged another bemused look.

"What the Captain is asking," said his Spock, somewhat stiffly, "is whether, in this universe, a troubled future Romulan traveled back in time, attacked the *USS Kelvin*, killing your father, and then proceeded to destroy Vulcan in an artificially created black hole."

The other Kirk looked as though he didn't know whether to laugh or be horrified. "The *planet* Vulcan?"

Jim sneaked a glance at his Spock, whose gaze was fixed on the table.

"Yeah, the planet," Jim confirmed. "Where we come from, it's gone."

Their counterparts were both staring straight ahead at them, but Kirk's hand strayed across the table to cover Spock's. Jim couldn't help but watch, curious and strangely mesmerized, as Kirk traced his fingers over Spock's. Even more unusual was that the Vulcan seemed to be permitting it.

There was a long silence, then, "The incident you describe has occurred in your timeline," the elder Spock stated flatly.

It was not phrased as a question, but Jim nodded, his gaze still riveted to his older self's hand as it traced Spock's.

"I'll take it that didn't happen here then," said Jim, feeling a peculiar lurch in his gut. "And your dad?" he addressed his other self.

"Is back in Iowa," Kirk confirmed. "Last I heard."

"What about your mother, Spock? Um...how's she?"

When Spock did not immediately respond, Jim tore his gaze from their counterparts' entwined hands to look at him. His head was cocked to one side and his eyes were boring into Jim. "My mother is well," he replied at last.

At that, Jim felt rather than saw his Spock's head snap up. He instinctively reached out his own hand, but withdrew it at the last moment. He saw that the older Spock had caught the movement, and he hurriedly ploughed on. "See, Spock," he said, keeping his tone as jovial as he could. "This is that other timeline, it has to be."

"It is evidently similar," Spock agreed. "Nonetheless, it is not the same one."

"You mean it's not *likely* to be the same one," Jim corrected. "But it is."

"Negative, Captain, I did in fact mean that it is not."

"What makes you so sure?" Jim squinted at the older Spock. "He kind of looks the same. You know, if you add a hundred years or so."

"Indubitably. That is inevitable, given the shared genetics. Nonetheless, the law of causality dictates that the Ambassador cannot have originated from this timeline. Quite simply, our timeline did not come into existence until he and Nero traveled into the past. That event, if it occurs in this dimension, is still a long way in the future."

"That makes no sense. He went into our past, so why can't we go into his?"

"No event can precede the one that caused it," Spock stated. "It is possible that this timeline has been that same one up until now, but if so then our presence here has changed it, causing it to diverge – however slightly – from the one the Ambassador experienced."

Jim scowled. "All this alternate reality stuff makes my head hurt."

Jim realized then that their counterparts were staring at them, Kirk with barely-suppressed amusement and Spock with his eyebrow raised. That was interesting, Jim noticed suddenly; while his Spock expressed surprise, annoyance, condescension and pretty much everything else with his left eyebrow, the one in this universe used his right. He wondered if that meant anything, much like a left-handed human was supposedly more artistic.

"What's so funny?" Kirk asked, his eyes darting between Jim and the older Spock.

Jim opened his mouth to explain, but was interrupted when his Spock exclaimed, "Fascinating." Both he and Kirk turned expectant expressions on the younger Vulcan.

"Well?" Jim prompted when Spock didn't immediately elaborate.

Spock shot his older counterpart a conspiratorial glance and said, "They have different colored eyes."

The older Spock's eyebrows shot up and he inclined his head, regarding Jim carefully. "Indeed."

Jim frowned and looked across the table at his other self's face. "Huh," was all he could say. It was true; for some reason he had hazel eyes in this universe instead of his own blue ones. "Sucks to be you," he added with a shrug. "The girls go crazy for the blue."

The older Kirk smirked, and shot a sidelong glance towards the other Spock. "Mine have served me just fine," he said.

A strange expression came over the other Spock's face at that, intense yet soft somehow. Jim was reminded again of the Spock on Delta Vega, but couldn't imagine his Spock looking at anyone like that. The thought saddened him, because despite their rocky start he'd grown to be fonder of Spock than he would have considered possible.

Shifting uncomfortably, Jim glanced over at his Spock, who was staring at their counterparts on the other side of the table. His eyebrows had disappeared under his hairline, and his hands gripped the edge of his seat so hard that his knuckles were white.

Frowning, Jim looked back across the table to the scene that had apparently perturbed Spock so much. Their counterparts were looking at each other, apparently conversing without words to judge by the expressions that passed across their faces. Jim looked down to where Spock's hand lay on the table, with Kirk's resting on top of it, still lightly tracing Spock's fingers with his own.

It was an innocent enough gesture, Jim thought with just a hint of indignation. He often found himself having to consciously refrain from touching Spock; it seemed this universe's Jim Kirk had a lot in common with him, only his Spock was more accommodating. Jim distinctly remembered one time when he had inadvertently touched Spock's hand and the Vulcan had whipped it away as though the touch burned.

Perhaps left-eyebrowed Vulcans were the more repressed ones, Jim mused. If that was the case, it was just his luck to get lumbered with a leftie.

*"Engineering to Captain Kirk,"* Scotty's voice interrupted Jim's thoughts.

Kirk released Spock's hand and moved to the nearest comm pickup. "Kirk here, Scotty."

*"Captain,"* said Scotty, *"I'm heading up to the bridge. I think I've identified the problem with the transporter..."*

"Yes," Kirk prompted when Scotty trailed off. "And can you fix it?"

*"Not sure, Captain. I could use a wee bit o' help from Mr Spock, if ye can spare him."*

"I can do better than that, Scotty." Kirk grinned at Jim. "I can lend you two Spocks. We'll meet you on the bridge. Kirk out."

Kirk gestured towards the door, and they all rose. As Jim passed him, Kirk lowered his voice and confided, "I'm sort of looking forward to this."

"Hmm?" Jim glanced at Kirk as he fell into step beside him, the Spocks walking a pace behind.

"You don't want to see two Spocks working together?" said Kirk. He smiled and looked into the distance. "I hope they argue," he added wistfully.

Jim looked over his shoulder, to where two Spocks were regarding them with evident amusement concealed in their neutral expressions.

"Wouldn't they just agree on everything?" he said.

Kirk's lips twitched. "No one finds fault in Spock as well as Spock does," he said, somewhat cryptically in Jim's opinion.

"Can't say I've noticed that," he replied honestly.

"Gentlemen," the older Spock interrupted. "I feel obliged to remind you that lowering your voices is insufficient to conceal your words from Vulcan ears."

"We know," both Jim Kirks replied in unison. They smirked at each other.

They got into the turbolift. This, too, was different to the one he was used to; it seemed to be voice-activated, unlike their own, and Jim found it intriguing.

That was nothing, though, compared to the sight that greeted him when the doors opened. While Kirk explained who they were to the astounded crew, Jim could only stare. The bridge was laid out exactly like theirs, yet was nothing alike. There were lights everywhere, flashing in myriad colors, and the controls beeped all around them.

Jim thought it was the coolest thing he'd ever seen.

Sure, he loved the pristine bridge on his own ship, the simplistic computer interfaces and minimalist design. But one thing his *Enterprise* sadly lacked was *buttons*, things he could actually press and interact with. Jim's eyes widened. He could feel his fingers twitching with excitement.

"Fascinating," said a voice beside his ear. Jim realized only then that his Spock had moved to stand close beside him. "It is curious that the layout is so consistent between the dimensions when the technology is so different."

"Would it be so bad if we got stuck here?" Jim mused. At Spock's raised eyebrow, he elaborated, "Well why not? Vulcan's still there, you can see your mom, I'd get to meet my dad..."

"There is nothing to be gained by such contemplation," Spock replied coolly. "We are required aboard our own *Enterprise* and are evidently superfluous here."

With a tilt of his head, Spock indicated the other Kirk and Spock, who were on the other side of the bridge. Spock was leaning over the scanner and Kirk was standing close beside him, one hand braced against the console and the other on Spock's shoulder.

Jim felt his face flush and hurriedly looked away. He immediately wished he hadn't; everyone else on the bridge was staring at them. Uhura was trying, though failing, to be subtle. Sulu and Chekov, on the other hand, were staring unabashedly.

Jim subconsciously edged closer to Spock, until they were almost touching. He suddenly felt strangely warm, a combination of the intense scrutiny and the heretofore forbidden proximity to his first officer.

"Why do you suppose our ship ended up so different?" Jim mused, trying to distract himself.

"Unknown," Spock responded. "I would surmise that the presence of an advanced twenty-fourth century ship in our timeline somehow altered the development of technology."

"Huh." So that was another thing Nero had to answer for; he'd deprived them of buttons.

The turbolift doors opened again and Scotty stepped out onto the bridge, a bemused-looking McCoy in his wake.

"Ah, Scotty." The other Kirk stood up straight, though one hand remained on Spock's shoulder. "Care to fill us in?"

"Aye." Scotty moved over to the science station, and Jim and his Spock followed. McCoy hovered behind them, muttering under his breath.

Scotty proceeded to babble about ion storms and transporter anomalies, but Jim found his attention drifting. He was strangely fixated by the way the other Kirk and Spock stood so close, always touching, and was suddenly hyperaware of the space between himself and his own Spock, who was standing rigidly by his side with his hands behind his back. The other Spock, by contrast, was leaning into his captain, their arms touching, and they both seemed utterly unaware of the contact. This Scotty and McCoy didn't seem to think it was odd, either; Jim could only imagine the look of terror on his McCoy's face if he and his Spock acted like that.

"That is illogical," his Spock said, abruptly pulling Jim back into the conversation.

"Do elaborate," the other Spock said, somewhat coolly.

"In an infinite universe, it is posited that there are infinite parallel dimensions in which every possible scenario exists."

*Yeah, including crazy ones where you're all touchy-feely,* Jim thought, his eyes still on their counterparts.

"Affirmative," said the older Spock.

"Then a significant number of these parallel dimensions bear a very close resemblance to each other. The same people, occupying the same positions on the same ship, for instance." He looked around at the bridge to emphasize his point. "Such minor deviations would have no effect on the course of a star's lifecycle. If, as you suggest, the transporter malfunction was caused by identical solar flares in both universes at the same time, this occurrence would be so commonplace as to be a hindrance to the very operation of Starfleet."

"Your logic is flawed," the older Spock countered. For some reason, Jim bristled.

Kirk smiled. "Criticizing your own logic, Mr Spock?"

The older Spock's lips twitched in irritation, and Jim saw his hand reach for Kirk's. It rested there, not clasping, just with their fingers resting together, but the touch was so obviously deliberate that Jim felt himself look away, abashed.

"Do elaborate," his Spock said.

Jim saw his hands flex behind his back, and felt the ridiculous urge to reach his hand over and mimic their other selves' gesture. He refrained by holding his own hands behind his back. Trying to distract

himself as the Spocks got caught up in a heated argument, Jim looked away, and his eyes caught Kirk's, who grinned at him as if to say, *What did I tell you?*

Jim smiled back; he had to admit it was amusing, watching two Spocks try to out-logic each other, but he found it difficult to concentrate when he was so conscious of the scant inches that separated him from his Spock.

There was obviously something crazy-making in this universe, he decided. Something that made everyone act as though it was normal that the commanding officers couldn't keep their hands off each other – and one of them a *Vulcan* - and which was making his head swim for no reason he could fathom.

"Aye, I can about do it," Scotty's voice pulled Jim back to the present.

"So we have a plan?" said Jim.

The older Spock looked at him with something that could only be termed a glare. His Spock moved closer to him, as though protectively, and Jim felt a frisson of heat as their arms brushed together. Spock tensed and jerked away.

"We have identified a set of conditions that can be artificially replicated," his Spock explained hurriedly. "With some adjustment to the transporter, it is possible that we may be beamed back to our dimension. However, I estimate the probability of a successful outcome is no more than two point seven percent."

"Your calculation is erroneous," the other Spock countered. "The probability of success is seven point three percent."

Jim fought not to laugh as he watched the two Spocks glare at each other, and realized that his counterpart was also stifling laughter.

"You'd better both be wrong," McCoy said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Two of that pointy-eared hobgoblin in the same place for too long, the universe'll about implode."

"Or *you* will, you mean," Kirk remarked, evidently amused.

Jim felt no such amusement; he was dismayed that this universe's McCoy had made no more progress in getting along with Spock than had the one he knew, almost as though their friction was an inevitability. Neither Spock seemed at all perturbed by the remark though, and that was sad in itself.

Jim realized he was leaning towards Spock again only when their arms touched and he automatically jumped away.

"It's a chance we'll have to take," said Kirk. "How long will it take to complete the modifications to the transporter?"

"It's not a quick fix, Cap'n," Scotty replied, shaking his head. "Even with every spare hand on the job, it'll take all night."

"Get every spare hand working on it, then," said Kirk.



"Aye, Cap'n." Scotty spared one last incredulous look for the newcomers and then scurried off the bridge.

"Bones," said Kirk. "Are you here for a reason, or just to satisfy your morbid curiosity?"

McCoy hesitated, then admitted, "I'm mostly here for the curiosity, Jim."

Kirk gave him a wry smile, then said, "Then how about you study them over dinner, since we've got an evening to kill?"

"Captain," the older Spock interjected. "If you recall, I was hoping to complete -"

"That can wait," Kirk laid a hand on his shoulder, then winked at Jim. "I'm not done with my own curiosity."

With that, he led them to the mess hall. The older Spock gave something of an indignant harrumph, but dutifully followed, falling into step alongside his captain. Jim and his Spock followed a step behind, and behind them came McCoy, who was shaking his head and muttering, "*Madness.*"

All the way to the mess hall, Jim found himself insanely conscious of Spock beside him, of the way he walked a half-pace behind but perfectly in step, the distance between them that was sometimes imperceptible yet always undeniably present. Whenever they passed crewmembers, they were met with unabashed stares. Kirk seemed to find it amusing to acknowledge them without attempting to explain, as though their situation was perfectly normal. Then again, perhaps it was – what was that the older Spock had said about their previous experience...?

"You said you've had experience with being switched with alternate universes," Jim said as they took their seats in the mess hall, trying to ignore all the eyes fixed on them.

"Just the once," said Kirk with a grin. Then he winked at Jim and added, "Spock looks good in a beard."

"Gave him some character," McCoy agreed.

Jim sniggered, then burst out laughing when he saw the Spocks exchange incredulous looks.

"I presume you were able to reverse the effects," his Spock enquired.

"Affirmative," the other Spock replied. "The cause in that instance was an ion storm occurring in both universes as the transporter was activated simultaneously in each."

"Indeed?" his Spock inclined his head. "Factoring in that previous occurrence, I must revise my estimate of the likelihood of the scenario you suggested."

"That your way of saying he's right?" said McCoy.

"I am merely acknowledging that he had access to information that I did not, Doctor."

Something about the tension in Spock's voice made Jim smile fondly, but then he caught Kirk looking at the other Spock with an expression that was decidedly affectionate, and that brought him up short. He hoped to god he'd never be caught with *that* expression on his face.

Trying to tear his attention from Spock, Jim looked instead at McCoy. His lips were curled in a rueful smile as he looked at the other Kirk and Spock; Jim got the distinct impression he was accepting if not entirely understanding of whatever it was between the two of them.

"You know," said Jim, "our Bones snarks at Spock too."

"I suppose some things are just constant in any universe," McCoy groused.

Jim smiled at that, but suddenly he was reminded of the other, even older, Spock he'd met on Delta Vega. Some of the things he'd said about his Jim Kirk, and the way the two across the table were with each other...

Jim felt his insides tighten in a knot. It was completely and utterly absurd. And yet... Whichever universe they were in, it was undeniable that the Kirk and Spock here were close. Insanely close. Jim didn't want to think about what they may have gotten up to, but there was no denying that those were not merely friendly touches between them. And everyone else acted as though it was normal.

He rifled through his mind for the memory of Delta Vega, of a Spock who had looked at him as though he were the center of the universe, who had shared memories that had been laced with overwhelming affection for him. And then, the incontrovertible fact that that Spock had manipulated their timeline, even lied to him, in order to ensure that he and Spock ended up working together.

Surely, *surely* it could not be that there were two universes in which he and Spock were... together? Not only that, but these were the only other two universes with which he'd come into contact, which meant that as far as he knew, this was true of *every* universe.

Every one but his, anyway. And how was that for a kick to the ego; it seemed it wasn't Spock's Vulcan nature that caused him to rebuff Jim's touch after all. It was him, something about the way he'd turned out in their timeline that made him less appealing.

Jim realized he was staring at his Spock, and hurriedly looked away, hoping his despondency was not too evident.

"Is everything all right, Captain?" Spock asked in a low voice.

To his horror, Jim felt himself flush. Fortunately, though, he was spared from answering when the other Spock interjected, "Fascinating. You call him 'Captain.'"

His Spock's brow furrowed as he looked across the table. "That is his title."

Jim swallowed nervously. He didn't want to know what the other Spock called his Jim. If he had some dreadful endearment he might finally go crazy.

"What's strange about that?" Kirk asked, echoing Jim's thoughts.

"Judging by their appearance," Spock explained, "they are at least ten standard years younger than ourselves. We had not yet met at that age, and you were certainly not a captain."

Kirk looked between Jim and his Spock, frowning. "Well, I suppose the other you looks a bit different, but," he gestured towards Jim, "he looks exactly like me."

Jim smirked. He cast a quick glance sideways and saw that the two Spocks were raising their eyebrows at each other.

"Jim," said the older Spock softly, "while you remain, of course, most aesthetically pleasing, I can assure you that your appearance is of a human at least ten years older than the one sat opposite you."

Kirk's mouth fell open on an indignant sound, and he stared at Jim while touching his own face as though testing the contours. Jim wasn't paying attention, too distracted by the fact that Spock had referred to him – all right, an alternate him – as *aesthetically pleasing*. The older Spock was looking at Kirk now, his eyes glinting and his lips twitching in amusement.

And that, right there, was too much weirdness for one mission. There were lots of crazy things in space – some even as dangerous as McCoy claimed – and next to those, being spontaneously transported into an alternate dimension was almost routine. But the sight of Spock smiling – even if it did only really reach his eyes - was too much.

He cast a sidelong look at his Spock. His hands were firmly clasped in his lap, his lips pursed. So he saw it too.

"Indeed," said his Spock after a long pause, "I concur with your estimate of our age differentials. However, circumstances in our timeline were such that many cadets were advanced quickly through the ranks of Starfleet due to an insufficient supply of officers."

"How old are you?" Kirk eyed Jim nervously.

"Twenty-seven," Jim replied with a shrug.

Kirk's eyes widened, but it was McCoy who choked on his food and said, "They made you a *captain* at *twenty-seven*?"

"Twenty-five, actually," Jim corrected with a smirk. "We're two years into our mission."

"That's insane," McCoy declared.

"While I too questioned the initial appointment," Spock cut in, "there can be no disputing the results."

Jim's face broke into an involuntary smile. "Thanks," he said, placing a hand on Spock's arm before he could stop himself. Spock tensed slightly, and his eyes flickered briefly to Jim's, but this time he did not pull away.

Jim looked up, expecting to see them being watched, but the others' attentions were once again on each other. With a rueful smile, Jim carefully withdrew his hand from Spock.

Suddenly, Kirk's head snapped towards them, and he smiled in a way that was far too easygoing. "Well, long day," he said. "Time we called it a night, don't you think?"

Though he tried not to think about it, Jim could guess why his other self was so keen to go to bed all of a sudden, and if he'd been in any doubt McCoy's heartfelt groan would have confirmed it.

"I'll get you guys set up in the guest quarters on Deck 2," Kirk continued, but Spock's hand on his arm stopped him.

"Jim," the other Spock said softly, "I think the guest quarters on Deck 6 would be more... comfortable."

Kirk frowned and looked intently at Jim and his Spock, apparently scrutinizing them. "Really?"

"Really, Jim."

"All right, then," Kirk conceded warily. "Deck 6 it is."

Jim tried to wrack his brain but couldn't recall the difference between the guest quarters; he wasn't even sure he'd ever seen them on his own *Enterprise*. His Spock seemed to know, though, to judge by the way his eyes widened.

Jim could feel Spock's tension as they rose from the table, sense the way he clenched his hands in that manner he did whenever he was uncomfortable. They walked close together, behind their counterparts, and Jim had to fight not to look at them, because the way they walked, with their arms and even their hands casually brushing, was so damn distracting.

He could hear his Spock's breathing. Was it always that loud, or was he suddenly weirdly tuned into it? He was sure his own breathing was heavier than usual, and he wondered if anyone else could hear the way his heartbeat was pounding in his ears.

By the time they were dropped off at their quarters, a spacious room with two bunks, Jim was holding his breath and trying to count backwards from twenty in his head. His goodnight to their counterparts consisted of only a curt nod, but they seemed too distracted to take note of his state anyway.

When the door hissed closed, leaving them alone, Jim turned to face Spock, meaning to release his discomfort with an irreverent remark (*This universe is weird*, or *The other me's a bit of a poser isn't he?*) but he was stopped short by the expression on Spock's face.

Spock's eyes were wide, and he had Jim fixed with a gaze so intense that it rooted him to the spot. Jim's breath caught in his throat as he was suddenly reminded of that power being unleashed upon him on the bridge back home. Was it anger that he saw in Spock's eyes now, he wondered? Did he feel that his dignity had been affronted by his other self's behavior? Or had he noticed Jim's inappropriate response to the situation?

Jim opened his mouth to say something, but could find no words. Inwardly cursing himself for his own cowardice, he turned away and flopped down onto a bed.

Spock remained standing; Jim could sense him, only a few feet away, and could feel the tension that radiated from him. It felt as though he was on the verge of speaking, only the words never came. The apprehension was almost unbearable. Jim lay rigidly upon the bed, eyes forcefully screwed shut while his heart hammered in his ears, until he sensed Spock move away. At last, Jim slowly exhaled.

They did not exchange a word all evening, as each prepared for sleep. Starfleet-issue pajamas were laid out for them in the adjoining bathroom, which presented Jim with something of a problem. He had seen Spock in any number of situations on away missions, whether imprisoned by or undergoing bizarre ceremonies for various alien races, yet he wasn't sure he'd ever seen Spock dressed as casually as this. Somehow, he managed to look pristine even now, but his attire lacked the inaccessibility that held Jim's fantasies at bay.

*Shit*, Jim gave an inward groan; he was *fantasizing* again. He thought he'd laid that ghost to rest long ago, that it had just been a phase, a few idle thoughts he'd once entertained, before he'd seen sense and realized that duty came first.

Not that there was actually any rule against fraternization, of course. Jim had always assumed it would be more frowned upon than it was, and if the reactions of others in this universe – or rather, the lack of any perceptible reaction – was any guide...

*Fuck*. Jim climbed into bed and lay facing away from Spock, grimacing in horror at his own mind. He could not use this universe as a guide of anything; it was only further, crushing proof that the universe he inhabited was the most hideously unfair.

The night was a restless one. Jim was all too conscious of Spock's presence on just the other side of the cabin, and could not tear his thoughts away from the knowledge that somewhere else on this ship, another version of him lay entwined with his Vulcan lover.

\*

Morning arrived slowly, and Jim greeted it with bleary eyes and a thundering headache. He had slept little and fitfully, not at all helped by the sound of Spock's even breathing proving that he was the only one suffering.

Spock was already gone by the time Jim rose. He felt decidedly sullen by the time he ventured out of the cabin, and his mood was not improved by running into his counterpart. Kirk was grinning, revealing lines at the corners of his eyes. At least Jim had one thing, he supposed; he had been given his own ship earlier than this other Kirk. He tried to feel proud of that, but in truth it felt too much like an accident of circumstance to be a real accomplishment.

"The Spocks are arguing about temporal anomalies or something," Kirk greeted him, his grin broadening. "Thought I'd leave them to it and find you."

Jim didn't return the smile. "Any progress on the transporter?"

"Scotty's working on the Spocks' adjustments now. Are you so anxious to leave?"

Yes, Jim thought, but, "Course not," he said aloud. "Just worried about my crew, you know?"

"Hmm." Kirk looked concerned or puzzled, Jim couldn't decide which. After a pause, he said, "How exactly *did* you become a captain so young?"

"I'm not that young," Jim bristled. "I was one of the oldest in my class at the Academy." To his annoyance, Kirk looked flat-out disbelieving at that. "If you want my life story," Jim added, "the least you can do is breakfast."

"Of course." Kirk gave him a stiff smile and led him to the mess. Jim looked around for the Spocks, but they were nowhere to be seen. Probably off experimenting or something, while Jim was stuck with his pompous other self.

He was being petulant, he knew; yet coming face to face with such a perfect life that could have been his was a hard blow. This Kirk had not lost his father, had not suffered Frank or Nero, yet he had the *Enterprise* all the same – and had worked his way up the ranks properly, so that no one questioned it was his due. And, to top it all off, he had Spock.

Disregarding his promise of a life story, Jim ate breakfast in sullen silence, while Kirk watched him with evident curiosity. An interminable silence stretched between them, leaving Jim nothing to focus on but that the synthesized food here was even worse than in his own universe.

Eventually, it was Kirk who broke the silence. "If you don't mind my asking," he said, hesitant, "if you lost your father so young... What I mean is, did you ever... Did you go to Tarsus?"

"Where?"

"Tarsus IV."

Jim wracked his brain. He'd had any number of missions in the last two years, and couldn't recall every planet's name offhand. "Doesn't ring any bells."

Kirk looked strangely sad. "You'd remember if you had. It was when I – we were fourteen."

"Oh. Then no. Didn't go off-planet 'til I joined Starfleet." Kirk looked surprised at that, so Jim added, "Wasn't keen on the space travel, what with... you know."

Kirk nodded his understanding, but did not explain further what the significance of this planet was, so Jim dismissed it and changed the subject. "So how long have you been doing your first officer?"

Kirk looked taken aback but offered no denial. "Hard to say. A year, I suppose? It depends how you..." he shrugged.

Jim choked on his coffee. "A *year*?" he spluttered. That settled it; this guy might share his name and a part of his past, but they sure weren't the same person.

"I know." Kirk gave him a wry smile. "Doesn't seem likely, does it? But Spock... he doesn't do casual."

Jim frowned. "How long was he with Uhura, here?"

"How long was he *what*?"

Jim was saved from having to explain when Scotty's voice came over the intercom. "*Captain Kirk to transporter room.*"

Jim and Kirk exchanged a worried glance, then leapt up as one and ran to the transporter room. Jim had no idea what he was expecting to find, and his heart leapt to his throat when the doors slid open to reveal a heap of blue and black.

Jim was by his side in an instant; it was his Spock, unconscious though he had no visible injuries. "What the hell happened?" Jim demanded. "And get Bones!"

"The doctor is on his way," the elder Spock said, eerily calm.

"I cannae say what happened," Scotty added fretfully. "We were just testing –"

"What the -?" McCoy dashed into the transporter room, pushed Jim aside and began running his tricorder over Spock's lifeless form. "What have I said about messing with these damn fool things?"

Bizarrely, that eased Jim's mind somewhat; this Bones was uncomfortably similar to the one he knew, yet with none of their shared history, so it was comforting to hear something so familiar. McCoy's frown was not comforting, though, nor the way he muttered to himself under his breath. Jim felt himself instinctively edge towards the elder Spock, but he could find no reassurance in this other, unknown Vulcan who apparently loved the more mature, successful version of him.

Suddenly feeling utterly alone, Jim could only watch, utterly helpless, as Spock was lifted onto an anti-grav gurney and led out of the transporter room.

\*

"He'll be fine, y'know."

At the sound of McCoy's gruff tone, Jim guiltily dropped Spock's hand and fought back a blush. Bones rolled his eyes. "Don't bother yourself over that, I've seen you fret over the Elf a hundred times. He does the same when you're injured an' all, though he thinks I don't notice."

"That's the other us you're talking about," Jim sighed. "We're not... like that."

"P'raps not yet," Bones said with a shrug.

"No," Jim insisted. "I mean at all."

McCoy looked unconvinced. "Y'know, I don't rightly know how it happened with those two either, but they were a darn sight older'n you, and there were years of them dancing around it before they finally gave in."

Jim looked at Spock's unconscious form and wondered what it would be like to give in. In his fantasies, Spock alternated between gentle and rough, between shy and dominant. Every combination excited him, but right now he would settle for a mere game of chess.

"It doesn't matter," he declared, meeting McCoy's gaze with determination. "I don't care if it never happens in our world. He's a good friend, and I wouldn't trade him for anyone, even a more... cooperative version of himself."

McCoy screwed up his face in distaste, but Jim recognized the lack of sincerity in the expression. "Y'won't need to," McCoy said gruffly. "He's fine. Just a shock, and he's doing that Vulcan repair thing."

Jim had no idea what *that Vulcan repair thing* was, and wasn't sure he wanted to. In a small voice, he asked, "How do you know?"

A smile tugged at the corners of McCoy's mouth as he glanced up at the display above the biobed. "You'll see," was all he said.

Jim tried to read what McCoy was looking at, but the equipment in this universe's Sickbay was unintelligible to him, all dials and slides. He missed the clean, intuitive displays of his *Enterprise*.

Just then, Spock began to stir. Jim instinctively clutched his hand, relief swelling over him, but then McCoy roughly shoved him out of the way and began to slap Spock hard across the face.

"What the hell, Bones?" Jim tried to push him away, but then a firm hand closed around his upper arm; he turned on his heel and found the elder Spock watching the scene impassively.

"Do not be concerned," Spock assured him. "Doctor McCoy is merely returning him to consciousness."

Jim watched, speechless, as McCoy continued to slap Spock, harder and harder, until at last the Vulcan's hand shot up and caught McCoy's arm mid-strike. McCoy looked up at Jim then, a broad grin across his face. "That's my favorite part," he said with a wink.

The look of deranged glee on McCoy's face was so comical that Jim quite forgot himself and let out a bark of laughter, but he immediately sobered when Spock began to sit up. The hand that was not gripping McCoy's arm reached out and grabbed the closest thing to him, which happened to be the elder Kirk's arm. In a hoarse voice, Spock said, "Jim?"

Kirk smiled and moved closer, but Jim felt as though his blood had run cold. He watched in silence as McCoy ran his scans muttering good-natured jibes about Vulcan physiology. The whole time, Kirk held onto Spock's hand, and Spock allowed it.

Unable to watch any more, Jim quietly slipped out of Sickbay. He was halfway back to his quarters when he heard brisk footsteps behind him. The elder Spock drew up alongside him, and for a while they walked in step, neither speaking.

As they rounded a corner, Spock led them into an empty rec room and stood, impassively, silently. Jim avoided his gaze, feeling awkwardly like an errant schoolboy. Spock had a way of doing that to him, subordinate or no.

When the tension overrode Jim's discomfort, he looked Spock square in the eye and seethed, "It's not enough that he's had all the breaks and all the luck, he can just sweep in and..." He trailed off and threw his hands in the air in disgust.

Spock's eyebrow shot up. "Fascinating," he declared. "You are envious."

"Yeah, fine. He's had," Jim waved his hand in a vague gesture to encompass the unfairness of the universe, "*everything*."



"Perhaps," said Spock in a measured tone, "it might assist you to know that *he* is envious of *you*."

"He – what?"

"In our universe, he is the youngest captain in Starfleet history. I have attempted to highlight the illogic of resenting being usurped by himself; however..." he trailed off, a lift of his eyebrow conveying his opinion of both Kirks' adherence to logic.

Jim knew that Spock was making a valid point, but he was too energized by his own frustration to care. "Maybe I should just leave my Spock here," he vented.

"I doubt your Spock would agree to those terms."

Only when Spock repeated Jim's use of the possessive did he realize what he'd said, and in his fleeting embarrassment his anger faltered. "I am jealous," he conceded. "Because he has you in a way that I'll never..." he shrugged. "I'm not like him. And my Spock isn't like you, either."

"In many respects, no," Spock agreed. "Yet he is not so dissimilar as you might think."

Jim frowned, wondering if Spock could possibly be referring to... but no, that wasn't possible. "We need to go home," he sighed. "This place is driving me crazy. Also," he frowned at a strange, button-covered food synthesizer set into the bulkhead, "this ship is weird. Buttons are overrated."

Spock raised an eyebrow at the last remark but elected not to pursue the matter. All he said was, "Agreed. I believe we found the solution this morning, but our power calculation was amiss." Spock sounded decidedly put out by that admission. Jim gave him an affectionate smile. "Nonetheless," Spock continued, "I believe that you should be able to return in the morning."

"That's a relief." Jim raked a hand through his hair and heaved a sigh. "This has been... enlightening."

Spock inclined his head and favored Jim with a thoughtful look. "I hope that is the case," he said, somewhat cryptically in Jim's opinion.

Jim considered returning to Sickbay, but decided instead to wander back to their guest quarters. The moment the door opened, Jim could tell that Spock had beaten him to it; there was a dark energy in the air that he sensed even before he saw Spock in the corner of the cabin, watching him with fierce intensity.

"Hey," Jim greeted him warily, unnerved by the discord of their temperaments. "How are you feeling?"

"Quite well." Spock took a step towards him. "You were with him."

"Yes," Jim admitted. Defensively, he added, "You seemed happy with the other Kirk."

Spock's brow creased into a frown. "He feels...his...emotions," he stumbled over the word, "feel almost like yours."

Jim's brain short-circuited as he replayed the image in his head, of Spock reaching for the other Kirk's hand. He had always wondered, but never quite dared to ask, how much Spock could read

through a touch. Perhaps, he realized, that was how they could make sense of whatever was going on here.

Suddenly seized by daring, he took a step towards Spock, and then another. Spock tensed but did not back away. Jim felt lightheaded, and his heart raced as he slowly lifted one hand. He kept a wary eye on Spock, as though expecting him to bolt at any moment, but Spock was watching his hand, riveted.

Jim waited, holding his breath, half expecting to be pushed aside. For a moment Spock was as still as a statue, but gradually he raised his hand and touched their fingers together. A shiver coursed through both their bodies, and Spock's free hand grasped at Jim's arm, pulling him closer.

"Do I feel like him?" Jim asked, his voice hoarse.

"No," Spock replied in barely more than a whisper. "And yet... more so than I thought possible."

His eyes flicked to meet Jim's, and startling passion glinted in them. Jim's free hand snaked around Spock's neck, drawing him down. The hammering in Jim's ears intensified, but he paused, his lips mere fractions of an inch from Spock's. His eyes closed, and for a moment he just breathed in Spock's scent, relishing the precarious balance.

"Do you...?" he murmured.

Spock's eyes fluttered closed and he took a deep breath before he whispered, "Yes," the word a mere ghost of air over Jim's lips.

Jim shuddered, and then he let himself fall into Spock. Their lips met gently at first, testing, but then they became fierce and demanding, crushing together and then parting as tongues met. Jim's head swam, heat coursed through his veins and his fingers tangled in Spock's hair.

"Whoa," Jim broke off the kiss abruptly, panting.

"You wish to desist?"

A barking, disbelieving laugh escaped from Jim then, because Spock had no right sounding so calm and collected when Jim could barely see straight, and because at that moment he felt he'd rather die than stop. "Hell no," he said.

And then that Vulcan power was unleashed. With one hand, Spock lifted him and all but threw him against the bulkhead. Jim gasped in momentary pain, but then Spock was pressing against him and he groaned in pleasure. He hooked a leg around Spock's waist, drawing him closer, and gasped into a ferocious kiss. All the while, Spock moved his fingers against Jim's, which was odd but Jim supposed it must be a Vulcan thing and let him have at it, because anything that turned his cool, composed first officer into this raging inferno was quite all right by him.

Spock's mouth drew away, his lips tracing Jim's jaw and then his neck. Jim groaned and threw his head back, exposing his throat and gasping when he felt teeth at his collarbone. He was rocking his hips, his free hand grabbing at Spock's shirt as he murmured incoherent sounds of encouragement.

"You are quite vocal," Spock observed.

Jim could only manage a strangled sound in response. Spock raised their joined hands then, and pressed his lips to the back of Jim's hand. Jim just watched, a little dazed, as Spock's tongue sneaked out and ran along the same fingers he had been caressing. Jim jerked, surprised by the intensity of the sensation. Then that tongue probed between his fingers, exploring every crease of his hand, circling each of his fingertips. Jim brought Spock's hand to his mouth and tried to reciprocate, only foggily understanding now something about Vulcan hands.

It was strange, though; his own hands were no more erogenous zones than those of any other human, yet something about Spock's tongue set every one of his nerves alight. He could feel every motion as a lance of heat all the way up his arm. He shuddered with every swipe over his palm, moaned when each of his fingers was drawn into a hot mouth. When teeth grazed his fingertips, a shudder wracked his body and he grasped blindly at Spock's shirt, pulling him up hard against him.

He heard a sound from Spock's throat that was almost a feral growl, then he felt teeth nip at his jaw and then close on his earlobe. Jim gasped and jerked against him. Spock made a satisfied sound and bit down again, then laved the area with his tongue. Jim grabbed Spock's hips with both hands and slammed them against his, writhing as he sought friction.

Spock's tongue traced the outline of his ear, lingering on the rounded shape that was foreign to him, and then teased with his teeth again. Jim squirmed, desperate for more contact, and forced his hand in between them, fumbling with the fastening of Spock's pants. He shoved them roughly down over Spock's hips, then the underwear after them, then he grabbed at Spock's ass and pulled it toward him.

Spock let out a faint moan against his ear, and that slight, breathy sound was possibly the hottest thing Jim had ever heard. He turned his head and captured Spock's lips, then reached down and unfastened his own pants. His hand grazed Spock's erection as he did so, eliciting a shudder.

He felt Spock's hand cover his, and together they pulled him out of his pants. A shiver tore up Jim's spine, then both of their hands gathered their erections together and squeezed. Jim felt his knees buckle, and his free hand wrapped around Spock for support. Spock's arm slid around his waist, then lower, and then Jim felt himself being hoisted up against the bulkhead. He wrapped his legs around Spock's waist and gasped, "Spock."

Spock broke off the kiss to raise an eyebrow in question. Jim clenched his legs around Spock's waist and leaned forward to reclaim Spock's mouth, gasping, "Don't stop."

Spock kissed him back, forceful and demanding, and wrapped long fingers around them both.

It was rough, lacking in any real rhythm or finesse. Their hands moved out of sync, alternately moving, pulling and squeezing. Their hips thrust into their joined hands, becoming more and more urgent. Spock was hot everywhere Jim touched, the power of the grip against him intoxicating, the force of it driving him out of his mind. He burned, his body thrumming with pleasure, his head pounding.

Then Spock's hand withdrew. Jim broke off the kiss to groan his protest, but then Spock pressed against him hard along the entire length of their bodies, and Jim's groan came out as, "Yes."

With one hand still holding Jim up, Spock used his other to reclaim Jim's hand in that Vulcan gesture. Spock dropped his head against Jim's shoulder, panting, murmurs of "*Jim*" muffled against his shirt.

Jim bucked his hips forcefully, and the friction was a burn that surged through his body. His head fell back against the bulkhead, his hand tangled in Spock's hair, then grasped at his shirt, then slipped underneath to grapple at the smooth skin of his back. As Jim dug his fingers into Spock's back, Spock lifted his head to kiss him, hard, then dropped his hand and placed his fingers on Jim's face.

Spock murmured something into the kiss, perhaps a question, and Jim frantically gasped, "Do it."

Spock flooded into his mind, all raging fire and wild passion. Jim was overwhelmed with sensation; he was being pressed against the bulkhead but was also pressing another against it, and he could no longer tell Spock's pleasure from his own. He rocked his hips and spikes shot up his spine, he scraped nails across Spock's back and felt the tingling burn himself.

Then he gasped and pulled back from the kiss, pressed their foreheads together and held Spock close in his mind as their bodies shuddered to mutual completion.

For a moment they just stayed like that, breathing heavily and sharing the wonder in their joined minds as their skin prickled with lingering heat. Then, gradually, he felt Spock withdraw from his head, and he sagged against the bulkhead. He unwrapped his legs from Spock's waist, wincing as the blood flow returned to them, and Spock gently lowered him back to the ground and took a small step back.

Jim's mouth moved silently as he sought something to say. In the end, all that came out was, "Well."

"Indeed."

Spock's neutral demeanor was belied by the swollen lips, tousled hair and rumpled clothing. Jim let out a breathy chuckle. "God, you look good when you're debauched."

That earned him the eyebrow, and Jim was intensely, almost painfully glad that he'd landed the one with the left eyebrow.

Somehow they staggered over to one of the bunks, Jim leaving a trail of clothing while Spock collected his together into a neat pile. They collapsed onto the bed in a tangle of limbs, and Jim was drifting off to sleep before he could insist to himself that this absolutely did not count as snuggling.

\*

When dawn broke – at least, the false dawn of a ship in deep space – they were met at the door by their alternate selves.

"Good news," Kirk greeted them, "Scotty reckons the transporter's ready to go."

"Excellent," said Jim, tugging his shirt over his head. Beside him, Spock looked immaculate, of course, but Jim had made no effort to hide his disheveled appearance or the new bruises that were forming on his neck and wrists.

Kirk evidently took in his appearance, because his eyes darted over to the bunks, one of which had clearly not been slept in. His face broke into a beaming grin. "See," he nudged the older Spock. "Told you we should have put them on Deck 2."

Jim decided then and there to check, once they got home, whether there were double bunks on Deck 2, and if so, whether he could have one relocated.

The older Spock looked confused. He regarded them both thoughtfully as they made their way to the transporter room and only when they were about to step onto the transporter pad did he say, "I would surmise this is a new development."

"Yeah," Jim grinned and moved his fingers against Spock's with a wink at the elder Spock. "Turns out we just needed a nudge."

"I do not know what you are referring to," the elder Spock said in a perfect impression of innocence.

Jim turned a wicked grin on Kirk. "You should've told me he was that good." He felt Spock's fingers go still under his.

"It's fun finding out, isn't it?" Kirk replied. Both Spocks tensed at that and turned disbelieving gazes on him.

"Hell yeah," said Jim, enjoying this far too much. "Hey, does yours do that thing with his tongue?"

"Jim!" his Spock barked, suddenly grabbing his arm and pulling him towards the transporter pad.

Jim held up his hands and assumed his most innocent expression. "You sure you want to try this again?" he said to his Spock.

Spock assumed his position on the transporter pad and gave him a stern look. "I believe an expedited departure would be in everyone's best interests at this juncture."

Jim shrugged. "Don't know what you mean; I think it's been quite a successful mission."

Jim saw their counterparts exchange a glance, while Scotty glared at them all in confusion.

"Are ye ready?" Scotty called.

Jim nodded. "Energize."

As the haze of the transporter beam enveloped him, Jim distinctly saw Kirk giving him the thumbs up.

The figures before them flickered and faded, blending back into the familiar gleaming white of their transporter room. Jim stepped cautiously down from the pad, inspecting his surroundings. It certainly *looked* the same, but he wasn't ready to be sure.

"I'm not sure what happened there," Scotty muttered, fiddling with the controls.

"Scotty," Jim interrupted, "what do you most want to know about the future?"

Scotty looked at him as though he had grown a second head. "What?"

"Just answer. I'm making sure it's you."

Scotty grinned, though he still looked wary. "Aye. That'd be the sandwiches then. Ye'll never let me forget that, will ye sir?"

"Nope," Jim replied happily. "So how long were we gone?"

"Just a wee second," Scotty replied. "Ye flickered out, then back in, and that was that. I'll have to check the circuits."

"Not to worry," Jim said breezily, hopping down from the pad. "See if you can get it fixed, we're in no hurry. Mr Spock, perhaps we should look over those mission reports in my quarters?"

Spock took a step towards him, the heat returning to his eyes, but he kept his voice entirely neutral as he said, "Very well, Captain."

# Chances

T'Racionn

"Jim, your suggestion lacks all logic."

"Spock, of course it does!"

"Are you provoking me?"

"Would I stand a chance?"

"No."

"Then I'm .... convincing you."

"You assume those chances are higher?"

"I just say Landru, Emiani III, Nomad ... am I James T. Kirk or aren't I?"

"You are first of all drunk."

"I'm not! What they gave me is nothing compared to Bone's Saurian Brandy."

"The effect seems to be remarkably similar."

"Spock, if I were drunk I wouldn't try to convince you, I would mob you."

"You think you succeeded?"

"Aaarr ... you're driving me mad."

"Nothing is more foreign to me."

"Ha! Then my suggestion is *less* foreign to you."

"Hypothetically ... yes."

"See!"

....

....

"Jim?"

"What?"

"You feel asleep."

"I didn't!"

"As you wish."

"Dozed off maybe. How long have we been held here?"

"29.25 hours."

"We mustn't fall asleep."

"So you said."

"Thanks for waking me."

"Only my du ... No: Gladly, Jim."

"Have you thought about it?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Perhaps this is no decision of logic."

"Do you want it, as much I've been wanting it?"

"It is complicated. It changes everything."

"Spock, do you *want* it?"

"Jim..."

"Yes, Spock?"

"Kiss me."







# Contact

## Blackbird Song

For the third time tonight, James T. Kirk flies across the room at his opponent's discretion. For the third time tonight, he gives thanks for the pain upon landing. It remains for him the strongest reminder of the life and vitality that so nearly was lost this day. Not that such risk is abnormal. There's been quite a spate of close calls of late, even for their job description. And there have been losses. Many losses, both of his own crew and of people he's known and valued for years. It's just that he can't remember ever having come so close to losing Spock, whom he now sends flying with an ease and vigor he's never managed before.

\*\*\*\*\*

*One year earlier*

Spock first suggested the idea of combat as mental purgative after the transporter accident around Alpha 177.

"Thanks, Spock, but ... no thanks."

"Captain, it would be ... imprudent to refuse."

Kirk stuck to the corner, fussing at a statue that should have meant something to him and didn't. "Explain," he said, woodenly.

From somewhere behind and to the left, Spock exhaled.

On Spock's intake of breath, Kirk huffed. "Let me guess – the crew wants to take a swing at me and you're the designated hitter."

"In a manner of speaking," said Spock. "Doctor McCoy has noted a tendency towards ill temper, Nurse Chapel reports seeing you talking to yourself, Mr. Scott sent me a written inquiry concerning his status as Chief Engineer, and Lieutenant Uhura became concerned when you ... rearranged her console."

Kirk winced and flexed his still bruised left hand. "Yes.... I owe her an apology. I'm surprised she didn't call security."

"Indeed."

Kirk knew that that really meant, 'No, she called me instead.' He rubbed his forehead and pinched his face. It was tiring, calming that wolf inside him. Tiring and tedious. "What about you?"

"Captain?"

"Don't play dumb with me," Kirk snapped.

The stillness in the room was instant and absolute.

Kirk felt like a bastard, through and through. And his bad half was being defiant about it. He wanted to apologize, but all he could manage was, "What have you observed about me, now that I'm ... back?" He still couldn't turn around, but he thought he could hear a rising eyebrow.

"I have noticed a certain ... lack of balance, of late."

"And you think that would make me a suitable sparring partner?"

"I have observed that you become focused during and after combat."

The wolf laughed inside and said, 'You wanna see focus? You won't be able to see anything when I'm done with you! Too bad... Great eyes...' The sheep said, "I really don't think it's a good idea, Spock."

"You will not hurt me, Jim."

The wolf squashed the sheep. "You think I can't do you any damage?"

"I did not say that," said Spock, quietly.

Both Kirks sighed, for different reasons. "All right, Spock. It's your funeral." He strode past Spock, fighting every urge to push him out of the way.

In the gym, stripped down to regulation exercise pants and noting Spock's choice not to wear his usual long-sleeved top, Kirk began to look forward to the match. "What's the matter, Spock? Too hot for you?" He gave the air a couple of preparatory jabs.

"Quite the contrary. If I may persuade you to quicken your readiness to engage—"

Kirk knocked Spock flat on the ground. "Quick enough for you?"

"It is an adequate beginning." After regaining his feet, Spock feinted left and took Kirk down with a right cross.

After that, it was a glorious, half-hour melee that left the wolf grinning and the rest of him sated with sweat and physical pain. He looked at Spock and noticed for the first time the ooze of green from just under the eye. He reached towards it without thinking.

Spock flinched just enough to dodge Kirk's fingers. "I am undamaged."

"You need to see McCoy." Kirk dropped his hand. "I'm sorry, Spock. And thank you...." He bit off repeating 'from both of us'.

As he picked up a towel, he noticed the gooseflesh on Spock's arm. Throwing the towel over Spock's shoulders, he said, "Time to hit the showers," and headed for the changing room before Spock could object.

\*

The events of Psi 2000 took a strange toll on the crew. Everyone was on edge, either mortified or trying to pretend they weren't, and tamping tempers wasn't easy, especially when everyone knew how badly out of hand things had already been during the first pass of those three days. Even though the cure had been administered, the hyper-vigilance of the crew was perfectly understandable to Kirk.

It was just hard facing Spock after he'd backhanded him repeatedly. As much as he needed a good, sane fight, he couldn't bring himself to hit Spock one more time. As for the rest of the crew – well, that wasn't allowed under the best of circumstances.

So he couldn't quite understand it when he found himself buzzing Spock's door.

"Enter."

"Spock, I—oh. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have disturbed you...."

Spock turned from his firepot. "You have not disturbed me. You have enabled me to ascertain your wellbeing without disturbing you."

Kirk found himself caught in Spock's soft gaze. He swallowed. "I'm all right. I guess," he added, when Spock's scrutiny didn't abate. "Just ... restless. Unsettled."

Spock reached toward the firepot, pulling from its glowing center two ampoules made from the same material.

"Spock, your hand!"

"Vulcans have a superior tolerance for heat." Spock rose and tapped each ampoule on its own small glass. He poured the golden liquid from them with a precision that silenced Kirk. Then he turned, glasses in hand, offering one.

Without thinking twice, Kirk took it and lifted it to his lips.

Spock stopped him with a hand. "It is too hot, Jim."

Kirk felt the warmth spread through his arm and fingers from where Spock's hand rested on his forearm. It soothed him, calming some of the restless hurt of the loss of crew and control. He relaxed a little into Spock's touch and felt the warmth spread further.

It felt strange when he knew that the time was right to drink the substance without so much as a glance at, sound or vibration from Spock, and then found himself sipping the stuff in perfect synchronization with a man he'd once thought as out of reach as the next galaxy. All he knew at the end of it was that he felt a sense of tranquility that he'd never been able to feel except after great sex or a great fight, and maybe not even then. "What was that, Spock?"

"It is a proprietary mixture of herbs and berries found on Earth and Vulcan that my father perfected."

"And he gave you the recipe?"

"No."

"So ... is it safe for humans?"

"My mother has consumed it ninety-five times during my lifetime. To my knowledge."

"And, uh, she's still with us?"

"She has never been 'with us', Captain. She is on her way to—"

"Never mind, Spock. So how does your father make herbs and berries from Earth and Vulcan glow like that? Or do they just do that naturally on Vulcan?"

"Great pressure and heat are applied within stone vials exactly two point three-seven microns thick when compressed by—"

"Okay, okay," laughed Kirk. He thought he saw the sting flicker in Spock's eyes and squeezed the nearest shoulder to ease things between them. "I'll just enjoy the feeling like I'm supposed to do. I ... am supposed to, right?"

"My mother calls the elixir 'Happy Juice'."

If Kirk had had any of the substance left in his mouth, he'd have choked on it. He nearly did, anyway. "Happy juice?"

"Yes. She states that it relaxes her, especially when combined with a therapeutic massage of her latissimus dorsi." Spock shifted.

Kirk looked at Spock, wondering what had prompted the display of discomfort and quelling his hope of a nice, painful massage.

"I believe that you have been overly tense, of late." Spock sounded even more uncomfortable than he did when dealing with issues of emotion.

"It was a rather trying three days," said Kirk, carefully.

Spock exhaled what sounded like a sigh. "My mother praised me for my ability to ease certain muscle groups that she could not reach herself."

Kirk felt his eyes widen. "Are you offering me a back rub?"

"I believe I stated that."

A back massage from strong, relentless fingers might be better than the fight Kirk longed for. It was all he could do to contain his greed for it. "Thank you, Spock. I might just take you up on it. But only if you're sure...."

"I am."

Kirk bit his lip to keep from stating his disbelief. "Okay, where do you want me, and how?"

Spock's eyes, to his credit, didn't widen. But the lids stiffened, which nearly made Kirk break down into fits of laughter.

"Tell you what: why don't I just sit down over here?" Kirk waved at a chair. "Unless you'd rather I took your meditation spot...?"

"That might prove more convenient," said Spock.

Kirk shook his head and sat on the floor where Spock had been. There was a moment of awkwardness before he felt Spock settle behind him, but then the feel of warm, skilled fingers on his neck and shoulders made him forget the strangeness of this form of intimacy between them. "Ohh-hhh! Your mother was right...."

"Yes."

\*

Following the tragic encounter with the Romulans, Kirk wanted nothing more than to beat the crap out of someone. But then he remembered Tomlinson's steady, competent presence and Martine's courage in facing his death, and he couldn't deface either of them that way. Nor could he disrespect Spock, whose quiet dignity in the face of Stiles' bigotry and the impatience of Captain and crew put them all to shame. Which made him want to hit someone again. He was contemplating putting a fist through the wall when the buzzer assaulted him. "Come!"

Spock stepped hesitantly, placing one boot point inside Kirk's cabin. "Have I interrupted a crucial procedure?"

Kirk rubbed a hand over the side of his face, letting the impending stubble rasp at his palm. Sometimes it felt good to forget the depilatory. "Not at all, Spock. Come in." *Get out.* "Have a seat." *I need to be alone, or I may kill you. Someone. Else.*

Spock remained at the door. "My query is trivial, Captain. Your need for rest is—"

"—not going to be solved by sending you away." Kirk sighed in recognition of the truth of it. "Please, Spock. Take a load off." He gestured to the visitor's chair.

"I am unsure that I can ease your mind by 'a load', but I shall endeavor to do so." Spock moved towards the chair. "Although I am not sure how my occupying this chair will remove undue burden from you."

Kirk's hand snaked over the top and down the back of his own head, grabbing the back of his neck as an anchor. He had to admit it was an effective way to avoid actually hitting someone. "That expression refers to reducing the load on the recipient's feet."

Spock's eyes gleamed for a split second.

Kirk ignored it. "So what's your question?"

"It is more ... a request." Spock fell silent for a short eternity.

"Well?"

Spock ignored Kirk's impatience. "Yes. I wish to learn how to play poker."

Kirk blinked. And again. "Poker?"

"Yes."

"I taught you the basics right after that incident with the Fesarius, didn't I?"

"Yes. However, the basics do not enable one to win. I require instruction in the art of the bluff."

"I'll ... see what I can do." Kirk fished out his deck of cards. "Five-card draw?"

"If that is most convenient for you."

Kirk eyed Spock. "Too easy for you?"

"I am familiar with the mechanics of all varieties of draw, stud, community and Antarean forms of the game."

"Of course you are, Mr. Spock. Five-card draw. You can beat me at Confound the Tellarites later."

"Very well."

Kirk shook his head and shuffled the cards, holding Spock's gaze as he put the deck face down on the table between them. "Cut."

Spock did, looking Kirk calmly in the eye.

Kirk dealt the cards and placed the draw pile on the table. "You sure you need this? Looks to me like you've got the poker face down pretty well."

"Poker face?"

"Yes, Spock. That impenetrable glare of yours is perfect. Nobody knows what you're thinking."

"Vulcans do not glare."

The only way Kirk could keep from laughing was to let the smile spread slowly across his face. "Of course not."

\*

Halfbreed.

He had used it. Had programmed Spock to respond by using the one word he never would. It had worked, of course, but he didn't ever remember feeling quite so sick in the soul. Maybe if he could get Spock to spar with him, hit him a few times....

He shook his head, but it didn't clear enough. "That'd just make everything worse," he muttered.

In the gym, he sparred with the punch ball. It was the maximum combat that McCoy would allow him, and it gave him a chance to improve his strategy and footwork without hitting a crewmember. He thought it was working out quite well—

"Captain, I—"

Kirk found himself on the floor, knocked down by the ball on its way back from a strongly thrown, misdirected punch. "Spock," he said, with his best imitation of aplomb, "What can I do for you?" He started to rise, but his limbs didn't quite work as he expected.

Spock had a hand under Kirk's elbow immediately. "I believe that Doctor McCoy advised you to avoid such activity for twenty-four hours."

"Standard procedure after a brush with a giant android."

But Spock didn't let go at Kirk's quip.

And Kirk found his own hand resting on Spock's arm, in the crook of his elbow. "Spock?"

"I wished to apologize for taking you to task for your choice of words earlier. It was inappropriate."

"No." Kirk's other hand found its way to Spock's free upper arm. "No, I'm sorry. I should have found another way to deal with the situation. Race hatred is no way to send a signal."

"On the contrary. From one who never succumbs to such prejudice, it is a very efficient code."



"Perhaps, but..." Kirk found himself stroking Spock's arm, absently.

"Perhaps we should accept one another's apologies and agree to disagree?" Spock's hand closed gently on Kirk's elbow.

Kirk looked up into eyes full of expression and let himself enjoy the odd, lopsided embrace. "Agreed, my friend." He let go before Spock did, and felt a stab of regret at the flicker in Spock's eyes.

\*

*"Not when you've sat in that room...."*

Kirk didn't want to be alone. Not ever again. He refused to give himself time off after Van Gelder, which McCoy allowed, but with a worried look. He spent more time touring the ship in his off hours, even spending time in the mess. McCoy was going to put him on steamed grass if he didn't stop overindulging.

It was when he hadn't slept for fifty-two hours that he tripped over Uhura's foot and landed on the floor, sprawled between her and Spock. "Sorry," he said, righting himself as he heard Spock coming towards him. "Are you all right, Lieutenant?"

"I'm fine, Captain, but what about you?"

"I'm perfectly all right, thank you."

"Captain," said Spock, near Kirk's left ear.

"Yes, Mr. Spock, about that urgent matter you called me to discuss..."

"The situation has developed and is now eyes and ears only."

Kirk experienced a sinking feeling. "Of course. Pardon me, Lieutenant." He smiled at her as she pulled her beautiful feet tightly under her chair.

"Deck five," said Spock, once the turbolift doors closed.

"That bad?"

"Yes."

Spock's tone left no room for further discussion until they arrived at the door to his quarters. "Please sit down," he said, as he took his own seat behind his desk.

Kirk did as Spock asked, albeit grudgingly.

"Doctor McCoy has informed me of his concern for your physical and emotional states and asked me to discuss the matter with you."

"Why didn't he come to me himself?"

"His exact response was, 'If I tell him, he'll just tell me to mind my own business and go find someone who's really sick.'"

Kirk nodded. "So, what? You're going to relieve me of duty if I don't get some sleep?"

"Under Section—"

"Yes, yes, I get it." Kirk sighed and rubbed his hand over his eyes.

"Captain, are you aware of how long it's been since you slept?"

"Um ... day? Day and a half?"

"Fifty-two point four seven hours."

"Oh."

"It has also been forty-nine point five three hours since you were last alone."

"Doesn't feel like it." The sound of his own voice around those words brought the hard knot of pain into full being.

"Jim."

The velvet warmth of that voice wrapped around his name struck Kirk right between the eyes. He felt the prickle of unwelcome tears somewhere deep inside.

"If you will permit me, I can help."

"How?"

"I can initiate a mental touch that will help to settle the mind and allow you to sleep."

"Uh ... all due respect, Spock, but after Van Gelder, I don't really want anyone poking around in my mind."

"Understandable. However, this touch would merely reinvigorate the pathways damaged by Van Gelder's apparatus and allow you to rebalance your thoughts."

Kirk gave Spock a wry smile. "You going to tuck me in?"

"If necessary," said Spock, oozing distaste.

"Is it?" Kirk didn't relish the desperation in his voice.

Spock calculated him for a long moment. "No."

Kirk didn't know why he was assailed by disappointment. "Okay, so you ... do whatever you do and I just walk out of here and take a nap?"

"I did not say that. It would be better if we performed the meld in close proximity to where you plan to sleep. It produces a certain lassitude...."

Kirk rose. "Good thing there's a shortcut." For the first time, he led Spock through the adjoining bathroom into his quarters.

\*

He sat in his chair – the Captain's Chair, it reminded him – images and sounds of his friends crying out, calling, pleading, torturing him. There was Scotty, fussing over his engines and saving countless lives. There were Spock and McCoy fighting, goading, cooperating, respecting each other just weeks ago on Miri's planet as they saved the ancient children and each other. The memory of Spock showing such tenderness towards McCoy when the doctor had taken the experimental cure and lay near death made Kirk choke as he started to pull himself away in order to make that ultimate decision to sacrifice three of the finest officers in the Fleet – three of the best men he would ever know.

And then came Sulu's voice, urgently calling his attention to a flare holding a lateral line. He poured himself into every shred of hope and willed them all back to the *Enterprise*.

He sat in his office, remembering Spock's offer of help after Van Gelder's torture chamber and the extraordinary experience of being joined like that to another mind. And yet, for all that he had feared the intimacy of such an experience, he'd found himself disappointed by its distance. Spock's presence had been comforting but professional, which, on balance, had been a good thing. Kirk had been keenly aware of Spock's ability to delve anywhere he chose, had he wished to, and that realization had unnerved him until Spock sent a clear sense of barriers and the respecting thereof. Two minutes in, he'd found out later, and he was deeply involved in the best sleep he'd ever had.

He came back to the present with a prick of conscience and went to Spock's door.

There was no answer.

Kirk found Spock in the gym, body tensed and looking so still that he wondered if he should call McCoy.

But then Spock's right hand moved a millimeter to the right and mesmerized Kirk. He was always fascinating to watch, but the smooth, tightly controlled movements of Vulcan martial art training were breathtaking. Especially when performed by hard, graceful sinew under stretched-velvet skin.

Kirk shook his head, shaking out the thought. *He hasn't even changed clothes*. That realization caught him up, and he remembered why he'd come looking for Spock, in the first place. "Spock, I—"

"Captain? Captain... Jim!"

It took a moment – maybe a month – to come out of the blackness. It took another moment – maybe a year – to remember where and when he was. "Sorry, Spock, I didn't mean to startle you" came out as "Nngmphhh...."

"Spock to Sickbay...."

"Be-belay that," Kirk managed. "I'm all right."

"Sickbay. McCoy, here."

Spock eyed Kirk.

"I'm okay."

Spock offered a hand, which Kirk took. "I apologize, Captain. I should have McCoy check my hearing—"

"McCoy is right here," said the intercom. "What the hell is going on, Spock? Jim?"

"It's all right, Bones. Just a ... freak accident. Minor contusions. I'll be fine."

"Well, I'm busy right now, but you're reporting here in one point two hours or I'm relieving you of command. Not to mention your medical license, *Doctor* Kirk."

"Will do, Bones. Kirk out." He hit the button before McCoy could reply.

And then he realized that he was still holding onto Spock's hand. He started to let go.

Spock tightened his grip.

Kirk brought himself back to vertical and removed his hand from Spock's. Then he laid his freed hand on Spock's shoulder. "Rough first command."

Spock stiffened under Kirk's hand. "I performed unsatisfactorily."

Kirk squeezed Spock's arm and let go. "No, you didn't. You just went through your first real Kobayashi Maru test. The one where you don't get to see the crew get up and do it all again."

It was Spock who looked away.

Kirk resisted the temptation to touch him. "Nothing I can say will ease the pain, Spock," he said, as close to him as the situation permitted. "It never hurts any less, but the good ones learn from their mistakes."

"I do not know what mistakes I made."

The pained confusion in Spock's voice tugged at Kirk's heart. "That's what debriefings are for."

Spock nodded.

"It's a long time 'til eleven hundred."

"Fifteen hours, thirty-four minutes, forty-two seconds."

Kirk's hand went automatically to Spock's shoulder, curling and resting over it. "An eternity. Want to spar?"

Spock all but flinched, locking his hands behind his back. "I believe that that would not be wise, Captain."

"Okay, then how about you teach me some of those moves of yours?"

"'Moves', Captain?"

"You know, that Vulcan martial art stuff you were doing when I came in before you knocked me out."

Spock sighed, annoyance suffusing his blank expression.

Kirk stripped off his tunic and removed his boots. "Come on, Spock. It'll get your mind off tomorrow and give me a greater advantage in the field."

It was calculated and a low blow, but Spock's face relaxed after a couple of seconds. "I recommend that you stand one point five meters behind me."

"I think I can manage that." Kirk set himself in place.

"Your precision is excellent," said Spock, without turning to look.

"Thank you."

It was like Taijiquan, only the movements were infinitely slower and designed for Vulcan joints. This meant that after half an hour, Kirk was sweating profusely and fighting the urge to give up and report to Sickbay early. But he would continue with the session for as long as Spock permitted, because he was now required to keep his eyes on those fluid sinews, those graceful movements of biceps and deltoids, those electrifying contractions of latissimus dorsi, that glorious definition of spinal furrow that appeared whenever Spock drew his arm back.

"Forgive me, Captain."

Kirk looked up, caught. "What for?"

"I allowed this to go on too long for a beginner."

"I'm not exactly a beginner, Spock. When do we start working on the lower body?" Kirk's back swore at him.

"You are a most proficient exponent of nearly every form of combat, but this level of practice is not expected even of Vulcan students new to L'tan."

"In other words, I did well for a human."

"Yes."

Kirk smiled and clapped Spock on the shoulder. And then he became aware of muscles he hadn't known he possessed. "Ahh! Oh, god, McCoy's going to have a field day...."

"If you will permit me, Captain...." Spock moved his hand towards the back of Kirk's upper arm.

Kirk turned to accommodate the offer. "Oh! Ah.... Mm...hunh ... fff!"

Spock moved around and started on Kirk's back.

"Uh ... when do we get to do this again?"

"In three days, if our duties and schedules permit."

"Three days? What if I need it tomorrow?"

"Jim, even Earth culture recognizes the need both for adequate training before applying a new combat technique and adequate intervals between lessons."

Kirk grinned. *At least you loosened up enough to call me 'Jim'. Mission accomplished.* "Quite right, Mr. Spock. I stand corrected."

"Yes." Spock probed a tendon near Kirk's right elbow. "I'm afraid you will require one of Doctor McCoy's potions for this."

Kirk groaned.

"I regret having caused such a necessity."

"Huh? Oh, no, Spock, that was a happy noise. You should open up a massage parlor."

"I believe that is the first time that suggestion has been made." Spock cleared a knot and eased the tendon back into place.

Kirk smirked. "No doubt."

He grasped Spock's arms when they faced each other again, suddenly serious. "Look, Spock ... no matter how things go tomorrow, I'm really ... really glad we got you back."

It was a long time before Spock came out with a husky, "Thank you, Jim."

Kirk could say nothing more and ripped himself gently away.

\*

Nothing had prepared him for Spock's betrayal.

But when he thought about it, Kirk realized he should have been prepared. Spock was motivated by loyalty. He'd served with Chris Pike for eleven years, four months, five days. Kirk knew he'd never forget that statistic, now.

But all of that logic didn't change the hurt of it. And it didn't help that his jealousy polluted the thrill of what Spock's actions implied for the future. So as he rolled to his feet for the fifth time in three minutes, he felt the huge satisfaction of seeing Spock keep his reluctant promise to fight Kirk hard. Not that Spock ever let him win, exactly, but there were times when it was easier than it should have been.

Kirk fainted and went in under Spock's arm, catching him just under the center of gravity. This time, he didn't make his usual mistake of assuming that Spock's density was equal to his own.

The arc Spock made as he slipped, helpless, over Kirk's back satisfied Kirk even more than the satisfying thump of his landing.

His satisfaction bumped into a wall when Spock threw him there, and for whatever reason he'll never figure out, he was angry. Before he knew it, he was raining blows on Spock. He didn't stop until Spock was lying under him, pinned and panting and unresisting. Bleeding.

Kirk wished the blood was red. He gazed down at Spock, unclenching his fist as Spock's expression drained the fight out of him. He traced a trail of green from the corner of Spock's mouth. "Better get that seen to," he murmured, cupping Spock's face.

He bolted before Spock could reply.

\*

He got it out of his system on the next planet they discovered. Everyone called it The Shore Leave Planet. Not even the Caretaker gave it a name. For Kirk, it was a glorious medley of fighting and sex – a glut of release – so he expected everything to be back to normal when he boarded the *Enterprise* at the end of their stay.

It wasn't. He was more relaxed, but when he first saw Spock, his heart leapt in his chest and he knew that he was in trouble. Fortunately, nobody had to know that his lust-tinged smile as they broke orbit was largely due to the proximity of his First Officer.

He was grateful for the flurry of activity over the next few weeks, and for the fact that he had enough fighting to satisfy his inner wolf without having to seek it from those he knew. Though Spock had

accepted his apology after Talos IV, Kirk remained unsettled in a corner of his mind. Perhaps sparring as emotional release wasn't such a good idea, after all.

So he couldn't quite understand why the fights with Trelayne and the Gorn and Lazarus – all formidable opponents in their respective ways – had felt so tedious. Or why he always seemed to find himself in a Vulcan's personal space. Or why he hadn't found Yeoman Barrows as fetching as she clearly was. Or why, despite his hatred of confinement, he had been suspiciously fond of his time in the prison cell on Beta III. He booked a training session with Sam Ellis as soon as he returned to the ship, after that mission.

He'd expected tedium on Eminiar VII – the entire crew loathed diplomatic missions – but even the unusual step of desanitizing a war of half a millennium hadn't quite engaged him as it should.

And then came Khan. Fighting with Khan wasn't tedious. It was terrifying. The man wasn't as strong as Ruk had been, but he was infinitely more dangerous. It had been a battle of wit and will, as much as body, and Kirk had won only because he understood his time and people better than his enemy had. Much as he wanted to, as he applied McCoy's ointment to his bruises, Kirk couldn't dismiss Spock's somber question about the seed that he'd planted by marooning Khan on Ceti Alpha V.

He only just managed to resist bugging Spock for a game of chess.

He got drunk with McCoy to stave off reliving the suffocation of his Bridge crew – or the light in Spock's eyes at seeing him alive in the decompression chamber.

\*

"Spock, let me in. Please." He knew Spock could hear him. He also knew that Spock would probably not allow him to beg in public, as it would be bad for ship's morale. But right now, he wasn't too sure of anything. He'd never seen Spock so withdrawn.

The door slid open. Even its swoosh seemed subdued. Kirk poked his head in first, looking around.

Spock was standing in front of his desk. "Captain?"

Now that he was in, Kirk couldn't remember what business he'd thought he had invading Spock's privacy. He took his words from Spock, from weeks and at least a layer of friendship ago: "Are you all right?"

Spock's breath was measured. "I am functional."

Kirk's chest sank, inside, and he moved closer. "I'm sorry, Spock." Close enough to touch.

"There is no need for apologies." The words were soft and hollow in their pain.

Kirk reached, then, and rested his hand on Spock's arm. A shimmer went through him, and he felt Spock's breathing quicken. "Do you want to spar?"



"No!" The word was quiet and tinged with pain.

Before he could think, Kirk had his other hand on Spock's free arm and was stroking it, as if to calm him. The shimmer from earlier – light through a soul – pressed into him. "I've missed you ... the last few weeks."

"I have been here."

It was a reproach, Kirk knew. Or at least he felt it was, in his bones. "I know," he murmured, looking down through the core of the universe.

*"I don't belong anymore."*

It rippled through Kirk's body as a physical thing, and his hand was on Spock's face. "Yes, you do."

For just a moment, Spock's hand covered Kirk's. "Jim." It was quiet. Soft. A caress. So sad.

As the tears gathered, Kirk's hand was lifted away and held for a different moment. He inclined his head ever so slightly toward the bathroom door. "I'm right there, if you need me."

"I know."

The shimmer changed and made Kirk step back, even as Spock held his hand for that extra fraction of a second.

And then the connection was ended and Kirk was out in the corridor, removing a drop of moisture from his cheek.

\*

Everything was gray.

Even her silky hair and warm, almond eyes.

The world was dull and numb and ash.

So was he.

He chose not to remember his name, but she kept saying it over and over in his head.

He chose not to remember hers, but he kept repeating it, letting it flow through his head and mouth as it sent sparks of light into the gray.

Gray sparks that should have been gold.

He felt himself falling and wondered for that brief, eternal moment if this was what it felt like to die of grief.

If so, he thought, it didn't seem that bad. He'd feel lucky, if he could feel.

Cold, gray, dull stabs of pain.

Warmth.

A thread of silver and the sound of birds.

An invitation. "You could come with me for a rest. You would feel comfortable there."

"I loved her." It was his voice, he thought.

"No woman was ever loved as much, Jim."

*Because no woman was ever offered the universe for love.*

He realized that Spock had said it exactly as he thought it.

There was a touch – a hand on his shoulder. A caress. A reminder of another uncertain soul that was too important to forget.

"Spock...." It might have come out as 'Edith'.

He reached from the depths to cover that hand with his own.

He could feel.

It hurt when Spock was there.

It hurt more when Spock was gone.

\*

After the horror of Deneva, the last thing in the world Kirk wanted to do was to inflict more injury on someone who'd already endured so much pain and psychic intrusion. And yet, when Spock offered himself as sparring partner, Kirk couldn't make himself refuse. He realized when he landed his first blow and saw Spock's difficulty getting up that he should have noticed Spock's exercise shirt and pallor before they began. This time, when he reached to help Spock rise, he didn't accept Spock's flinch of refusal.

And then he found himself sprawled on his back on the floor, wondering for a second what had happened. "Nice throw, Spock. Want to switch to—" He was going to say 'wrestling', but Spock's expression changed his mind. "Chess?"

Spock met his gaze.

"I'm not on my game," said Kirk.

Spock raised a brow.

"Physically," Kirk added.

"I see," said Spock, drily.

Kirk offered his hand. "Truce?"

"That would be acceptable," said Spock, as he rose and pulled Kirk easily to his feet.

Kirk wasn't on his chess game, either. In move after move, as he saw his pieces taken down, he thought of Sam and Aurelan, of Peter's lucky escape. Each time a bishop fell, he was reminded of Spock's ordeal of pain and blindness, and of how brash and stupid he, Kirk, had been.

"Jim."

The quiet voice entered Kirk's consciousness.

"I am sorry."

Kirk looked up to see Spock's unguarded care. In his mind, he got up abruptly to leave, thanking Spock for the aborted matches of combat and strategy and making some excuse about how McCoy would threaten him with some of his worst pills if he didn't get a full night's sleep. "We fought the last time we saw each other," Jim found himself saying.

Spock's expression opened.

"I promised Aurelan I'd visit – teach Peter a few tricks of flying, even though Sam hated the idea."

"The inculcation of knowledge in one's progeny can be a contentious issue."

Spock's solemn tone lightened Kirk's mood, a little. "You speak from experience, I take it?"

"Yes."

Kirk smiled and shook his head. "We didn't argue about that. Not that last time, anyway. I kept on promising and canceling. Duty before privilege.... And then we literally bumped into each other on Starbase 12. We just had time for lunch before I had to go meet the *Enterprise* for the first time. He asked me why I hadn't come to visit at Christmas, like I said I would." He paused. "I forgot. Even before my Captain's commission came through, I'd forgotten my promise to visit them. He ripped me apart." He passed a hand over his eyes, dealing with fatigue and tears in one swipe.

And then Spock's hand was on his, grounding him.

He tried to pull away. "I'm sorry, Spock...."

"There is no shame in weeping for a brother's loss."

Kirk looked up, startled to see a haunted look disappearing from Spock's eyes. "You speak from experience?"

"It is ... a concept understood and shared in Vulcan consciousness."

"But never spoken of..."

"No." Spock squeezed Kirk's hand ever so slightly.

Kirk turned his hand palm up, stretching his fingers along Spock's wrist to relieve the cramp he hadn't known he had.

The fleeting lull in the cycle of engine noise and ship activity made Spock's sharper intake of breath audible.

Kirk smiled, ruefully, and squeezed Spock's hand between both his own. He bit down on words.

"You have suffered much loss, of late." Spock's voice was rough, tentative.

*"It's just part of the job"* came out as, "Yes."

Spock picked up Kirk's upper hand, enclosing it the way Kirk had his. He said nothing. The shimmer of contact was enough to tell Kirk that the invitation to Vulcan was open.

\*

The last thing Spock seemed to want from Kirk after the emotional reunion in Sickbay was contact.

Kirk could understand that physical combat was completely off the table. Nobody could have missed the distress in Spock's demeanor, or the relief in his voice and face when he found his Captain alive again. But after going over the logs and personal reports of all those even remotely connected with the events on Vulcan, Kirk all but ached for his friend – which did nothing to interfere with the warm glow blooming inside as he snooped.

So it was a bit disconcerting when Spock chose to minimize their contact outside of work. It wasn't until Matt Decker got killed by the planet eater – and Kirk nearly went the same way – that Spock invited him to another game of chess. It was noteworthy for two things: Spock pored over every move about twice as long as usual, and Kirk won. Handily.

And then there was Nomad. For some reason, Spock chose to hover after that. A visit to McCoy's office armed with a bottle of the doctor's favorite Bourbon and the need-to-know boilerplate revealed that

Nomad had fried certain parts of Spock's psychic mechanisms that Kirk couldn't remember when tired and tipsy, and that the *Enterprise's* First Officer was, therefore, a basket case.

But when Kirk sobered up, and accidentally bumped into Spock during a spar with Sam Ellis, it became clear that Spock was clinging, more than hovering, and that he was missing a core part of his ability to manage his emotion center. Kirk reworked the schedule that night and set Spock to research the upcoming mission to Halka.

Spock didn't quite buy that it required his undivided attention for two shift periods.

Kirk prevailed.

And then he was the one hovering after losing Hendorff, Kaplan, Mallory and Marple – and almost Spock, several times over – to Vaal. In one of his more self-pitying moments, he considered insisting that Starfleet do away with red uniforms, or at least that they be reassigned to Command-track personnel. He knew that he'd gone too far when McCoy spluttered and told him he was being an idiot.

Spock just folded his arms and glared.

\*

There were things that Kirk began to notice as the dust cleared from his detour through the looking glass.

When he looked at Uhura, he saw her lithe muscles moving under her dress, where the fabric shouldn't be.

When he looked at Sulu, he saw the ugly gash that wasn't there. Depending on his dreams the night before, he was either shivering inside at the memory of a ruthless man with a gluttony for cruelty, or profoundly grateful for the presence of *his* Sulu.

Chekov confounded him. He wondered if he should cultivate the man's aggression a bit more – teach him how to channel it into a career advantage. But there were red flags when he remembered the I.S.S. *Enterprise*, and he pushed the idea from his mind.

He noticed the great similarity and vast chasm between Spocks. Both reasoned. Both had no use for waste or power without purpose. Neither was effusive. Neither desired command – a fact that Kirk found interesting and confusing, especially in the mirrored universe.

However, when it became necessary to use force, his Spock found it distasteful while the other relished it. His Spock was gentle, deferential where the other was domineering. Although when Kirk thought about it, he hadn't thought Spock so gentle at first. The impassioned advice to kill Gary Mitchell still rang in his ears, though less harshly and with deeper knowledge of both men.

Even the physical differences were interesting. The beard was formidable, but it also drew attention to the eyes – probing, curious, guarded enough to be interesting. Kirk noticed that the emotions were in

some ways easier to read on the bearded Spock's face. He also noticed that the mental sparring with that Spock gave him a thrill that went straight to his groin. For the first time, he'd found his male, bearded First Officer infinitely more sexually tempting than the beautiful woman in scant clothing that he'd found in his counterpart's quarters.

And looking at him as he lay on the diagnostic bed, Kirk couldn't help but notice the soft, tempting thickness of Spock's lips. He wondered why – or even how – he'd never noticed them on his Spock.

His Spock.

It wasn't safe or wise to think that way about a fellow officer, especially one's First. And while Spock's mirror might have been completely uninterested in women, for all Kirk knew, his Spock had not seemed so indifferent to them.

But there was that look in Spock's eyes when the landing party materialized in their own transporter room – that overt sigh of relief as soon as he laid eyes on Kirk that said he *knew* that he was looking at *his* Kirk – that had Kirk turning over in bed to ease a growing, pleasant pressure that he couldn't rationalize or pretend away. And he wasn't sure whether to be pleased or disturbed by the fact that his erection seemed to be less interested in the exotic, bearded Spock than it was in the familiar, smooth-skinned Spock. *His* Spock. Though, perhaps, 'familiar' might not be quite right.

He groaned as his arousal flared and demanded attention. Sexual impulses were weird. Great, but weird.

\*

Sex was the last thing on his mind on Gamma Hydra IV. Sex wasn't on his mind for a long time afterwards, even after the last tinges of reaction to McCoy's noxious adrenalin potion wore off. His sole focus, once he'd offloaded Stocker, sent the report of Galway's death to her families and finished up all the reports on aging to the point of painful, humiliating death and the knowledge that it would all come again, was Spock.

He entered at the faint permission.

Spock lay on the bed. He looked awful.

Kirk put the tray down on the partition ledge. "I brought you some mint tea."

Spock struggled to raise himself up on an elbow.

"Here, let me...." Kirk sat on the bed with care and helped Spock to sit, placing the pillow and part of himself behind his friend before reaching for the tea. "It's all right. You can lean on me."

Spock took the tea in his bruised hands. "I take it Doctor McCoy sent you to ascertain my wellbeing." The words were slow and labored.

"Not quite. More like, he told me about your ... violent encounters with the Sickbay walls, doors, beds and monitors. He also mentioned your unexpected reaction to the drug." He worked himself more fully onto the bed and his right arm loosely around Spock.

"The worst of it is past," rasped Spock.

"I certainly hope so. Is your tea the right temperature?"

"It is perfect." Spock took a small sip, and his eyes widened in appreciation.

Some hard knot inside Kirk melted, a little. "I'll be sure to let my mother know you liked her mint."

"I am ... most grateful to both of you."

"And I owe you everything." Kirk swallowed the emotion down. "Including an apology for the calumny I heaped on you."

"'Calumny', Captain?"

"Insults. Slander. Lies. Character assassination—"

"I am aware of the meaning. I do not know that you committed the offense you mention."

"I called you traitorous, disloyal and a back-stabber. I accused you of wanting command, when—"

"Ah. Consider your apology accepted." Spock labored at another sip of his tea.

Kirk laughed quietly, giving Spock's shoulders a gentle squeeze. "Thank you, my friend."

Spock relaxed, letting out a breath of pain and relief as he sank awkwardly against Kirk. "Thank you, Jim."

Kirk gave a sigh of his own and settled back, taking his own mug of his mother's special mint tea.

\*\*\*\*\*

### *Present*

Kirk throws himself towards his opponent. He doesn't think of Spock holding a tribble and petting it tenderly. He doesn't think of the way Spock stepped in to help McCoy in the Roman Circus, or the way he risked his family and life for the ship and Kirk's career. He doesn't think of the way he almost lost Spock on Neural, or the way Spock greeted him on his return with such tender quiet or let him decompress without judgment. He doesn't think for the thousandth time of the decision he had to make about which of his two best friends to send to certain death, or how utterly vital Spock has become to him since the Galileo Seven disintegrated half a year ago.

But he notices when he is being held in a tight lock of arms, and he struggles to get out of it, because this is combat. This is—

"Jim."

This is—

"Jim, please...."

This is contact. "Spock!" His arms go around Spock's naked, sweating shoulders, hand hooking around the taut neck and catching the rapid-fire pulse. He presses his face there, shifting his grip to squash out all possible space between them. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Spock's arms shift and become tender, desperate, pulling him closer than he thought possible. "There is nothing to forgive." It is a kiss of sound against Kirk's ear.

It is less than a second before it turns into a passionate kiss of lips and tongues and thought, and everything changes.

Kirk will never remember the journey from the gym to Spock's quarters, but they are there and removing each other's remaining clothes, never letting the other go untouched even for a second.

And then they are naked and standing pressed together, holding each other as Kirk knows now that they've both longed to do. Kissing as Kirk knows he's never kissed before, and never will again with any other being. Opening their souls to one another, even as they shut out the rest of the universe, because this – *this* is all that will ever matter.

Kirk pulls back just enough to see Spock's beloved face, and notices those gorgeous, kiss-swollen lips on this Spock – *his* Spock. He passes a thumb over them, relishing the feel of Spock shivering against him.

And then he comes to his senses. "Spock! You're cold...."

"I will be all right if you will move, Jim." Spock moves against him, making his very impressive erection known to Kirk's.

"My apologies," Kirk says against Spock's lips. He adjusts himself against Spock, unsure how long he'll last. "What do you want to do?" He traces a line of kisses along Spock's jaw, pressing his hard-on more insistently against Spock's.

"I'd have thought that was obvious," purrs Spock in Kirk's left ear.

"Not so much." Kirk kisses Spock deeply, exploring the beautiful mouth as he gets harder by the second.

Spock breaks the kiss and looks at Kirk. "Jim."

"Did anyone ever tell you that your voice is pure sex?"

"No. Jim...."



"Well, it is." Kirk dives for Spock.

"Mmmm.... Ah, Jim!" Spock capitulates for a moment, reveling in Kirk's mouth and arms. He pulls off again. "Jim."

Kirk sighs, but quickly schools himself to patience when he sees Spock's worried look. "What?" he asks as gently as his balls will let him.

"If we do this, we may bond."

"Haven't we done that already?"

"Not in the way you are most likely to mean."

Kirk puts a hand on Spock's face. "Spock. T'hy'la. Am I not feeling something of that bond when I touch you?"

A tear rolls down Spock's cheek. "Yes. I am sorry."

Kirk thumbs it away. "I'm not. Unless you—"

Spock falls on him, devouring him in the deepest kiss as they stumble to the bed.

Kirk surges up as Spock bears him down against the mattress. It's odd being in this position, when he's nearly always the one doing the bearing down, but his arousal surges with him. "You got any lube?" he asks, before diving back onto Spock's mouth.

For answer, Spock thrusts a very slicked penis against him.

"Ah! God! No problem...."

"I – Ah! I take it you have—" Spock kisses Kirk's lower lip, "—all your—" and then the upper lip, "—vaccinations?" He hums against the bottom of Kirk's chin, just where it joins the throat.

"Of course," Kirk manages, writhing into position beneath Spock and moaning when Spock nibbles his earlobe. "Y-you?"

"Naturally."

"You mean that – ohh – literally, don't you?" Kirk licks his lips as Spock explores his left ear with a very hot tongue.

"Yes."

"Fan – ah – fantastic! Then I'm all yours, Mister Spo – SPOCK!"

Spock slips a slick finger inside him – how that happened, Kirk will just have to figure out later, but his imagination vastly increases his lust.

At three fingers, Kirk gasps and freezes, erection deflating a bit. "Slow down...."

Spock withdraws the third finger and holds still, moving only to stroke Kirk's face. "I am sorry."

"No." Kirk strokes Spock's cheek, in turn. "No, love. I'll be fine. This is normal, to need a little time to adjust."

Spock's fingers stroke the psychic points on Kirk's cheek.

Kirk stares into his eyes and experiences the first fear that night. And then he nods, just once.

Spock's fingers fall into place and take Kirk's breath away.

He is with Spock, but not invaded. He can sense Spock's pleasure – his love – but does not feel like an intruder. And he knows that if he relaxes, there will be no pain. So he does.

And there isn't.

He stretches and stretches as Spock slips inside him. He feels the burn and the ache and the pressure, but it is combined with the feeling of entering and being encased, and becomes pleasurable even without Spock's shared sensation. He reaches up to kiss Spock, and they are fully joined in body and kiss and mind.

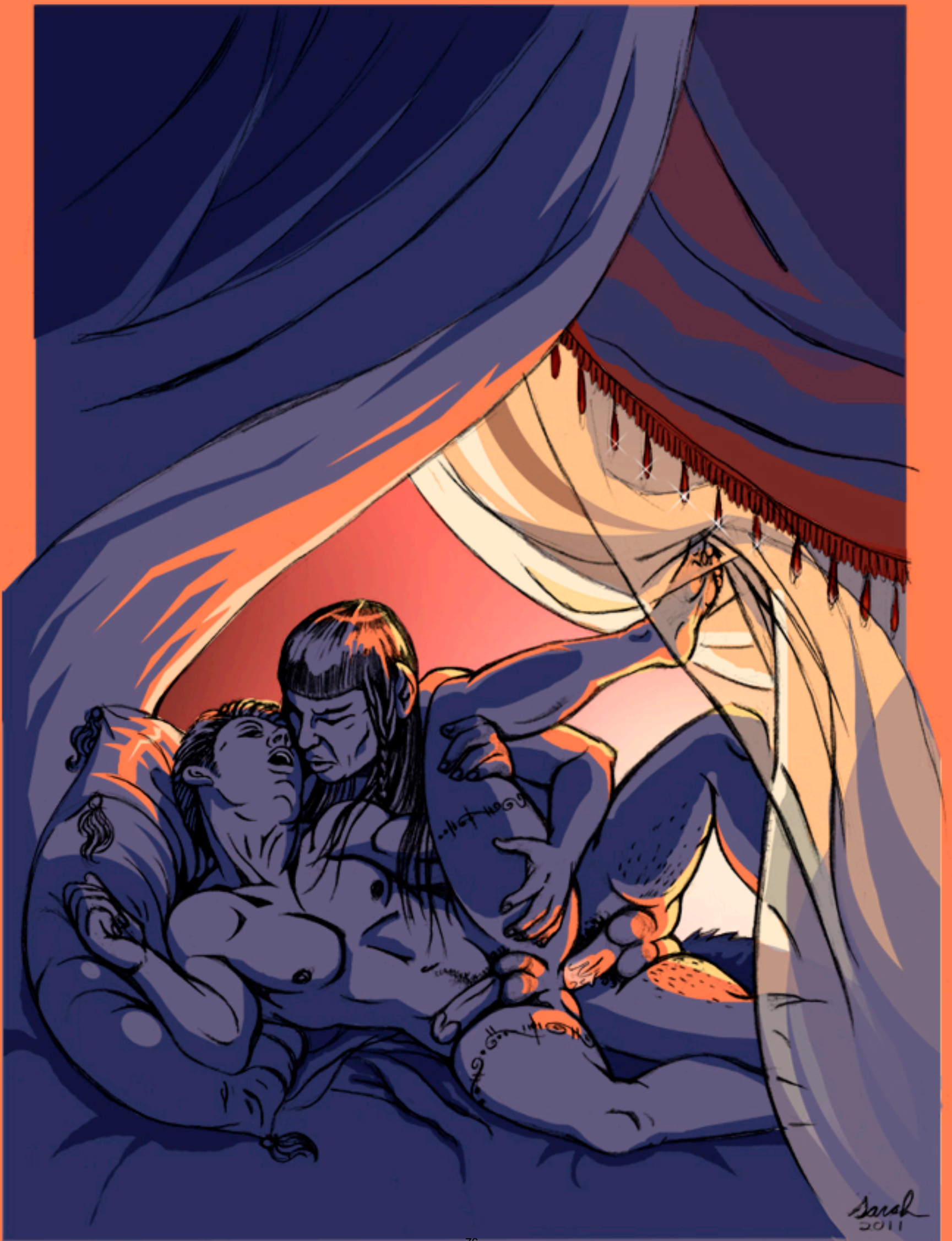
There is so much sensation – so much *feeling* – that he can't feel how close he is, or how long it takes, or which body part of which of them is having the most fun. All he knows is that he doesn't want it ever to end. But he does know when he's coming, and he feels impossibly aroused when Spock follows just a second later, and he can feel the hotter-than-human semen flowing inside him.

And he is very pleasantly surprised when he passes his hands over Spock's lower back and Spock has a second orgasm in response.

Much, much later, as he turns over after being awakened by a misstep in the corridor outside, he feels Spock's warm, naked weight shift against him and knows that he's in trouble. Big trouble. And he wouldn't trade this for the universe.







# Cumulative Evidence

Jaylee

The first time he dreamed of Spock and himself, tangled in a heady, romantic embrace, he passed it off as the result of extra shifts, the muddy water that the replicator dared to call coffee, his mind's rather romantic subconscious (much to the chagrin of his waking consciousness) and the lingering aftermath of that term paper he did on Sigmund Freud back in high school.

In other words, no big deal. Bound to happen. He and Spock had been practically in each other's pockets since their mission started six months prior. The job required it. For his mind to have sexualized their burgeoning friendship and the working relationship that was really starting to hit a steady, smooth groove wasn't itself all that shocking.

Hell, it was probably entirely normal. Bones would tell him the same thing, were he to talk to Bones about it. Which he wouldn't. Not even under threat of death (or forced ingestion of replicated mud-coffee).

The thing was, he was beginning to understand Spock, Spock was beginning to understand him, and despite their rather blatantly obvious differences in personality, their command styles complemented each other well. He and Spock had a natural...*rapport* between them. Call it combining ingenuity to pull off the impossible. Attribute it to cheating death together on the *Narada*. Whatever it was and wherever it came from, it was *there*, no questioning that.

And it wasn't as if Spock were hard on the eyes, exactly. If Jim were completely honest, he supposed Spock could be called attractive. If one were into men. Which of course he wasn't.

But yes, Spock had that whole 'repressed yet super strong, infinitely orderly, while harboring hidden wells of passion' thing going for him. Jim wasn't *blind* nor was he prone to acts of futile denial. Spock was what Carol would have called 'a catch'.

Tall, dark, educated, highly intelligent and exotic. A stimulating mixture. Always had been, always would be. Not even James 'Tomcat' Kirk could be immune, life-long member of the straight club or no.

But the second time his dreams featured himself and Spock tangled together, their bodies writhing, flushed with passion, skin shining with sweat, it became a bit more of an issue for him. And when Spock started to be the main feature in all of his fantasies, Jim figured the term 'issue' didn't even begin to cover it.

'Fool me once', Jim recited to himself, 'shame on you, fool me twice, thrice and so on, shame on me.'

Apparently he wasn't as straight as he had previously thought.

Sometimes, just sometimes, Jim wished that he *were* prone to acts of knee-jerk denial. Life would be so much easier.

So he dream-lusted after Spock. So what? Stranger things had happened.

He had no problem with bisexuality in general. In fact, he liked to think of himself as a pretty open guy. An explorer. An embracer of change. He wouldn't have signed up for the job he had if he weren't. Differences, whether existing out in the universe around him or within himself, were welcome, exciting. Bring any new knowledge *on*. Yes, poor attitudes and intolerance for same-sex oriented individuals had existed in the past but humanity, as a whole, had long since worked past all of that. Roughly the same time they realized that prejudicial intolerance could be the downfall of man.

In fact, it nearly *was*.

The Eugenics Wars had been an entirely ugly bit of Earth history - a time when bigotry, prejudice and irrational hatred had run rampant, and just look where *that* line of thinking had gotten mankind. Almost obliterated. Nearly destroyed by their attitudes and weapons of their own making.

Luckily those remaining, once the dust had settled, had been foresighted enough to modify their behavior. These days it was just not *on*, not on at all, to show any remnant of irrational and destructive ways of thinking.

Jim loved history, read historical texts for fun, even, and was a firm believer in the old adage that those who failed to learn from history were condemned to repeat it.

So no, Jim didn't object to the discovery that he was or could be attracted to men. That was absolutely okay in his book. In fact, he commended himself on his good taste in men. What he objected to was the surprise of it all. So what, twenty-five years of lusting after women and his hormones just now decide to spring this on him? Did he know himself at all? What the fuck, brain?

His first wet dream had starred his seventh grade science teacher, and he remembered it clearly. And she was hot, man. Hot.

He'd lost his virginity to a woman. Hell, he'd hacked his way past the Child Monitoring For Adult Content code his mother had installed on the Kirk family computer system at 14 and had been beating off to heterosexual porn ever since.

So seriously, what the fuck, brain?

And could his subconscious have picked a less attainable focus for his burgeoning bisexual awakening? Prim and proper Spock, who probably had never had an erotic dream or thought his entire life, let alone one about another male?

The Vulcan would probably laugh his ass off if his 'highly emotional and thoroughly illogical' captain solicited a date from him...if Spock even knew how to laugh, which was an ongoing subject of debate between Jim and Bones. The doctor was convinced the Vulcan couldn't crack a smile if his life depended on it, but Jim had a sneaky suspicion that Spock did have a sense of humor, only sly and subtle and not

easily spotted. You needed a sense of humor in their line of work, otherwise the pressures of the job would really do a number on you.

Anyway, the only person Jim had ever seen Spock interested in was Uhura, and even if his first officer and communications officer were no longer an item romantically, having parted amicably before the mission began, Spock's preferences were rather clear.

Of course, if it was usual to guess people's sexual preferences based on their previous romantic entanglements, then everyone probably thought the same of *him*...

But that was neither here nor there. Because Spock was not, *absolutely* not, going to find out about Jim's attraction to him. He had worked too hard and for too long to get where he was today: Captain of the flagship *Enterprise*, exploring the stars he loved.

He had the best ship in the fleet, the best crew in the fleet, and the best First Officer in the fleet. Contrary to what his short list of ex-lovers thought they knew, Jim's priorities were very clear in his mind. He wouldn't do anything to screw up his captaincy. Too many people were already expecting him to fail, and being the youngest person ever to make Captain, and certainly the only one promoted from Cadet to Captain in Starfleet history, came with enough problems as it was. He wasn't about to add sex into the mix, at least not amongst those he worked with.

So maybe he wasn't prone to self-denial naturally, but he was sure as hell certain he could learn it with time.

\*

Many things about Spock were absolutely infuriating, Jim thought a month later, while trying not to make it look obvious that his gaze kept wandering over to a certain Vulcan from his position center-stage on the bridge.

Of course, there were many things that were admirable about him, too. A lot of things. More things than Jim ever thought he would find back in the early days when he was convinced that Spock was the single most uptight individual he had ever met, or ever would meet, in his life.

He almost wished he could go back to that line of thinking, instead of his timely realization that, all things considered, Spock was actually quite awesome. Unfortunately.

But the thing that annoyed Jim the most about Spock was how *noticeable* the guy was all of the time. Really, would it kill Spock to be less noteworthy? Just a tad? Turn down that...*umph* he had, just a bit?

Because here Jim was, innocently trying to repress the hell out of those god-damned dreams, and then Spock would go and bend over the science console on the bridge, in the middle of a shift, which, in the spirit of honesty, highlighted how delectable the Vulcan's ass really was.

And the worst of Spock's sins by far (as if having the starring role in his dreams wasn't *enough* nor the utter gall he had of being attractive to begin with) was that this bending over of his and Jim's subsequent staring made Jim feel warm. In fact, he was certain his cheeks turned bright red whenever he caught a glimpse of Vulcan buttocks.

Good Lord almighty he was giving off *tells*.

That Spock was science officer and thus required to do such bending (thank you Starfleet architects for designing a console which absolutely necessitated the bending and gave Captains like himself such pretty things to look at; how very ergonomic of you) was neither here nor there. No. The issue with this frequent turn of events was that Jim fucking *noticed*. Each and every time. He couldn't *stop* noticing. It was like Spock's ass was one big ol' magnet and Jim's gaze contained metal. Or something.

But, all over-the-top similes aside, the whole noticing Spock's ass thing was really quite distressing.

Now, Spock might be THE Mr. Science Guy on board the *Enterprise* but Jim himself wasn't a slouch when it came to garnering ideas based on cumulative evidence. He could put two and two together. Which led him to some rather distressing conclusions: his attraction to Spock was not confined to dreams. Denial was not working as well as it should, thank you god-damned fucking Freud (who'd also made the subject of denial his life's work). The attraction he felt towards Spock only seemed to grow with time and exposure. And his physiological responses were no longer operating under the impression that he preferred only women.

His attraction was happening, he'd tried to ignore it, that didn't work, so, fine... he was capable of being attracted to men.... Or maybe it was just Spock? Perhaps Spock was the only guy who could manage to do it for him. It could be that there was something about Spock that transcended sexual preference. Not so hard to believe, really; Spock was a one of a kind type of guy. Both literally and figuratively.

Jim wasn't quite sure if that would make his situation better or worse, but well, it was better to find out at the earliest opportunity; patience wasn't a particularly strong virtue of his. Which meant shore leave, because, confused over his sexual identity or not, he was not about to solicit any member of his crew in the pursuit of better understanding himself. No way, no how. Captaincy and ship *hella* first. Sexual awakening second.

Luckily he didn't have to wait long, as he had a brief visit to a mining colony scheduled for the following Tuesday.

Since he'd never gone trawling for a man before, he wasn't exactly sure how to go about it. Surely the ritual couldn't be too dissimilar? So, deciding to wing it, he went about his pre-shore leave procedure the same way he did when he wanted to pick up some fleeting company of the female variety: he put on his favorite blue shirt, found a bar (ditching Bones so the doctor wouldn't cotton on to what he was doing nor the reasoning behind it), ordered an ale, and smiled a lot. Only this time, instead of smiling at the women who passed by, he smiled at the men.

Surprisingly, it didn't take long for a fellow human male (as far as it was possible to judge by appearances), to take the bait and sit slowly, deliberately, next to him.



"How about I buy your next drink?" the dark-haired, dark-eyed man offered, his voice rich and smooth as molasses.

"How about I let you?" Jim replied, hoping against hope that his nervousness, his sweaty palms, and the fact that his heart was racing impossibly fast didn't give him away as a first-time charter.

If he were *really* bisexual, would he be this nervous?

But then he remembered his first time with a girl, how his hands shook, and how he'd wished fervently that he wouldn't explode too soon and become an adolescent cliché like his high school pal who'd become known to one and all, and through all eternity, as "Ernie-cum-too-soon".

Apparently age didn't cool the impact of first-time jitters. Good to know. It was just one of those annoying facts of life like getting an itch on the nose during an important interview or having to pass gas in a full but dead silent auditorium...meant to be endured and go down in history as mortifying. There was nothing to do but grin, bear it, tighten your butt cheeks, ignore the nose, hold on to the hope that this too will get easier with time.

Or would it?

The man leaned forward into Jim's personal space and his already rapid pulse increased exponentially. And Jim couldn't help it, did it entirely subconsciously, but he began to lean away from the man, attempting to gain his personal space back. Which, under normal circumstances, would answer his question. He didn't want this, his body didn't want this and it was acting of its own accord... except an image of Spock flashed before his mind and he became a little light-headed.

His would-be companion gave a disappointed frown, and then shook his head, stating, "You are taken."

"No," Jim responded, instantly and fervently. "I'm not."

"Ah, but you are. I'm Betazoid, my friend. I can see your thoughts. They speak of another you would much rather were sitting next to you now."

Betazoid. That certainly explained the man's insight. Figured. Of all the people he'd attempted to experiment with, he ended up with a telepath. Ironical, really. Or a stroke of luck. If Jim didn't know his own mind, maybe this guy could read his mind and decipher it for him? Perhaps finding a Betazoid was the equivalent of finding a Rosetta Stone for the sexually confused.

"Inconsequential, I can't have him. And I need to know... I need to know if he is an exception."

"Does it matter?" the Betazoid asked gently, staring at Jim with amusement shining through his eyes. "You want who you want, yes? Why do you concern yourself with the how and the why of your desire for this person? You have to define it to ... what? To condone it within yourself? Do you think that knowing you can be attracted to men as well as women will somehow invalidate your attraction to this... Spock?"

Jim sighed. God-damned telepaths. They weren't Rosetta Stones, translating the indecipherable into something readily understood, they were god-damned Confucius wannabes. 'Betazoid say man who ponders over love too much winds up with none at all.'

"Not invalidate it, no," Jim corrected, "but perhaps make it less...important to my peace of mind."

At that the man laughed, loud, clear and impetuous.

"Good luck, my fine friend," the Betazoid said, getting up, probably to find someone more likely to put out. Jerk. "You'll need it."

Jim wasn't quite sure how to take all of that, other than to be thoroughly annoyed.

Data inconclusive. The evening had been a total wash.

\*

"The concept of destiny is utter bullshit, don't you think?" Jim asked Bones as he casually sat down to join him for breakfast next day.

The doctor sighed. Then rolled his eyes, finishing a mouthful of porridge with exaggerated gusto.

"For fuck's sake Jim, how many times have I told you that it's rude to start philosophical discussions before oh-nine hundred? Especially when this tin can of yours fails to provide any decent source of caffeine?"

Jim waited a beat, took a sip of his mud-coffee...

Finally the doctor actually responded through his grumbling, "Too right it's bullshit. Too many people use it to explain their own selfish damn choices. My ex-wife did it."

Bones's voice then adopted an exaggerated falsetto in imitation of the much-hated ex, and Jim had to squelch the urge to laugh outright. "'Oh, Treadway's my destiny, Leonard, surely you can understand?' In my estimation a man makes his own destiny. Why bring it up, kid?"

Suddenly the contents of his mug were utterly fascinating and required his rapt attention as he struggled to hide a grin. If Mister Betazoid-Buddha of night yonder was right and the nature of attraction wasn't as important as the existence of the attraction itself, there were other bits about this whole 'gotta have Spock' thing Jim took exception to and, unlike infuriating telepathic philosophers, Bones was man enough to call a spade a spade. A conversation with him was just what the doctor ordered, pun intended. It would be all clear. Precise. As a conversation between rational people should go.

Dear, blunt, honest, free-will-loving Bones, just the person to assist Jim to clear his head, help him put all of these mad thoughts behind him. Attraction was one thing, lots of people felt a lot of attraction daily, but not all attraction could or should be followed through to a sexy conclusion. There were other points besides attraction to be considered. Common sense, for one.

"Oh, no reason. I got to thinking about parallel universes and how destructive it is to try to compare them. Like if you're told something is going to happen, and it doesn't, and you end up feeling a very real disappointment, or if something not to your liking happens and you spend time wondering how it was or could have been somewhere else, none of which is very productive, in my opinion."

Mention of parallel universe Spock specifically wasn't voiced out loud, but definitely implied, since Jim had told Bones about the older Vulcan months ago and he knew that the doctor would get what he was really trying to ask.

*Okay Bones, that's your bait. Go, Bones, go.*

"Translation from Kirk-speak into Standard: I have just realized my attraction to my First Officer. This has led to a grade A Kirk freak-out, because Jim Kirk can't do anything, even freak out, halfway."

Jim opened his mouth to speak but Bones was just getting going and steamrolled right over him.

"Instead of manning up to said attraction, like a sane person, you've decided to disparage every variable, even old Spock's insight into you and Spock being lifetime bosom buddies in his reality. Obviously you've wondered if that somehow translates into them really being lovers, thus you've found a possible, albeit far-out explanation, like 'destiny' of all things, for your attraction to our Spock in this one. And now you're using me to validate, or rather invalidate, this certifiable train of thought. How close am I?"

Right, so not exactly the response Jim was looking for. Clearly Bones was part Betazoid. How the fuck did he know...

"How did you know about the attraction thing? What, am I giving off 'I want Spock' vibes?! The hell, man?!"

At this Bones sighed, apparently giving up all hope of getting to eat his breakfast while it was hot. Jim would feel guilty, but he was on the verge of an existential crisis here, thus his guilt was rather minimal.

"Jim, give me some credit here. I know you, kid. I watched you strut around Ruth at the academy and I watched as you strutted around Janice, then Carol. And now I'm watching as you strut around Spock. You see, Jim, you've got this mating dance you do. With anyone else you meet for the first time, someone who doesn't matter, you pull out the 'I'm so charming, I can succeed in life by my charisma alone' card. With people you're actually interested in wooing, you call on that big brain of yours, discuss abstract theories and/or Plato, quote Shakespeare and/or the Beatles, and try to wow them that way, all but daring them to take on the challenge that is managing you. And I gotta say, as a spectator, it never does get old."

"So thrilled to be so entertaining," Jim announced through clenched teeth, uncertain if he was more annoyed or frightened by Bones's revelations. Did he really do that? Was he honestly so obvious? More importantly, did the rest of the crew know... did Spock?

"Relax, Jimbo, it's only obvious to those of us who really know you," Bones announced, a smirk dancing across his face.

Well, that was a relief, kind of, but it still didn't solve the initial issue.

"So destiny..."

"...is a vague blanket term people use to explain why things happen instead of embracing self-accountability. Obviously we both know this," the doctor replied before he took a sip of his own mud-coffee and grimaced appropriately. And just when Jim was starting to relax, thinking the conversation was finally going the way he had intended it to go, Bones opened his mouth to say more. "However..."

'However', Jim decided, really was the worst word in Standard.

"There is such a thing as a type..." the doctor finished, and grinned evilly. "Did it not occur to you that the other Jim fell for his Spock for the same reason you're falling for yours? Perhaps all Spocks of the space-time continuum simply just do it for ya. There have been interesting studies with identical twins, separated at birth, experiencing completely different childhoods, but following similar career patterns and finding similar types of people for partners."

"Sure, because, clearly, Ruth, Carol, Janice, and Spock share oh so much in common. I have a type, all right, yes sir... Come on, Bones, they're not even the same gender, let alone species!"

"Has it not occurred to you that they were all scientists? Ruth, Carol, Janice and now Spock - all different as night and day, personality-wise and yes, in gender, yet all members of the scientific profession, meaning their minds are naturally geared towards exploration, towards discovery, just like yours? AND they were all of above average intelligence. In fact, they would all qualify for membership to Mensa, just like you. Anything less would bore you, I think. And there is one more commonality between them... none of them were particularly impressed by you during the first meeting. You always have liked a challenge."

True, that. Jim couldn't help but smile when he thought of how hard he had to work to get each of them even to give him the time of day. So apparently he was a masochist, who knew?

But Bones wasn't done yet. But then again, he seldom was done, not when he considered himself on a roll.

"What really bothers you here, Jim? That Spock is male? Yeah, I'll admit that's new for you. But is it just that, or is it that he gets under your skin, makes you crazy in a way not even Ruth or Carol or Janice ever managed? You don't feel in control in your dealings with Spock, you don't feel in control of your attraction to him, and that, my friend, is driving you nuts. You don't WANT to be attracted to him, you don't like how he affects you, puts dents in that nonchalant armor of yours, and how much power that effect gives him in any situation. So you're repelled."

Which made no sense at all, and Jim was about to refute every word of it, except that Bones resumed speaking before he had the chance to open his mouth.

"He meets you head on, he's equally tactically minded, he shows just as much courage as he follows you into your harebrained schemes, and neither one of you know how to take fucking 'that's impossible' for an answer. Ruth, Carol, and Janice didn't work out because they didn't mesh with your career goals,

goals that would ultimately take you away from them and into the black for long stretches of time. With Spock that's not an issue, as your career goals are pretty much one and the same."

Again Jim opened his mouth to get a word in edgewise; again Bones beat him to it.

"He wants what you want, to discover new life and new civilizations. Thus he provides the first real hurdle for you to overcome emotionally... it could actually be something, something important. Oh my god, what a concept for you!"

Well then. That was hurtful. Was the sarcasm really necessary? Jim wanted to tell Bones to knock it off, that it wasn't like Jim was a relationship-phobe or anything. He liked relationships just fine, thus Ruth, Carol and Janice....he just had problems with the maintenance part of it. So not the same thing.

However, the doctor seemed determined to not let him defend himself. At all. He just kept talking.

"A relationship that doesn't have the convenience of being secondary to your desire to embrace a nomadic lifestyle. You won't have to leave him behind as you fly from port to port. You and he could very well end up exploring the stars together until your dying day. Really, Jim, for all that the hobgoblin has exactly two facial expressions, 'eyebrow raised' and 'that doesn't even merit a raised eyebrow', the two of you are cut from the same fucking cloth and subconsciously, you realize it."

The doctor paused, giving Jim only a brief moment to digest this, before adding...

"Besides Jim, if it helps, I think Spock is equally smitten with you. When he looks at you, his eyebrow is always raised."

It took Jim a minute for that last bit to catch up with him, his mind still churning over the doctor's stunning insights - and although he'd never admit it in a million years, Bones's words made his heart feel tight, like it had just been squeezed - but when it did he snorted and shook his head.

"Asshole," he stated, voice laden with affection. "You're not helping at all."

Bones just grinned.

\*

So he'd tried dealing with the whole attraction thing by not dealing with it, he really had. And when that had failed to work for him he'd tried to seduce infuriatingly insightful telepaths, and had even gone as far as consulting Bones for a light-natured heart-to-heart which, as he should have predicted, turned out to be anything but... Were these not the actions of someone at the end of their tether? How much more desperate could he get?

And still this thing just couldn't be beat. His attraction to Spock had a lot in common with fine wine; it only got richer and more potent with age.

Jim was tired.

He didn't believe in giving up, this was as true today as it ever was, but sometimes the battles just didn't seem worth it. Pick and choose your battles, pick and choose, didn't every wise person ever say that? Apparently repression wasn't his particular forte. He could embrace that... eventually.

The proximity to Spock thing, though? That was painful.

Here he was, sitting across from Spock, pretending to be engrossed in their bi-weekly chess game, all the while preoccupied with the fact that Spock's hair was shiny and Jim really wanted to touch it. Like 'five-year-old on a field trip to a museum in front of an awesome dinosaur fossil' touch it.

Bones was right about one thing, Spock was driving him nuts.

It was a test of strength, that was it. The universe, for whatever reason, was trying to teach him restraint...

"Jim," Spock called, in that breathy voice of his, and if voices were tangible, Jim would want to touch that, too. It had taken him months to get Spock comfortable with using his given name, and now that he was, it gave Jim chills every fucking time he used it. "You appear to be distracted. Is there anything you would like to discuss?"

Oh boy, was there. And the obvious concern Spock was showing for his well-being certainly wasn't helping Jim's underlying want.

So he'd tried dealing, letting time wash it out of his system, and that hadn't worked. He'd tried being gay elsewhere and was utter crap at it. He'd even tried goading Bones's blunt tongue. The only thing left, the only means available to him, was honesty. Tell Spock of his attraction so that Spock himself would keep Jim in check by politely, yet bluntly, informing Jim that his attraction was neither reciprocated or appreciated. Things would be awkward for a while, sure, but well, necessary evils and all that rot. Jim had already established that he was a bit of a masochist, why not be true to form?

And all of this had the added benefit of giving him a bit of that much vaunted control back. His fate was entirely in his own hands. He was choosing this fate, picking the time and the place and the words. Destiny was in his hands.

Although he sort of felt like he was jumping off a drill platform again, Jim bolstered his courage and opened his mouth before he could change his mind.

"Yeah, Spock, there is something I'd like to discuss. You see, I'm attracted to you. In fact, I want you, here and now on this very table. Or against the wall. Or hey, we can go for tradition and try it on a bed. But it's not just about the sex, although I'd never turn that down. Ever, just to be clear. But I'd also like to pick your brain."

Jim felt the words rushing out of his mouth and didn't bother to try and stop and censor himself. It felt like if he couldn't get it all out, every single detail, just then, he never would. And he had to be clear. Felt the urge to be completely understood. Spock had to know the extent of this, had to know just how crazy all of this had made him.

Thus, he couldn't stop and he couldn't let Spock interrupt him. This urgency lit a fire under every instinct he possessed.

"On every subject, too. I want to hear your thoughts on transwarp beaming, pre-Surak literature vs. the works of Hemingway, and Tellarite cuisine - which I found surprisingly palatable, just not the canine dishes, I could never bring myself to eat Rover - to name a few."

Which yes, sounded lame to his own ears, but it was how he felt, damn it, at least an approximation of it, so he stood the fuck by it.

"Not just on the bridge and twice a week during chess. Way more often than that, like whenever our schedules would allow, and maybe even more than that. To be entirely honest, I think I may be in love with you."

*'Don't think Jim. Don't stop. Just go, go, go.'*

"But I want you to know that I'm doing my very best not to let it affect our working relationship. I don't expect you to reciprocate or do anything at all, really. I'm trying to work through this, trust me, I am. And though I know things are bound to be weird between us for a while following this revelation, I really hope we can both hang in there and find our normalcy again."

Whew, he'd said it. Yet contrary to popular misconceptions about truth setting people free, he didn't feel better for it. No weight had been lifted from his shoulders. If anything he felt dizzy. And nauseous. Really, really nauseous. In fact, he was probably going to faint. And, Lord, if his heart beat any faster it would drum itself right out of his chest.

And he couldn't look up and meet Spock's gaze if he tried.

He really needed this masochistic thing checked out. He'd even willingly go see someone about it. Bones had a psych degree, one of many, maybe he'd do the honors...

Then a set of fingers gently touched underneath his chin and lifted it up. It was a testament to how emotionally distraught Jim was that he hadn't even noticed Spock move from his chair and kneel down beside him. The fact that he had made Jim's insides melt, just a little.

"Jim," Spock said again, his brown eyes soft. "I do not wish you to work through your attraction; I would rather you allow it to remain. In fact, I think it pertinent to inform you that your attraction is, in fact, reciprocated. I am honored by your declaration and awed by your courage. I have been searching for the same courage within myself, wanting to express similar sentiments to you, but had not yet found it..."

"You would have, Spock, I know you would have," Jim announced, truly feeling the smile that was currently splitting his face. He was still dizzy and his heart still beat faster than was probably healthy, but the difference between sick with nerves and sick with love was startling. For the first time in a long time his mind was clear, no confusion nor over-analyzing present, thank you kindly. The cloud of doubt and denial was lifted and his body, he couldn't help but notice, was leaning naturally into Spock's personal space, wanting to feel Spock's heat, wanting to feel Spock's everything. He felt free in that desire.

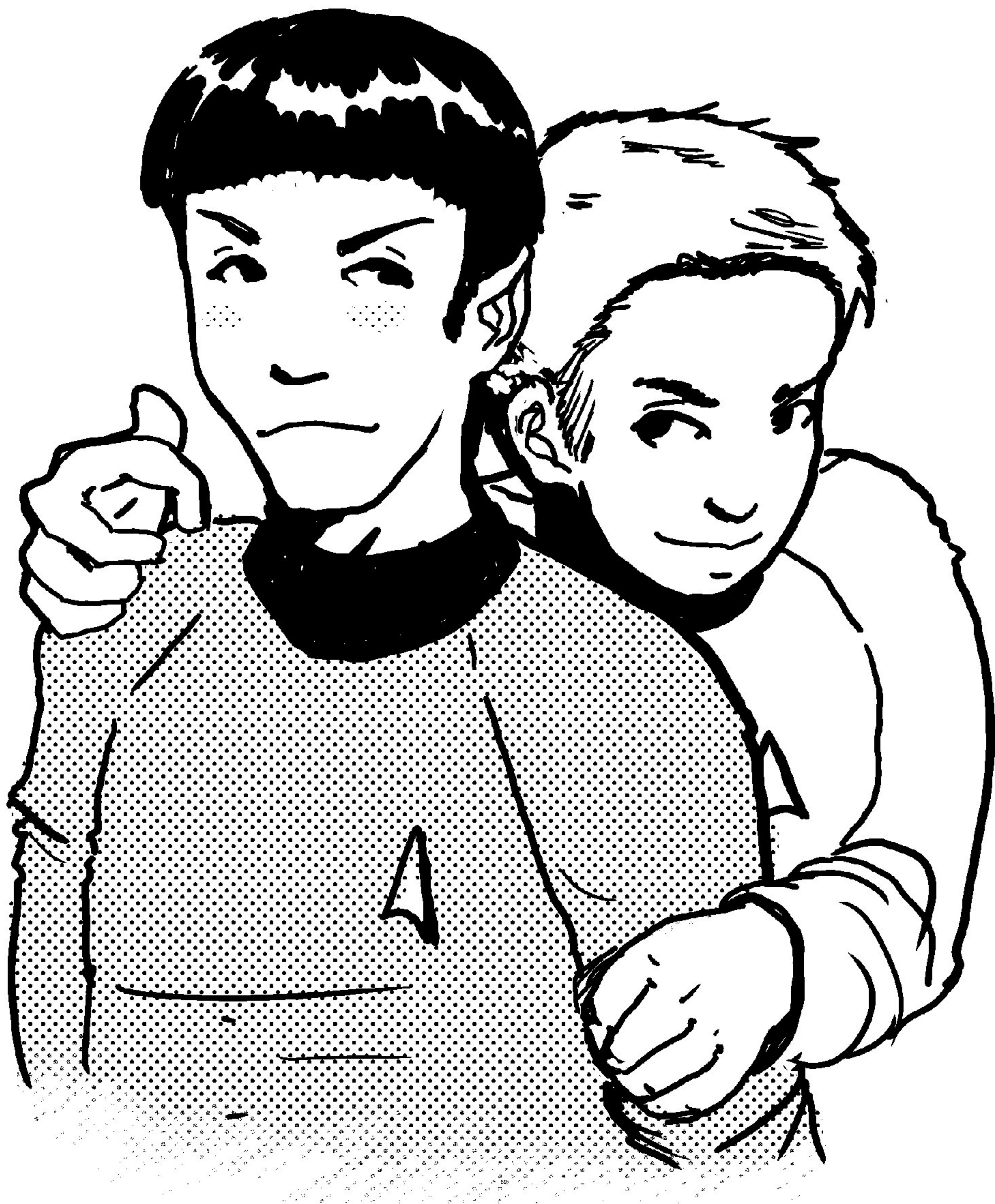
It was glorious.

“How can you be so certain?” his First Officer asked, eyebrow raised and the corners of his mouth twitching in the Vulcan approximation of a grin.

“Because you and I? We’re cut from the same cloth.”

And before Spock had time to ponder the utter illogic of that statement, Jim leaned forward and stole their first kiss.





# In Sickness and in Health

spirktrekker42

Jim and Spock had been given an all-expense paid trip to Risa, courtesy of Spock's grandmother, T'Pol. They had saved up their leave time and were finally using it for a vacation to celebrate their tenth anniversary.

The bonded pair had slept late that morning, as they were quite tired from the activities of the night before. Spock awoke early, having the urge to give Jim his anniversary present right then and there.

"Hey, sweetheart, what's goin' on?" Jim asked, his voice thick with sleep.

"I wish to share my gift to you, Jim. I cannot wait any longer."

"Then let's not wait." Kirk's grin practically blinded his mate. "What is it?"

"I wish to show you one of my most cherished memories," Spock said quietly. "It is one where you chose to stay by my side as a child." He turned over to caress his mate's cheek, inhaling his familiar, musky scent. "My selfless t'hy'la."

"Me, selfless? This I have got to see," Jim teased, allowing Spock's fingers to take their usual position along the side of his face. He loved it when Spock showed him memories, and this morning was no exception. "Ready whenever you are."

\*

Twelve-year old Spock was sick, really sick, with a version of the Vulcan flu.

"Hi, Jim, thank you so much for coming on such short notice," Spock heard his mother say from the next room.

"How is he?" Jim asked immediately.

"He's... been better," was Amanda's reluctant answer. "I had better prepare you for what you are going to find."

"There is no need for that, Mother. Not while I can simply demonstrate," Spock spat, entering the room. He began to pace the length of the ornate living room. "I thought I asked you not to invite him."

"You don't want me here?" Jim blinked, confused by Spock's reaction. They were best friends, for God's sake. Surely his Vulcan friend wasn't worried about propriety or keeping up appearances. He wasn't some foreign dignitary of Sarek's, after all. "Spock, I don't care if you're sick. I wanted to come visit you because you're my friend."

"If you were my friend, you would stay away." The Vulcan stopped pacing when he came to the couch, took a seat, and began to rock back and forth. Jim thought that the pendulum-like action reminded him of the old grandfather clock that resided in his own living room.

"Why is he doing that?"

"It's one of the symptoms," Amanda sighed. "Jim, his flu isn't like the flu you are used to. The Vulcan flu is an illness of the mind."

"Okay," said Jim, shrugging. "Anything else I should know?"

"His concentration is not good. For example, he won't be able to play chess with you today."

"Why not just tell him that I cannot read while you are at it," Spock snapped, growling softly as he looked away from them both. Amanda gave Jim an apologetic look.

"Er, anything else, Mrs. Spock?"

Amanda hid a smile. "How many times have I asked you to call me Amanda?"

"Lots, Mrs. Spock," Jim said with a grin. Then his expression turned serious. "Is there anything else I should know about?"

Amanda glanced back at her son. "He has been prone to fits of aggression. He's never directed them at me, just at some of our valuables."

"We have far too many valuables, Mother. Surely if I destroyed a few they would not be missed."

"Spock, honey, I know you're not feeling well, but must you stay in such a bad mood?"

"This is me in a good mood," said Spock. "Come, Jim. I suppose if you are here, I must entertain you."

Jim wordlessly followed his friend back to his bedroom.

"In my present state, there is not much I can do for you in terms of entertainment," Spock said as he took a seat on his bed. Jim sat at his friend's desk and faced him, hoping that he would somehow be able to connect with his friend. "I tire easily, and require nourishment more than usual. As you just saw, I am quite irritable, and frankly I do not understand why you would wish to remain in my presence."

"Look, I don't care if your mind is sick." Jim crossed his arms over his chest. "Is that why you're being so snotty? Because you're afraid I wouldn't be your friend anymore?"

"I do not know what you mean," was the Vulcan's flippant response.

"Oh, I think you do." Jim stood up, and advanced towards his friend. "I've called you on your B.S. before, and I'll do it again. So let me ask you - are you afraid I won't be your friend because of this mind-sickness?"

"Yes," Spock whispered. "I cannot control my body any longer. Humans might enjoy being waited on when they are sick with the Terran flu, but our flu is very shameful for a Vulcan."

"Only if you let it be," Jim challenged. "For the last time, Spock, I don't give a rat's ass that you can't think right. You're still you inside; you're still my friend who saved me from those guys at school who were screwing around with me about my father's death. Do you remember that? Do you remember how you promised me that you would always look out for me now that we are friends?"

"I have an eidetic memory," the Vulcan mumbled. "Of course I remember."

"Yeah, well, that is the exact same way I feel about you, and if you don't like it, tough." Jim glared at him, his gaze so fierce that Spock had to look away.

"I am aware that you have tickets to see your favorite musical group, Blind Cheetah, in concert tonight," the Vulcan reminded him. "I would not want you to miss this experience on my account."

"Spock, if you truly don't want me here, I'll go," Jim said patiently. "But I want to stay. I can always see the band another time. C'mon, we could have so much fun together!"

"I cannot believe that you would simply give up this musical experience. You have been talking about it for months now."

"Well, my best friend wasn't sick then," Jim said dismissively. "I won't deny that I'm a little disappointed, but it doesn't matter. This is what friends do. Friends don't leave their sick friends alone. Not when I know that having me around will help you feel better." Knowing it was a Vulcan taboo and not caring, he reached for Spock's hand. "Please, Spock. Let me stay. Let me help you feel better."

"I cannot believe you are here of your own volition," Spock said, his voice broken. "Perhaps my mother bribed you."

Jim sighed. What was it going to take to get through to this stubborn friend of his?

"I learned something interesting in school the other day about geese," Jim began, seemingly changing the subject.

"And what is that?" was Spock's frosty response.

"You know how Terran geese fly in a V formation, right? Well, if one of the geese gets sick or injured and has to drop out of the formation, two other healthy geese will follow him or her to the ground. They will stay with the sick goose until it gets better, and then together, all three of them will eventually catch up and rejoin the flock."

Spock blinked at him. "I fail to understand the purpose of that story."

Jim almost banged his head on Spock's bed, but stopped himself, remembering that he must have patience with his friend. "Don't you get it? I'm your goose, Spock. I dropped everything to be with you when you're sick."

"What happens if the sick goose dies?"

"Argh!" Jim threw up his hands. "Now you are just feeling sorry for yourself."

"My mind is not functioning properly, how would you feel?" Spock roared, leaping up to meet his stubborn human friend.

"I'm sorry you've got the flu, but I don't deserve to be treated like this. I guess you're right, you'd probably be better off alone." Jim inwardly grinned... he knew that would do the trick. He turned to go.

"No, wait, do not leave!" Spock looked as panicked as Jim had ever seen him. "I love my mother, but her company can be overbearing at times. I would much rather have yours."

"You sure you're not going to yell at me anymore?"

"I cannot make any promises, but I will try my best not to yell," Spock said.

"Good." Jim grinned at him. "You just need to take your mind off feeling sick. I can help you there. Wanna hear about how I borrowed my dad's red convertible and took it for a test-drive while my stepdad was at work?"

"Not particularly, but it does not seem like I have a choice." Spock feigned exasperation.

Jim pretended like he hadn't heard Spock's last comment. "So this time I nearly made it up to one hundred miles per hour..."

\*

Spock sharply pulled his t'hy'la out of the meld.

"Whoa, what happened?" Jim asked, his head pounding from the quick release.

"I knew then," Spock said simply. "I had only forgotten. Fascinating."

Jim frowned. "Knew? Knew what?"

"I knew then that we would always be together," the Vulcan explained. "Not that we would be bonded, per se, but I knew that we would always have a special bond of friendship. My mother never told you

that one of the other symptoms of the Vulcan flu was that we become especially intuitive at that time. That symptom in particular is the most shameful at all, so we rarely speak of it. I thought I was hallucinating when I recognized you as t'hy'la that day."

"You weren't. I knew too, Spock." Jim smiled wryly. "I was always drawn to you, from the moment we met, when you saved me from those bullies."

"I will always save you, as long as you are mine to protect." Spock kissed Jim's brow, and they basked in the warmth of their marriage bond.





# The Television and the Chocolate

Nola Frame-Gray

As our story opens, a gray-haired woman and a TV with spindly legs were sitting on the curb nattering.

"A penny for your thoughts," said the telly.

Nola sighed. "I wish there was a way of thanking everyone for all the good memories I've had of Star Trek fandom over the years. I remember the artwork, the zines, the fans, the friendships and the stories. (Will Kirk and Spock ever find True Love?)"

"Nola," said the TV, "why not come to my hotel room and watch me? I'll even microwave some popcorn...."

Their voices faded in the distance as a new couple arrived. The two males were wearing what looked like bright pajamas tops, but with black trim. The one with the light brown hair wore yellow, the other one with black bangs wore blue. Their names were Jim Kirk and Mr. Spock.

Spock brought up a hand to his eyes and peered ahead as he asked, "Captain, is that woman conversing with a ambulatory television set?"

Kirk laughed. "Yes, Spock. I love those Star Trek hall customs! When the Guardian of Forever warned me what a big splash we'd made in this era, I had no idea..." Kirk turned to Spock and added, "Come, Mr. Spock. There's a bowl of Plomeek soup calling your name" *...not to mention the honeymoon suite*, Kirk leered.

As they walked back to the Kyoto Grand Hotel, Spock said, "Jim, there is one thing I do not understand. If this is a story, where is the plot?"

"Sorry, Spock," Kirk said sheepishly. "I had delivered to the hotel the crate of bottled Avian water as you requested, but I forgot the condensed plot concentrate. By mistake, I brought a box of dry laundry soap instead.

Spock's eyebrow shot up in a familiar way. "Hardly the sort of thing for a slash convention," The Look said...if an eyebrow could speak. "Jim, why don't we go to the nearest grocery store and buy a bucket of chocolate syrup?"

Kirk grinned. "Sounds like a plan..."

And they all lived happily ever after.





# Grasp The Thorn

## Ragdoll

“Mother,” Spock called in a voice he judged sufficient to carry to his parents but insufficient to carry into the entranceway. “Is something amiss?”

“Just a moment, Spock,” Amanda said absently, smiling at him with what he knew to be fond exasperation before turning back to the collection of Starfleet officers she and his father were currently engaged in conversation with. Spock determined from this mild rebuke that his interruption was unwelcome, but not precisely detrimental; thus, he subsided back into his chair with nothing more than calm acceptance.

He allowed a further twenty-one minutes of silence to pass, during which he carefully respected the adults’ right to privacy, before saying again, “Mother? Is the issue one in which I might assist?”

Amanda broke away from the smaller group to approach him, immediately busying her hands straightening his otherwise pristine clothing when she reached him. It was a particular habit of hers he found unnecessary, but which he could not bring himself to dissuade her from.

“It seems our visit to the garden has been delayed,” she said after a moment, smoothing his hair in a manner most of his peers would have found unforgivably presumptuous. Spock allowed it because his mother desired he do so, and because he could deny her very little.

“Was not our appointment verified for 14:30 hours?” he asked.

“Yes,” she confirmed, “but one of the groups scheduled for this morning is having some difficulty, and since the Vulcan Embassy supports and contributes to this project, they’ve asked for your father’s assistance.”

“I see,” Spock said neutrally.

Amanda sighed softly, aware that Spock had been eagerly awaiting this excursion to the Xenobotanical Arboretum with as much enthusiasm as a Vulcan could legitimately express. Having his carefully crafted afternoon nixed in favor of his father’s professional duties would be accepted, because that’s what Vulcan children did, but it would put a damper on their entire visit to Earth, if only from Amanda’s perspective. And it made her heart ache in sympathy for her son.

She glanced over her shoulder to where Sarek was quietly arranging for additional personnel to search the building. She considered the dozens of people still flowing in and out of the overgrown archway

serving as the exhibit entrance, and looked again to the group of Starfleet officers milling about in a generally discontent and ineffective group.

She considered how little purpose was served by denying Spock his exploration, when it was his parents who truly felt the burden of their responsibilities, not he.

"This isn't likely to resolve itself anytime soon," she reflected, taking in her son's expressionless face from the corner of her eye. He nodded silently.

"Is there any assistance I can offer?" he asked again, and she felt a swell of pride fill her from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. Her son was still so young, just barely a teenager, but already she could see the brush of adulthood creeping up on him. Children aged so fast, and Vulcan children faster than most. She beamed down at him brightly.

"Yes, you can, Spock," she said, grasping him by the elbow and tugging him to his feet. "You can go ahead without us and pick out all the best displays we should see." And she pushed him gently toward the entranceway, watching him stumble and right himself, a tiny blink the only concession to his surprise.

"Mother...?"

"Go on, Spock," she said kindly. "Keep your communicator on at all times and, if anything alarming happens, meet us back here. If you haven't heard from us by the evening meal, feel free to get yourself some dinner and credit it to our account. I trust you won't get lost?"

"Of course not," he said, just this side of smug. She suppressed a wicked grin. "Vulcan's have a highly developed sense of direction. I will not 'get lost'."

"Good," she commented, already returning to her husband, who glanced only once in her direction, absorbing the situation between her and Spock with a minute nod of approval before refocusing on the matter at hand.

Watching her, Spock reflected on the fact that, though his mother was highly unconventional by Vulcan standards, he would no more give her up for a Vulcan parent than she would give him up for a Human child.

He entered the gardens, already compiling a list of which plant species his mother would likely appreciate most.

A fascinating array of colors and configurations greeted Spock as he walked slowly through the initial atrium. He had to suppress his illogical impulse to see everything at once; there was time enough to see it all, but he could not deny an inescapable sense of anticipation. This collection of horticulture was unique for two reasons: first, it was the only exhibit currently in existence which boasted contributions from every major member of the Federation; and second, it managed to maintain that status by a careful application of force fields and artificial atmospheric environments built into ninety-seven

independent chambers. Nothing like it had ever been attempted before, and actually witnessing something so unique was a privilege indeed. In preparation for this visit, Spock had made it a point to research all the various species of flora contained in the garden, but as he debated where to begin his extensive investigation he was forced to admit that no amount of research could have completely prepared him for this. The garden itself sprawled over precisely two-point-two city blocks, and was constantly undergoing expansion. It was, in a word, fascinating.

As he meandered from one chamber to another, Spock noted that some of the displays were familiar to him, particularly those which had originated from his home world. He passed by these with only a cursory examination (though he did stop to inspect a rare *Kal'ta* plant, its rich violet leaves in full bloom). Others were particularly striking, including the Betazoid *Muktok* plant, which issued tiny musical sounds when shaken, and the Rigelion *Ratana* tree, which produced an enthralling scent that could quite literally intoxicate its visitors if inhaled for an extended period of time.

Spock would never admit to being enchanted by anything, particularly within hearing distance of any of his peers, but the extensive garden was so inherently soothing that he could at least admit to being – unusually content. And exceedingly fascinated.

He made one full circuit of the garden, a time-consuming but worthwhile endeavor, and slowed to peruse the most interesting displays at a leisurely pace. Unknown humanoids passed him occasionally in his exploration, but none paid him particular attention, nor did he pay them any. A garden, in his estimation, was not a place for idle discussion.

He came to the Vulcan exhibit again, noting that it was somewhat less vibrant in its design than others, possibly because much of the vegetation on his planet thrived in a desert atmosphere and was therefore generally unappealing to the untrained eye. He might not have chosen to revisit this section at all, but as he stood outside the entrance to the exhibit, he was overcome with an unusual urge to pass through the force field holding the hot desert air in check. He examined the urge with scientific curiosity, unsure of where it had come from or why it existed. He could recall seeing nothing in this exhibit which was worthy of further inspection, but the impulse persisted.

Not normally one to follow the urgings of his instincts (roused, as they were, so rarely), but with no outstanding demands on his time, Spock considered that there was little to lose by indulging in a short repeat visit to Vulcan's flora. He felt the curtain of the field ripple over his skin with a faint tingle as he moved beyond it, and then he was breathing deeply, recognizing the scents and sights of home. Perhaps his atypical impulse had merely been the result of a desire to experience the familiar. He considered this as he moved deeper into the exhibit at an unhurried pace.

As he approached the shadowed recesses of the exhibit, he became aware that something was not entirely as it should be. Each of the enclosures included a restricted section, where the more dangerous and hazardous plants were kept securely, and each was normally protected by a low-yield force field which had to be manually deactivated with a pass code to gain additional access. Though imperceptible to the Human ear, Spock's heightened hearing was sensitive to the minute whine of the field generators.

At present, there was no whine beyond the one which hovered far overhead, containing the artificial environment itself. There was no localized field in effect, and there should have been.

Curious and not a little concerned, Spock quickened his step as he rounded the corner.

“Stop,” he commanded, coming to an abrupt halt as he immediately catalogued and verified the situation his eyes reported to him. “You are in imminent danger. Move away from the *S’gagerat* enclosure immediately.”

The Human, barely older than Spock himself, if not in fact younger, turned his head to regard the Vulcan with an imprudent lack of alarm. Spock wondered if his instructions had been misinterpreted; perhaps the boy had deficient hearing.

“Retract your hand behind the glass partition before the *S’gagerat* becomes aware of your presence,” Spock instructed, taking light, cautious steps up the staircase so as not to alert the plant to his arrival.

“Oh,” the boy said, continuing to wave his hand above the ominously shifting sands with a careless abandon that Spock found highly unwise. “It’s definitely aware I’m here. We’ve been playing hide-and-seek together for the last twenty minutes.”

Spock had no idea what hide-and-seek was, but he could extrapolate the meaning from the words alone. Vulcans did not allow themselves to be appalled and yet Spock could find no better way to describe his reaction to the boy’s words; therefore, he was appalled.

“Do you mean to say you are aware of the *S’gagerat*’s ability to attack potential prey and have been – provoking it into action?” Spock would have preferred to believe that no sentient being could be so foolhardy, but even in his short collection of years he had already learned that a determined person was capable of anything, regardless of logic and reason.

“Well, no. I didn’t exactly provoke it – “ and Spock leapt the final two stairs in alarm as a barbed tendril shot up from underneath the sand, intent on the boy leaning so casually forward, hand suspended in the air. He reached out, calculating the odds and already aware that he would not be fast enough to prevent the impending injury, but, as proven a moment later, the Human’s unfathomable dismissal proved – not unfounded.

Before Spock’s surprised eyes (curious eyes, rather, as admitting to surprise was inadvisable), the boy flipped his hand up, neatly avoiding disaster and thwarting the tendril’s furious attempts to capture the strangely agile limb which hovered just out of its range. Spock belatedly checked his forward lunge, which was obviously unneeded. He blinked as the vine rapped repeatedly on the glass, unable to reach beyond it (likely a deliberate act of management by Starfleet’s xenobotanists), before slithering back beneath the sand with what could only be described as an air of frustration. He had never before seen a plant display emotion. But then, there were few plants like the *S’gagerat*, which had been known to kill adult Vulcan males, and which was considered one of the most deadly predators of his home world.

It was therefore disturbing to witness a Human boy casually engaging in a particularly dangerous game of 'hide-and-seek' with one.

Even as he thought it, he watched as the pale hand was extended once again, sketching lazy patterns in the air with loose fingers.

"See?" the boy said, gesturing to the sand below, which now sat deceptively quiescent. "I'm not doing anything to provoke it except exist."

"Considering it is a carnivorous plant, that is provocation enough," Spock said, tucking his own hands in the folds of his sleeves and keeping an alert eye on the *S'gagerat*. One could never be too careful around them, though the Human did not seem to share this opinion.

The boy snorted, a sour look on his face that Spock could not immediately identify. "Oh, trust me," he said, laughing, though his voice lacked the usual intonation of humor. "You don't have to be a carnivorous plant to find my mere existence aggravating."

"I see," Spock said, though he very much did not.

"I'm Jim, by the way," the boy said, extending the hand which was not currently occupied with infuriating the plant below. Spock did not take it, eyeing both outstretched appendages with curiosity.

"I am Spock," he said, continuing immediately with, "and it would behoove you to desist in this behavior," as the sand below began to ripple in warning.

"I see," the boy, Jim, said, looking far too amused for one who was courting death. "Thanks for that. Question: is your primary language Vulcan or Standard?"

Spock tilted his head to better regard the Human, uncertain. "I fail to understand the relevance of your query."

"It's just that I'm not sure I know what the word 'behoove' even means. And I only speak Standard."

Spock still could not see the relevance, but he was willing to indulge the Human, provided the conversation shortly ended with him retracting his hand from its current position.

"I speak Standard and the five predominant Vulcan dialects fluently, but cannot communicate in any other Earth languages with more than passable efficiency."

Jim eyed him with a peculiar smile on his face. His blocky teeth shone unnaturally white in the glare of the artificial glow filtering down to them from above.

"I think you're an overachiever," the Human told him, and Spock could not be certain, but the words were said with a certain lightness he had come to associate with his mother when she was – jesting.

How odd; were his Vulcan peers to say something similar to him, he would have found himself immediately obliged to defend his academic prowess from their scrutiny. As it was, he merely felt the need to suppress the amusement which attempted to surface at the Human's words.

"Perhaps it is actually you who is the underachiever," Spock commented.

Jim grinned, sunny and unconcerned. "Ain't that the truth."

The *S'gagerat* made another attempt for his hand, darting two vines at him this time, which Jim neatly avoided, ducking backwards from where he'd been leaning on the glass. Spock quickly concealed the apprehension that leapt into his veins and settled low in his chest at the sight of those deadly vines striking at the Human.

"Why do you persist in this activity?" Spock asked, watching the tendrils linger threateningly pressed against the glass. The plant was becoming unusually aggressive. Spock theorized that it had never encountered prey that continuously eluded it only to return for further investigation. It was likely as confused as Spock was fast becoming.

"Do I need a particular reason?"

"Yes," Spock said, because surely one did not invite death without one.

"Can't I just do it because it's there?"

"It is obvious that you *can*; you are doing so currently. I am merely inquiring as to your motives."

"Sorry; I left those in my other pair of pants."

Beginning to grow frustrated, Spock schooled himself to calm. "Though you have obviously escaped injury thus far, you should be aware that the barbs on the *S'gagerat's* tendrils are toxic. It would not take more than a brief exposure to the soporific coating them before you became lethargic and would be in danger of falling into their clutches."

"Oh," Jim said, looking somewhat – guilty.

Spock stared at him.

"Well, I guess I missed that part when I was reading the data display," Jim said, raising his arms defensively. "And I guess that explains why my eyes are getting fuzzy."

"You are injured?" Spock asked, stepping closer in alarm. "The barbs pierced your skin?"

"I wouldn't say pierced. Grazed, maybe," Jim admitted, holding up his hand until Spock could see the tear near the elbow of his long-sleeved shirt where blood had turned the material a light pink in a few spotty areas.

Not a little disbelieving, Spock regarded the Human with severe disapproval.

"Hey, don't give me that look. How was I supposed to know the thorns were poisonous?"

"The information is located on page seven of the data display," Spock informed him.

Jim muttered something under his breath which sounded distinctly unhelpful.

"Come," Spock commanded, retreating down the stairs to one of the cushioned viewing areas, where a small beverage processor provided him with water. Though he regretted it could not supply medical ingredients it was, of course, designed to provide for the plants, not people.

The Human had not followed him, and was currently eyeing him with some uncertainty from his post.

"Depending on the depth and severity of the injury, you may begin to feel the effects of the *S'gagerat's* poison immediately, or you may remain relatively unaffected. It is not inherently damaging; it is meant to induce sleep so that that plant may begin the digestion process of its victim without interference."

"Well, that's disgusting," the Human announced, beginning to move down the steps with no obvious difficulty that Spock could see. "Efficient. But disgusting."

"Surely no more disgusting than some of the procedures utilized by your ancestors in the slaughter of livestock," Spock said, handing him the water as he slumped onto the padded bench with a sigh.

"Can't argue with that," Jim agreed, and Spock noted the blush of color staining his cheeks with unease. While the soporific should do no more than induce a deep sleep, an allergic reaction might be possible...

Reaching a decision, he pulled out his communicator, but before he could depress the activator, he found his hand gripped in a shockingly intimate hold.

"What are you doing?" Jim demanded, the blaze of anger in his eyes, and in the clutch of his fingers. Dizzy beneath the onslaught of unexpected emotion, Spock closed his eyes, breathing deeply. He pulled his hands away with no care for his greater strength, and the Human staggered sideways, bumping into his arm.

"I had intended to contact my parents. They are currently in contact with the Arboretum authorities in organizing a search of the facility, but I believe my interruption is justified; I estimate that your temperature has gone up at least two degrees since my arrival. How long ago did the *S'gagerat* mark you?"

"How long ago did you come in?" Jim asked, sagging into his shoulder sluggishly. Spock steadied him, discretely fumbling for his communicator again.

"Approximately twelve-point-four minutes."

"About twenty minutes ago, then."



"We should call for medical aid immediately," Spock said, attempting to use his communicator to no avail. The Human knocked it from his hand with one determined swipe. "Jim, I do not understand. Can you not see that medical intervention may be necessary to ensure your continued good health?"

"I'm fine, Spock. Just a bit woozy. You said yourself the toxin isn't gonna hurt me; it's just making me tired as hell. Just keep playing cushion and I'll be all right." Suiting actions to words, he burrowed closer, rubbing the side of his nose against Spock's shirt in a way the Vulcan found frankly perplexing. They had not even known each other for more than one sixth of a Terran hour. Were all Humans so quick to impose on the personal space of strangers?

And what was even more disconcerting: Spock found that, for reasons unknown, he was not averse to the imposition. In fact, contrary to most uninvited instances of contact, he found Jim to be oddly – soothing.

"If your condition worsens, I insist we call for medical aid," Spock said finally, feeling the cooler Human heat seeping through his shirt with a curious lack of distaste.

"Deal," Jim murmured.

They sat in silence for several minutes, and Spock debated the merits of laying the Human out full length on the bench, as opposed to the production of moving him when he was already so comfortably settled. In the end he decided against it though he couldn't have said for certain whether there was any defining argument that motivated him.

"Hey, Spock?" Jim muttered, groggy enough that Spock was unsure whether he was entirely cognizant of the situation.

"Yes, Jim?"

"Keep me awake, 'kay? Talk to me. Tell me bit about yur'self."

Spock considered the plea with grave deliberation. "I am uncertain as to the cause of your curiosity, but I have no objection to fulfilling your request, in theory; however, I reserve the right to withdraw my acquiescence at any time. What do you wish to know?"

"Mmph," Jim muttered unintelligibly, then spent so long in silence Spock was on the verge of prompting him when he finally stirred.

"Why're you wandering around here alone?"

"Unlike some," Spock said pointedly, "I do not require supervision in order to safely traverse a relatively risk-free environment."

"Oh, haha," Jim groaned, glancing up through the curtain of his dirty hair to glare with feigned anger. Spock noted the unusually large size of his pupils, which had expanded to the extent that they obscured the natural coloring of his eyes. Spock wondered with some detachment if this was an atypical response

to the *S'gagerat's* toxin, or if the Human's immune system was the primary cause of his symptoms. He glanced toward the *S'gagerat* enclosure, considering the curious lack of safety measures standing between curious onlookers and the predator. One eyebrow inched upward in puzzlement.

"I do not understand why this area was not kept more securely," he said, tilting his head upward to regard the security systems which were currently idling deactivated. Jim said nothing, shuffling until he could duck down more securely against Spock's shoulder; the Vulcan secured him absently.

"There should have been a force field in place preventing you from approaching the *S'gagerat* so closely," Spock continued, surveying the energy emitters for damage; there was none visible. "There was one present, in fact, when I first passed this display one-point-three ago, and there was no sign of similar malfunctions in any of the displays I examined prior to returning here. It is possible there is a defect in the equipment utilized solely for this display; however – "

Spock swung his eyes downward to take in the suspiciously silent boy currently utilizing his shoulder as a headrest. " – it is more likely this indicates the work of a saboteur."

Jim grumbled something unfathomable, and slid down Spock's shoulder until he was lying with his head in the Vulcan's lap, gazing up with dazed defiance. Spock experienced a shock at this presumptuous effrontery so sharp that he actually froze into immobility.

"Don't look at me like that," Jim said, shrugging, while Spock struggled to regain his scattered logic, currently subsumed in indignation. "If they wanted to keep the public out that badly, they should have picked a trickier pass code. It took me five minutes to crack that thing, and that was because I spent two of them reading the data display and another two disabling the alarm."

Spock debated shoving the insolent Human away from his person entirely but restrained himself on the basis of the boy's poor health. He could not countenance causing him further injury merely to satisfy his desire for personal space.

"Perhaps if you had taken more time reading the display and less time circumventing the Arboretum safety measures, you would not be in your current predicament," Spock told him primly, holding his hands discretely aloft to prevent touching Jim accidentally.

The Human scowled mutinously, reaching upward to tug at Spock's sleeve; he raised his hands higher to avoid this, noting their positions with some irony. It seemed Spock was now to take on the role of evader.

"I don't have cooties, you know," Jim informed him, allowing his arms to flop back to his sides crossly. "I'm not carrying any communicable diseases, and you won't catch my humanity by touching me."

"One does not catch humanity; one is either Human or not Human," Spock told him, carefully not adding that it was also possible to occupy the middle ground of this distinction, seeing as he was a prime example; Jim did not need to know that.

The boy sighed, tipping his head backward to regard the ceiling far above them. "Mm, wish the climate controls in here were cooler."

"They are designed to emulate the average temperature of Vulcan, which is a desert planet. There are very few places on the surface which experience lower temperatures at midday. If you find the current setting discomforting it would be wise to relocate to a more suitable venue."

"Nah. Comfortable," Jim muttered, sinking firmly into the bench beneath him. Spock debated the merits of continuing to allow his thigh to be used as a pillow.

"Assuming your timing is accurate, and taking into account the relatively minor exposure to the soporific, I estimate the toxin should complete its course through your system in approximately twenty-point-two minutes."

"Mm," Jim agreed, curling up on his side so that his collection of long blond hair scattered across Spock's black pants haphazardly. After shoring up his mental shields with several meditative breaths, Spock pressed two fingers to the Human's carotid artery, counting off ten healthy beats of the heart. No abnormal rhythms presented themselves and the pulse, while a trifle fast, was within norms. He determined there was no immediate cause for alarm.

He eyed the pale strands of hair decorating his trousers; blond was a color not generally seen on his home world, and to see it in such detail now made his fingers itch with resilient curiosity. He thought even the texture might prove different to his own; Vulcan hair was thin and uniform in nature, whereas this boy's seemed thick and prone to interesting displays of disarray. He reminded himself that to touch uninvited would be no better, perhaps, than having one's physical proximity invaded without prior permission.

Perhaps it was an unfair justification, but a justification nevertheless. Spock took up several strands of soft hair, rubbing them curiously between his index finger and thumb. He had been correct; the texture was much thicker than his own.

"S' nice," Jim said, almost crooning, and turned to bury his flushed cheek into the haunch of Spock's outer leg. Spock quirked an eyebrow, settling his hand over the Human's forehead with concern. While Jim's pulse was reassuring, his temperature still was not.

"I recommend that you remain as awake and alert as possible," Spock said, attempting to jostle him just enough to provoke movement. There was none. "If you fall unconscious, I will be forced to contact my parents for assistance," he added.

"M'awake," Jim grumbled, one hand coming up to rub at his eyes. He opened them, gazing overtop Spock's knee with an encouragingly aware countenance as he tucked his fingers beneath the Vulcan's leg. Spock did not move, allowing him to situate himself.

"What brings you to the arboretum, Spock?" Jim asked after a moment.

“Personal interest and scheduling convenience; my father had business on Earth, and my mother and I chose to accompany him.”

“Business, hmm? Merchant, consultant, other?”

“Diplomat.”

Jim rolled his gaze up to peer at him from the corner of his eyes. “Not a lot of Vulcan diplomats stationed outside the embassy. Your mom one too?”

“Negative. She was a teacher.”

“Was; not anymore?”

Spock hesitated to answer, knowing his mother’s reasons were both personal and unavoidable; while she harbored no desire to preoccupy herself when Spock was a child, he was also aware she had attempted to find gainful employment after his seventh birthday, when Vulcan children were integrated into the larger populace and began their formal education. She had been unsuccessful, largely due to the rigid views and stigmatism which still surrounded her Human heritage, stigmatism which Spock himself suffered through on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

“Not at present,” he prevaricated.

“My mom’s a microbiologist; she’s stationed with one of the research teams studying the M-class planets in the Laurentian system.” The smile Jim aimed at the far wall was disturbing, both for the grimace which preceded it and also for its bitterness. “I haven’t seen her for more than a few days at a time since I was eight.”

Spock did not know what to say to that. He attempted to imagine what his life would have been like without the calming and supportive influence of his own mother. She had often been an indirect cause of his many troubles with his peers, but without her constant warmth and encouragement he doubted he would have discovered the core of his resilience, which had seen him through difficult times.

“And your father?” he asked, attempting to politely divert the conversation to less emotionally fraught topics.

“Dead.”

Apparently that was a poor attempt.

“I had not meant to stir uncomfortable memories,” he said quietly, believing honesty was his only recourse.

“He’s been dead all my life; no memories to stir.”

Spock regarded the Human with a questioning glance; it seemed to him that Jim's manner of discussing his deceased or absent parents was unusually dismissive, almost uncaring; he would not have taken a Human for such casual disregard of their family structure.

"Though it's interesting he should come up in conversation, since this is the day he died," Jim continued with such incongruous carelessness that for a moment Spock was not quite certain of what he'd just been told.

"I – beg your pardon?" he said.

"Today is the anniversary of my father's death," Jim repeated. "And it's also the day I was born." He smiled, that deceptively mild, bitter smile again. "You could say he died in child birth – but that would be in bad taste, right?"

Spock was speechless.

Jim grimaced, the smile turning sincere and apologetic. He rolled over to regard Spock with regret. "Okay, yeah, that *was* in bad taste. Sorry. I have this foot in mouth thing going on."

"Placing one's foot in one's mouth is both inadvisable and highly unhygienic," Spock managed at last.

Jim burst out laughing, the sound echoing off the glass enclosures surrounding them. His eyes shone with merry humor, the pupils finally beginning to recede to their original size, and Spock listened to his mirth with a curious ear. It was the first time he had heard such joy given voice from anyone except his mother.

"Thanks, Spock," Jim said eventually, when his hilarity had waned. He reached up, gently tapping his fist against the Vulcan's shoulder. "I needed that."

"Though I am unsure what I have done to deserve gratitude, you are welcome."

"Funny guy," Jim chuckled. "I didn't know Vulcans came with a sense of humor."

Spock could have informed him that he was not entirely Vulcan, but he was reluctant to do so. The rapport he had developed with this boy was unlike anything he had previously experienced with anyone in his peer group. Reactions to his mixed heritage were not usually favorable, and he did not wish to injure the fragile connection that seemed to be developing here.

"I did not know Humans came with mouths big enough to insert one's foot into," he said instead.

"That's not a Human thing; just a Jim thing."

"I see," Spock said again, though he once again did not. "You mentioned that today is your day of birth. May I inquire as to how old you are?"

"Thirteen," Jim said, a crooked grin stamped onto his face. "I'm considering exploring my teenaged angst now that I'm officially of age for it, but there's not really anyone around to appreciate it."

Spock hesitated, debating asking about Jim's living arrangements, as his curiosity urged him, but ultimately deciding that questions along that path were likely to be unwelcome.

"Is your presence at the arboretum at all connected with your coming of age?"

"Nah. School trip. I'm transferring soon, and I think they roped me into this as a sort of fond farewell."

"Did you not enjoy the exhibitions on display?" Spock asked, his scientific mind already criticizing anyone who would willingly forego such a fascinating arrangement of flora.

The grin did not waver. "I liked at least one of them enough that I wanted to get up close and personal with it."

Spock regarded him with disapproval. "An attempt which could have cost you your life."

"That was sort of the point, Spock. It could have, but it didn't."

"Specify," Spock commanded, nonplussed.

"Let's just say that I have a standing bet with fate, the fickle bitch, and every year I put money on the fact that mine isn't to die today. Man-eating plants are a new edition, but the principle's the same." He quirked a grin at Spock's face, and the Vulcan took a moment to check that the horror shuffling rapidly through him was in no way visible in his expression.

"Last year I drove a car over a cliff," Jim continued, looking unaccountably proud of himself for it. Spock had to force his vocal chords to work as he wished; they seemed sluggish to respond.

"Was it a very small cliff?" he asked, feeling it best to get all the facts before passing judgment.

"A quarry, actually, so no. But don't worry: I jumped out of the car before it went over."

"That fact is far from reassuring," Spock informed him. "Unless you did so from a moderate distance, thus reducing the chance that your momentum would continue to carry you forward."

A sheepish expression crossed the Human's face, and Spock was aware of the answer even before it came. "Um. No. I wasn't that smart."

"I see," Spock said again, and again he truly did not.

"I think I might try skydiving next year."

"I advise bringing a parachute with you when attempting to do so, and perhaps consulting a professional service provider; it seems you require specific reminders in order to recall these basic safety provisions."

Jim laughed and Spock could not decide whether this was reassuring or not.

"You know, maybe most Vulcans don't come equipped with a sense of humor, Spock, but you do. I'm glad."

It was one of the first times Spock could recall his differentiation from his peers being a positive and fully welcomed thing.

"I am gratified," he said, and meant it.

The flush in Jim's pale cheeks had begun to dissipate, leaving a faint pink stain as its only sign. His breathing continued unimpeded, and there seemed to be very little grogginess remaining. Technically, there was no reason to allow the Human to use him as physical support, but Spock found himself curiously reluctant to break contact between them.

"I don't think anyone's ever just listened to me vent about this stuff before," Jim said, sounding equally as bewildered as Spock felt. "Usually they're too busy trying to fix me to actually talk to me. Huh."

"I am unsure how one would go about 'fixing' another, nor would I attempt to do so without proper training or frame of reference."

"Try telling that to the six or seven well-meaning teachers who think they have all the answers for me."

"If you provide me with their contact information, I shall do so."

Jim laughed again, resonant and pure. "God, I'd love to see the looks on their faces. Maybe some other time."

"Very well," Spock said, almost – disappointed.

"Well, think I had my sharing moment; feel free to take the floor. Tell me something about you."

"Specify."

"Think of it logically; similar input, similar output. Birthday, family matters, trials and tribulations, all that good stuff."

Though his past, much like Jim's, was riddled with many such 'trials and tribulations', Spock did not feel at all inclined to talk about them. Rather the opposite, really. He pondered the request for a moment, dithering.

"Vulcans do not celebrate birthdays," he said.

Jim stared at him, a slow curl of amusement catching at the corner of his mouth. "And I thought it was only Human women you weren't supposed to ask. Vulcan's have 'em beat."

"I do not understand."

"No need to; I was being a jerk. Well, what about your family? Any dirt on them?"

"I fail to see how the presence of soil in relation to my family could be of any interest to you."

"No, look, you've – nevermind. I meant to say: is there anything interesting about your family?"

There were many things Spock found interesting about his family but he doubted the Human would share his fascination, or perhaps it was more that Jim's interests likely ran to subjects Spock could not share for reasons of privacy.

"We have already discussed my parents' well-being and occupations. Reiteration is unnecessary." He considered a moment, weighing what a Human might deem family, and then admitted, "I once had a pet Sehlat with which I had a close association."

"Sehlat?"

"A moderately sized domesticated animal with unkempt brown fur and six-inch fangs. They are often kept as pets by Vulcan children."

Jim's eyes had widened slightly at the description. "What happened to it?"

"I-Chaya died defending my life when I was young; I had erroneously chosen to participate in a Vulcan endurance ritual before I was truly prepared and he intervened on my behalf when I was attacked by a le-matya, another predator found in Vulcan's Forge."

"Sounds dangerous," Jim said, and Spock could not tell if he meant the le-matya, or the *kahs-wan* ritual. Irrelevant, perhaps, as both were indeed dangerous. He pointedly glanced toward the *S'gagerat's* glass enclosure, which was now silent but had teemed with deadly intent not long ago. Jim shrugged, unrepentant, if a trifle sheepish.

"Any other pets?"

"No," Spock said. For a long time after I-Chaya had perished Spock had not wanted another creature to take his place. After a time, the desire for a loyal animal companion had faded until it was no longer noticeable. He considered the benefits of getting one now; the idea seemed oddly and unexpectedly attractive.

"Hmm," Jim commented, brow furrowed in thought. "Well, what about –"

But Spock was not to hear what else he may have inquired about. At that moment his communicator, which had lain dormant, sprang to life, beeping in a recognizable pattern.

"It is my parents," he commented, beginning to rise but hesitating as the weight of the Human's head held him immobile. Though necessity demanded he rise to retrieve the device, still he hesitated to disturb Jim's resting position.

The Human moved without comment, shifting further down the bench to lay flat along it.

Spock retrieved the communicator from where it had lain on the floor all this time. "Spock here."

"Spock," his father's voice sounded over the open channel, calm and unruffled. "Our business with the arboretum personnel is nearly concluded. What is your status and position?"



"I am well, Father, and currently reside within the restricted Vulcan exhibitions. I can return to the arboretum entranceway if my presence is required."

"No. Your mother prefers that we travel to you to begin our exploration. Remain in your current position and we will arrive shortly."

"Very well," Spock said, reviewing the exhibitions he had originally decided would be of interest to his mother. Looking at Jim, who had thrown one arm over his eyes so that they were no longer visible, Spock also considered the possibility of extending his illogical but fascinating time with the Human, and continued with, "I am currently engaged in discussion with a young Human male also exploring the arboretum. If his presence is acceptable to you and mother, I believe he would benefit from a group exploration."

Jim twitched in a curious sign of tension; Spock eyed him questioningly. More curious still was the minute pause over the communicator as his father, who was never lost for words, apparently found this development noteworthy enough to temporarily rid him of speech.

"A young Human male?" Sarek asked at last, slowly.

"Yes," Spock confirmed, puzzled.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"May I inquire as to the boy's name?"

Jim sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bench so he was facing Spock, staring at him. Spock waited to see if he would confirm his permission with either a nod or smile but he did not. Nor did he indicate disagreement in any fashion. After a further four seconds of silence, Spock concluded he did not care either way.

"He introduced himself as Jim."

Another extended silence, in which Spock began to suspect that this information somehow had greater meaning for his father than it did for him, a supposition which was confirmed a moment later when Sarek asked, "Is he still there?"

Spock glanced at Jim, who was stiff with tension, a faint, challenging grin hovering around his mouth. Spock was given the impression that, while he may indeed be here at this point in time, that could change at any moment.

"He is."

"Please ask him to remain, Spock," Sarek said. "If possible, convince him not to leave his immediate location."

Puzzled, Spock raised an eyebrow quizzically, but Jim only shook his head, silent. "May I inquire as to why?"

"I am unable to share specifics at this time. However, the arboretum staff has been searching for this boy for some time. They will be pleased to know he has been found, or at least seen."

Spock was quiet a moment, considering. His father had made it clear he was to ask Jim to stay rather than force his compliance. Obviously this was not a case of criminal concern, though this then put Jim's actions with the safety field in a different light. Curiosity burned in Spock like a candle, lit and blazing.

"I will ask him," Spock said.

"Very well. Your mother and I will arrive in approximately three-point-two minutes; arboretum staff will likely follow in due course."

"Acknowledged."

The communication channel fell silent.

"I think that's my cue to leave," Jim said, hopping to his feet with a casual smile. Spock blinked, taken aback.

"I have been instructed to ask that you not do so."

"Sorry, Spock. I really don't feel like facing the music just yet. I like my freedom, you know?"

"Freedom is a worthy pursuit," Spock agreed. "May I ask in what way you will lose it by remaining?"

"When I said this was a fond farewell, I meant that literally. It's back to the dorms and then to the transport afterward, and I'm not ready to leave Earth just yet. I think I'll keep them chasing their tails until tomorrow, at least."

"That would seem an inefficient waste of your instructor's time."

"Once again, you somehow miss the point while also hitting it right on the head."

Spock did not think he had ever met another person so contradictory and unfathomable. "I do not understand."

"You don't have to. Suffice it to say this transfer wasn't my idea, and this is my version of the non-violent political protest."

Spock eyed him in concern, taking a step in his direction. "You are being moved against your will? If that is the case, surely there are authorities you could appeal to, to have this decision overturned."

"I could, but that'd take months, if not longer. The transfer itself shouldn't last more than a year, so it's not the end of the world. I'll live. But I figure they owe me at least a day or two of mad scrambling before I give in gracefully."

"Perhaps I could be of some assistance," Spock said, already thinking ahead to the legal ramifications of a Vulcan citizen providing counsel for an Earth youth, and the logistics of providing said counsel.

"Nah. Thanks, but unless you have an admiral in your pocket I don't see how you could move things along much."

"I fail to see how one's pocket could be utilized to house a humanoid. Nevertheless, while I am unaware of any admiral who might be willing to assist, my father is the Vulcan ambassador to Earth and likely holds a significant amount of political sway, assuming that is what you require to state your case to the proper authorities."

"Your father is the Vulcan ambassador?" Jim asked incredulously, staring at him. "*To Earth?*"

"Yes."

"Wow."

"I am certain he would be willing to provide you with whatever you require, should you need anything the embassy can give you. Do you wish me to contact him with the request?"

The Human hesitated, tilting his head back to stare at the ceiling again in deep thought. After a few moments he sighed deeply, shaking his head with regret as a small smile curled his right cheek into a dimple. Bitterness edged this smile, and Spock was surprised to realize that he missed the more sincere, joyous ones that had graced Jim's face last.

"No, Spock, but thanks. While your dad's name might get me my way, he can't always be there for me. Sometimes you have to figure out things your own way."

"Not to take advantage of assistance when it is at your disposal is illogical."

"I guess we're safe then, cuz no one's ever accused me of being logical before."

Spock was about to reply when he detected the faint sound of approaching footsteps; two pairs: Sarek and Amanda.

"They're coming, aren't they?" Jim asked. When Spock nodded he shrugged, laughing.

"Definitely my cue to disappear, then. Do me a favor and reactivate the safety shields in here – wouldn't want anyone to say I willfully put someone else at risk."

"I urge you to stay," Spock said, reaching for any reason that might appeal to the Human. He found himself more than reluctant to let him leave. Their curious and unusual time together had been oddly rejuvenating, invigorating, and fascinating. Spock would certainly not object to more time with this Human, and further opportunities to know him.

"Sorry," Jim said, sincere and regretful. "Can't. But maybe we'll meet again one day," he continued, slipping agilely to his feet, all grace and easy motion, completely at odds with all Spock knew about the

awkward transition from youth to young adult. "I hope we do. It's been – enlightening. Thanks for being my pillow and my sounding board." He darted down the circular corridor, striding in the opposite direction of raised voices and footfalls.

"Jim," Spock called, as he heard his parents rapidly approaching from around the corner. "In future, were you ever desirous of – enlightenment – perhaps we could converse again?"

"I'd like that, Spock!" Jim said, turning once more to flash him a charming, sincere smile. "I'll be out of easy communications range as of tomorrow, but it won't be forever. I'll look you up when I get back, if I can!"

"Where?" Spock asked, taking a step toward him almost without his own volition. "Where will you be?"

"In hell," Jim called, "or whatever the equivalent is on Tarsus." And then he was gone.

Spock turned to face his parents as they rounded the corner, already oddly sorrowful for Jim's absence, already eagerly anticipating the possibility that they might one day meet again.



# Two Men

T'Racionn

There were two men from different worlds

One's hair straight and one's hair curled

They found each other fond

And so they shared a bond

And met a future shining and pearled







# Truth Be Told

## Lyricoloratura

Vulcans do not dream.

They do not, as Terrans like to call their periods of mental diversion, *daydream*.

They most certainly do not *fantasize*.

Spock knew this – he had spent far too many years being trained in all the Vulcan mental disciplines to think otherwise.

Therefore, what was currently going on in his mind could only be blamed on his human half...

...and on Jim Kirk.

To be fair, the captain had not intentionally caused Spock to feel this distress.

*Is “distress” the appropriate term for these sensations?*

He had no idea; they were so utterly foreign to Spock that he barely knew how to classify them.

Fortunately, Jim was unaware of the circumstances that had created this... situation. Spock was glad of this.

Truly. He was.

The unaccustomed voice in his mind that seemed to wish to argue this point with him was firmly ignored – especially since this argumentative voice was urging him to go to Jim, speak with him. *Now*.

And for the past 3.4 days, since their return from the Siri Prime, Spock had managed to avoid doing exactly that; he was not sure how much more time he would require before he could interact with Jim with any degree of composure.

*If the past few days are any indication, he mused, it might be quite a while...*

\*



As a general rule, Spock and Kirk tended to ignore the “Captain and First Really Shouldn’t Be on the Same Away Mission” advice that Starfleet gave their command teams. After all, they weren’t actually disobeying an order – they were simply disregarding a suggestion.

In this particular case, neither Jim nor Spock had wanted to miss the opportunity to be part of the first Federation team to actually see the Tuhuma – the inhabitants of Siri Prime that had, until quite recently, been considered to be mythological creatures and not actual living beings. So skilled were the Tuhuma at concealing themselves that centuries had passed without them having been seen by any outsiders at all – and scientific observers had concurred that the species, if it had ever existed at all, had long since died off.

Then had come a new breakthrough in sensor technology – and the astonishing revelation that in fact the Tuhuma had been right there on Siri Prime all the time. They actually had what seemed to be a thriving – albeit somewhat primitive by Federation standards – civilization, and a population that numbered well into the millions.

Starfleet had managed to make contact with the newly-discovered civilization – and that had been no easy feat, considering that their language was unlike any that current Federation databases could decipher. The best linguists back on Earth had nearly given up hope of being able to understand the way these beings communicated – and then a young lieutenant on a starship in the middle of deep space read about their difficulties in a professional journal, and made it her new hobby to try to crack the code of the Tuhuma.

The linguists would have been utterly scandalized by the fact that this young officer managed, in six months of her spare time, to find a solution that had eluded all of them for three years – except, as it turned out, several of them had been responsible for her training, so they could find some way to salvage their wounded professional pride.

And after all, it wasn’t often that one ran across a natural gift for languages like Nyota Uhura’s. Her professors at the Institute for Advanced Linguistic Studies in Alexandria had often lamented her decision to go to Starfleet Academy instead of remaining with them – it had been a waste of her training and talent.

But now, it was Lieutenant Uhura’s very presence on a Federation starship that made the Enterprise the most likely choice to be the first emissary to this fascinating race; the flagship of the ‘Fleet was no stranger to such diplomatic missions, and their Communications officer would be eminently qualified to help them make the initial contact with the Tuhuma.

\*

“Tell me again why you both are coming along? It seems reasonable for Jim to be there – he’s the commanding officer, and that’s usually who we send on these big-deal diplomatic missions. But you’re always the first to jump his ass about Starfleet regulations and not sending the two of you on the same away mission – so, what’s going on with that, Spock?”

“First of all, Nyota, I certainly do not, as you put it, ‘jump Jim’s ass,’ as you are well aware. It is simply my responsibility to make sure that Jim is always cognizant of any and all regulations that may affect a given mission.”

Spock had what Nyota liked to refer to as his “professor voice” going on – and she knew what he was trying to pull. They were still good friends, even though it had been over a year since she’d figured out that there was no scenario in which their romantic relationship was going to end well, and had called it off before too much collateral damage was done. And she knew Spock was doing his damndest not to answer her question.

“Of course, Spock. I get it. Jim’s ass is safe from you.” She smirked to herself at that, suspecting as she did that if Spock were even remotely in touch with his own feelings, such would emphatically *not* be the case.

“But you didn’t answer the first question – why both of you? For that matter, both of you, Scott and Chekov, in addition to me and Giotto? Isn’t that leaving the ship without a decent chunk of its Command crew?”

“I do see your point, Nyota – but there are any number of amply qualified officers who will remain on board, and the captain has every confidence in Mr. Sulu’s ability to, as he puts it, ‘mind the store’ in our absence as we orbit Siri Prime.”

He drew a long breath, letting it out slowly. “Moreover, you must be aware that the opportunity to meet the Tuhuma is a great privilege. It is my understanding that Jim chose the members of the landing party based not only on their specific skill sets, but as an unofficial reward of sorts for exceptional performance while on duty.”

Nyota smiled. “That sounds like something Jim would do. But... if that’s the case, then why not Hikaru?” She could hear the defensive tone rising in her own voice; it was silly, she knew, but Hikaru was one of her dearest friends, and she didn’t like to think of him being slighted.

Spock nodded; he knew Nyota nearly as well as Nyota knew him, and her indignation on the part of her friend was no more than he would have expected of her.

“Hikaru remains behind at his own request, Nyota. He realized that either he or Pavel would have to stay behind with the ship – and he did not wish for Pavel to be denied the opportunity to take part in the mission. Therefore, he spoke to the captain last week, expressing his desire to be excluded from consideration for the landing party. I believe this came as a relief to Jim, who was not looking forward to making a choice between the two of them.”

“I can only imagine.” For a moment, she returned her attention to preparing a few pieces of equipment for their trip down to the surface of Siri Prime in the morning before another thought occurred to her. “What about McCoy? He’s willing to let Jim go down there without him?”

“He would rather not,” Spock replied, “but there are several patients in Sickbay right now who require special attention – and as Dr. M’Benga is recovering from an illness himself, Dr. McCoy feels that he needs to be aboard the *Enterprise*. He is, however, sending along any number of medications with me, as well as a tricorder that is pre-loaded with all of Jim’s pertinent medical data.”

“So you’ll be babysitting the captain on this mission – I wish you better luck with that than McCoy usually has.” Smiling wryly, she shook her head. “That man seems to be able to attract trouble – or at least allergens – like nobody I’ve ever met.”

“I would hardly describe my responsibilities as ‘babysitting,’ Nyota – and I would advise you to refrain from using that term around the captain, as he finds it highly objectionable.”

She broke into a laugh then. “People have actually said that in *front* of him?”

Nyota was surprised to note that Spock was very close to smiling. “Doctor McCoy said it to Jim only this afternoon. I believe his exact words were, ‘I’m putting the hobgoblin in charge of babysitting your crazy ass down there, so you behave and do what he tells you, you hear?’”

Somehow, Spock managed to sound so much like McCoy just then that Nyota burst into a fit of giggling.

“I am sure you can imagine Jim’s reaction,” Spock continued with a resigned shake of his head, “and I am equally certain that you can imagine the difficulty I will have in getting him to exercise any kind of caution after such an injunction from the doctor.”

“Well, with any luck, it won’t be an issue. He won’t be able to say anything offensive – even if he wanted to for some reason – because I’ll be doing all the communicating. “

Nyota’s perfect eyebrows drew closer together in a vaguely anxious expression; although she would never admit as much, Spock knew that Nyota was worried about the immense responsibility that would be hers on this mission.

In an uncharacteristically affectionate gesture, Spock laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. “And you will do so admirably; I know this. After all, you are currently the Federation’s foremost expert on the language of the Tuhuma – no one is better qualified to coordinate communications for the party making this first diplomatic visit.”

Nyota smiled gratefully. “You’re the best, Spock – you know that? I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Recognizing Nyota’s turn of phrase as a well-worn Terran cliché and not a statement of fact (since Spock had little doubt that she would know exactly what to do without him), he chose not to reply, but changed the subject instead.

“I will take my leave, Nyota; remember that we will be beaming down to the planet at nightfall, which will take place —”

“I know, Spock. It will take place at 19:37 ship’s time. I’ll be in the transporter room ready to go, don’t worry.”

\*

"Here I thought I'd seen just about everything – but this? Damn, this is amazing." Jim's voice held a hint of awe – something Spock had not heard from him in a while. It had, in fact, been quite some time since the Enterprise had been given a mission that was so...

...*"Fascinating" is really the only term for it.*

"Indeed, Jim." The area of Siri Prime on which they had landed was, in fact, extraordinarily beautiful – for once, Spock completely understood Jim's enthusiasm. The plant life was nothing short of astonishing in its variety and abundance, as well as the vividness of its color – and they had yet to meet the sentient inhabitants of the planet.

"I wish Hikaru could be here to see these plants – he'd be going crazy looking at all these new specimens," Chekov said regretfully. "It should've been him and not me who came to the surface."

"Enough of that, Ensign." Jim's words were dismissive, but his tone was friendly. "I'll put you in charge of documenting as much of the flora down here as possible – so get to it with that camera and that tricorder, and you'll have lots of data to take back to our favorite botanist."

Pavel's smile was back again immediately. "Yes, sir." He was off like a flash then, obeying the captain's latest order.

"Uhura – when you spoke to their... what was it you called it?"

"The leader? Close as I can get to pronouncing it for you is *Kiofalme*, Captain. The actual Tuhuma language isn't really set up for a humanoid's vocal apparatus."

Kirk smiled wryly at his Communications officer. "But you've managed, haven't you? Anyway – when you spoke to the Kiofalme, when and where did they say they'd meet us?"

"They were extremely vague, Captain. I got the impression they're highly suspicious of outsiders – which is obvious, I suppose, seeing as how they've managed to hide themselves from pretty much the entire universe for centuries – but they did give us these specific coordinates and told us to get here at nightfall. Then we were to wait here for them – like I said, vague, but it's the best I could get from them."

"Well, then, it's going to have to do, won't it?" Jim looked around at the assembled landing party. "Make yourselves comfortable, kids – because now, we wait."

Kirk smiled tightly – the expression that his first officer recognized as the captain trying to conceal feelings of anxiety from his crew members. Spock did not know how well it worked for the others, but he always saw right through Jim's ruse.

Spock himself found it somewhat unusual that Jim was indeed experiencing anxiety at this time; as missions went, this one seemed fairly straightforward. They were simply to introduce themselves and to acquaint the Tuhuma with the Federation as an entity – there was no expectation on the part of Starfleet that the delegation from the Enterprise would persuade the inhabitants of Siri Prime to join the

Federation at this time. They had certainly had far more delicate and demanding diplomatic missions than this one.

Moreover, it seemed plain that the Tuhuma were a peaceful and possibly even a timid race – certainly not a threat to the technologically advanced crew of the *Enterprise*.

The captain had moved to stand immediately next to Spock, and sighed quietly.

“It’s the ones that don’t look like they’re going to be that big of a deal, Spock – those are the ones that freak me out a little, because I know I’ve got to expect *something*, but I don’t know what.”

Jim’s words actually caused Spock to start slightly; for the briefest of moments, he wondered if he had spoken his last thoughts aloud – but he was certain that he had not.

Evidently, Jim could see through Spock as well.

“Keptin!” Chekov’s excited voice broke the brief silence. “Look!”

No one would know what Pavel had seen, however – because at that very moment, complete darkness descended upon the little glade in which they had assembled. Not, Spock noted, the kind of darkness that comes in the dead of night on a planet with no moons, but the complete absence of light.

He heard several quiet gasps of surprise from his colleagues – and found himself reaching out to grasp Jim’s arm preemptively; it seemed that such unexpected events resulted in the captain disappearing or otherwise coming to harm in entirely too many cases. Jim, to Spock’s surprise, had reached out to place a hand on his own shoulder at precisely the same moment.

Sound came through the darkness then – nothing that sounded like intentional communication, but a different sound than what had previously surrounded them.

“Ever seen Venetian blinds, Spock?” The tone of Jim’s whispered words was oddly conversational, considering the unusual circumstances.

Spock shook his head in negation, before realizing that the gesture could not be seen. “I have not, Jim,” he whispered in return.

“That’s what this sounds like – like somebody left the window open at my great-grandma’s house before a thunderstorm, and the blinds are blowing in the wind.”

Before Spock had a chance to comment upon this observation – though he scarcely knew what he might say to such a seemingly random remark – the faint light of Uhura’s communicator cast a pale glow among them, and she began using the device to generate sounds that were eerily similar to those that they had just heard.

“Those Venetian blinds – those were the *Tuhuma*? Holy shit – no wonder nobody could break the code.” Jim’s voice held some surprise and a great deal of admiration. “Well, except for Uhura. But then again, she’s on a level of her own.”

The Communications officer in question shot a warning glare in her captain's direction – Jim was no expert, but even he could read “shut up” in her expression, and instead watched her work in silence.

After what seemed like a long time – but was probably only a matter of a minute or so – Uhura moved cautiously through the darkness to where Kirk and Spock stood.

“They want the two of you first,” she whispered, “without the rest of us.”

“Are they telling you why? What do they want with me and Spock that they don't want with the rest of the landing party? And how the hell are we going to communicate with them if we don't have you?”

Uhura looked vaguely anxious. “I asked them all those things already, sir. They say it's nothing to be concerned about – that they simply want to deal with our leaders, and to determine from you what our intentions are.”

“And did the Tuhuma offer any explanation, Lieutenant, as to how they would communicate with the captain and myself?” Spock had been a professor of xenolinguistics at Starfleet Academy, but he knew that there was no way that he could even begin to understand the series of sounds which the Tuhuma seemed to use for a language.

“You only now learn to understand us.” The words sounded almost more like a breeze than a voice – and seemed to suddenly come from everywhere around them at once. “This does not mean that we have not learned to understand you. We have your language, Outworlder.”

“Very well.” Jim took a step forward, as if to address the unseen presence who spoke to them. “You have our language – and you wish to speak first to my first officer and myself. “

“It is as you say.” There was a brief pause as the odd, foreign clicking sounds came across the clearing again. “You will come with us?”

In the scant light of Nyota's communicator screen, Spock saw Jim nod resolutely. “There is no need to speak to both of us. I will come with you.”

Of course – Spock realized that he should have expected that. Jim was not about to place Spock in danger, though he had no problem taking such a risk himself. However, Jim should have known better than to think that he would get away with such a ploy.

“As will I,” Spock stated bluntly, not relinquishing his hold on Jim's arm.

Jim would likely have argued that point – but they were not given the opportunity. An odd sensation – not unlike that produced by teleportation – swept over them before Spock had even finished his sentence, and in the next breath, the two of them found that their surroundings had changed dramatically.

Where they had been in something resembling a forest a moment ago, they were now in a huge chamber with towering ceilings and brilliantly-colored light streaming in through walls made of some sort of translucent material. Still, none of the Tuhuma was visible, and for a moment they thought that they might be alone in this immense room.

“Pay respect, Outworlders,” the strange breeze-voice surrounded them again. “You are in the presence of Kiofalme.”

As no one had given them any insight as to how the Tuhuma might interpret gestures of respect – and experience had shown Kirk that what was respectful in one culture could be interpreted as obscene in another – he simply bowed his head.

“On behalf of the United Federation of Planets,” he intoned solemnly, “we extend our most respectful greetings to Kiofalme and all the Tuhuma.”

“Very good, Captain.” This was a new voice, somehow more substantial than the one they’d heard previously – and it held more than a hint of what might have been amusement. “We welcome you and your first officer to our home.”

“And the rest of my crew? I assume they are safe – can you tell me what is being done with them?”

This voice seemed to quiver with something like laughter. “You are like Kiofalme, Captain. Your concern is for your children. Please know that they are safe – they are elsewhere in the palace with my own daughters, and will join us later for our ceremonial meal of greeting. Meanwhile, we must get to know one another.”

A flash of light caused both Kirk and Spock to squeeze their eyes shut reflexively – and when they looked again, a tall figure stood before them.

“Am Kiofalme, Captain. It is pleasant to meet an Outworlder again after so much time has passed.”

Kiofalme, the leader of the Tuhuma, looked like nothing either Kirk or Spock could recall having seen before. He (or possibly she – there was really no way of telling) resembled nothing so much as a very slightly corporeal beam of light, made of many of the same vivid colors that streamed in through the walls.

With a sudden surprised intake of breath, Jim looked around at those beams of light once more – and saw that they had moved.

Now there was no doubt that Kiofalme was laughing at him. “You have just realized, Captain, that you are in the presence of many of my sons.” The breeze-voices surged around them again – with a distinct suggestion that Kiofalme’s sons found Jim’s surprise to be pretty damned funny, too.

Good thing for him that it was certainly not the first time Jim Kirk had been a source of amusement to a group of random aliens – and better still that he did not take himself or his own personal dignity particularly seriously. With a smile, he bowed again to the now-visible Kiofalme.

“Indeed, Kiofalme.” He looked around the room at the beams of light that were the ruler’s “sons” – he didn’t know whether they were literally Kiofalme’s offspring or whether that was a figure of speech – and bowed again slightly. “And Commander Spock and I thank all of you for your welcome.”

“Captain, you are most gracious.” Kiofalme shimmered slightly in Jim’s direction. “And you have wondered, I know, why it is that we have separated the group’s leaders from the rest. Permit me to explain – and to tell you what is to happen to you this evening before we rejoin the remainder of your crew.”

“Happen to us?” That, somehow, did not sound encouraging – but again, Jim had to take into account the differences in culture, language, and everything else. It probably wouldn’t be all that bad.

“First, we will provide you with ceremonial garments.”

Spock wondered at the idea of “garments” for a race of being that certainly had no need of any kind of clothing themselves – and hoped most fervently that the Tuhuma did not expect either Jim or himself to remove their own uniforms and to go uncovered. He knew that Jim had been required to do so on other diplomatic missions – he had never witnessed this himself, though he had certainly heard the stories afterward – but Spock did not have the degree of confidence that Jim possessed. There was no way that he could go naked – regardless of the diplomatic repercussions.

“Do not be concerned, Commander Spock.” Kiofalme addressed him directly for the first time. “Your modesty becomes you – and we would not violate it. Though you might not think that we would require garments – and we do not in our current form – at most times, we take on a more material nature, and at those times we do indeed cover ourselves in a manner not unlike yourselves.”

“You are not always as you appear now?” Spock, intrigued by the idea of a species that could change its actual state of matter, found himself asking the question without thinking. “Fascinating.”

The breeze-voices fluttered again in what they now recognized as laughter – and out of the corner of his eye, Spock saw Jim fighting back a smile.

*Fair enough, he thought. For once it is not Jim who is amusing the aliens.*

“So, gentlemen. If you would please follow my son Iniwa – the light beam that was Kiofalme shifted slightly to indicate another shaft of vivid blue light that was approaching them both – you may receive your garments, make the rest of your preparations and join us again shortly. At that time, we will be able to more fully understand your intentions toward our people, and we can go on from there.”

Kirk nodded silently – once more, fighting back the feeling that something, somewhere, was going to go badly wrong. With a glance over his shoulder at Spock, he walked behind Iniwa out of the chamber and into a much dimmer hallway.

“This should be more to your liking.” Jim recognized Iniwa’s voice as the one that had greeted them before in the darkness, and turned to look at him again.

The being that stood before them now was as different from the insubstantial flickers of light in the chamber as – *well*, Jim thought, *as night from day*.

Now that they had moved into the darkness, Iniwa’s form had changed completely; his skin was still the same iridescent blue that he had possessed a moment ago, but now it was skin – he had a body. He was mostly humanoid in shape – he stood upright on two legs, and had two sets of arms in addition to a pair



of wings that were currently folded at his back. Iniwa was easily a foot or more taller than either Jim or Spock, and had a proud, almost hawk-like visage with a tall plume of what looked to be something like feathers in an even more brilliant shade of blue.

“This, Commander Spock, is how we normally show ourselves. The display that you saw from us in my mother’s grand chamber was what we typically show our guests upon first meeting.” Iniwa tilted his head in an almost conspiratorial fashion. “She thinks it is more impressive, and we would never presume to argue with her.”

“So,” Iniwa’s more casual manner emboldened Jim to ask a question that had been nagging at him. “Kiofalme is really your mother?”

Iniwa laughed aloud, even as he continued to walk down the hall. “She is everyone’s mother, Captain. Kiofalme has existed since before our earliest memories – and is responsible for the lives of everyone on this planet.”

Without warning, his expression darkened suddenly, and his voice dropped. “She is the mother of *everyone* on this planet – even our enemies, the Kuchu, who have sought to destroy us for centuries and who have driven us into this existence of half-hiding. It is... humiliating to hide from an enemy, Captain – you are a man of honor, and I am sure you realize this.”

“I imagine it must be,” Jim said sympathetically. This, he mused, had suddenly gotten very, very interesting. If they were all related, what was causing the Kuchu to want to destroy the Tuhuma? There had to be some serious back story there.

And if the Federation had managed to find the Tuhuma, could the Kuchu be far behind?

They had reached a door, which Iniwa pulled open to reveal a small room. “Excuse me for a moment, Captain, Commander.” He looked speculatively at them both, as if measuring them with his eyes. “I will return momentarily with your garments.” With a brief nod, he slipped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“So, Spock – what do you think of them so far?” As always, Jim was eager to hear Spock’s perspective – it was always just different enough from his own that it gave him something new to think about.

“As you can imagine, Captain, I find the Tuhuma to be completely fascinating. And I am sure that we share a great deal of curiosity as to what has prompted the state of enmity between the Tuhuma and the Kuchu.”

“Yeah – that’s bound to be quite the story. Wonder if we’ll hear it?” Jim paused, looking around the sparsely-furnished room. “And I wonder exactly what’s going to be expected of us at this dinner? Kiofalme was talking about being able to ‘more fully understand’ our intentions – and I’d be lying to you if I said that wasn’t making me a little nervous. It just sounds like there’s something she’s not saying.”

“It is possible, Jim – though I did not get that impression. However, I would be the first to say that you have the ability to read the unspoken signals of others much more effectively than I have ever been able to do.” He tilted his head with what was almost a smile. “I have often thought that had you chosen to concentrate in that area, you would have been a highly skilled Communications specialist.”

Jim smiled somewhat embarrassedly. “So – you think I wasted my talent, Spock?”

“I never said that, Jim. In fact, I believe that any career path but that of Command would have been a waste of your abilities. I simply meant...”

“I get it.” Kirk waved a dismissive hand – and Spock noted with some surprise that the captain was now blushing slightly. “I knew what you meant. Thanks, anyway.”

Just then, the door swung open again, and Iniwa had reappeared with a bundle of fabric draped over one of his arms and a small bottle in one claw-like hand. “I have your garments, and I have also brought the Waamini for you to consume before our dinner.”

Spock pulled himself even straighter than usual and took a step toward Iniwa. “Pardon me, but what is the nature of this ‘Waamini?’ Is it required that we consume it?”

McCoy’s words were echoing in his head: “Don’t – not under *any* circumstances – don’t let Jim eat or drink ANYTHING until you’ve been over it with that damn tricorder nine ways from Sunday.” The discussion that had then ensued about the meaning of “nine ways from Sunday” was also not likely to leave Spock’s memory anytime soon – but that had been another story.

“The Waamini, Commander, is something that we always ask outworlders to drink when visiting us for the first time. Anyone who drinks the Waamini is unable to speak dishonestly – which is vital to us in order for us to be able to trust you.” Iniwa drew himself taller, as well. “We will also consume it at our dinner – we would not insult you by expecting something from you which we would be unwilling to do ourselves.”

“Spock?” Jim gestured toward the tricorder before turning to Iniwa, an apologetic look on his face. “If you don’t mind, Commander Spock needs to analyze the Waamini with our instrument to make sure that it is safe for me to drink.”

He quickly put up both hands in the universal gesture for “wait, let me finish” before continuing. “Of course we don’t think you’re trying to poison us – but my system is very strange, even for a human. I have something that we call allergic reactions, so that things that most humans can consume safely might make me very ill or even kill me. That is why the Commander has our tricorder.”

Iniwa looked at both of them with confusion – but not, Kirk noted gratefully, with suspicion. “Do what you must, Commander,” he said, handing the bottle to Spock, “but Captain, be aware that if you find that you cannot consume the Waamini, we must regretfully refuse you admission to our dinner of welcome.”

“Of course, I understand.” Jim watched as Spock took his time doing what had to be at least twenty different tests on the liquid in the small bottle before he finally handed it back to Iniwa.

“Captain, it does not seem that any of the substances in this liquid are similar to any that have previously caused you distress.” It looked very much, Jim thought, as though Spock really, *really* didn’t want to say that – but couldn’t think of a good way out of it.

“So, you’re saying it looks safe?” That in itself was a minor miracle.

“I am not saying anything of the kind, Captain. I am saying that initial readings do not indicate that it is *unsafe*.”

Spock and his damn semantics. “Duly noted, Commander.”

Kirk sighed, turning to Iniwa. “How much of this would be considered the minimum effective dosage? It looks like this stuff isn’t going to kill me, but I don’t want to tempt fate by drinking too much of it.”

Iniwa looked back and forth between the captain and his first officer as if trying to analyze what had just gone on between them. “I understand your desire for caution, Captain,” he said – that hint of amusement back in his voice. “I would suggest that you allow Commander Spock to consume two thirds of the Waamini, and that you consume the remaining third.”

“Will drinking that much of it harm Spock?” Jim sounded distinctly upset.

“It will not, Captain,” Spock replied flatly. “The tests that I performed indicated that the Waamini contains nothing that would be detrimental to my physiology.”

“But, Spock – what about everything else? What about your telepathy... and, and all that other stuff you’ve got going on? I’d have to think that some sort of crazy-ass truth serum -- no offense, Iniwa – would mess you up something fierce.”

Jim was starting to get really concerned; if he had to pull rank and *order* Spock not to drink the Waamini, he would – even if he knew it would piss him off like no other. If he couldn’t go to the damn dinner, so be it; the crazy bastard needed protection from himself.

“Negative, Jim. As you know, Vulcans are already predisposed to be truthful in all their interactions; therefore, a chemical that would compel me to be honest would have very little effect on me.

“Therefore,” Spock said suddenly, as though he could tell what Jim was about to order him to do, “there is no reason for me not to consume the Waamini at this time.” Lifting the small container to his lips, he managed in one long gulp to drink precisely two thirds of what had been in the bottle before placing it neatly onto a small table nearby.

“*Dammit*, Spock.” Jim spoke in what he hoped was a *sotto voce* whisper. “You *knew* I was going to tell you not to do that.”

The first officer looked almost unbearably smug. “On the contrary, Captain; you are well aware that I am not able to foresee the future, and therefore could not predict your actions.”

Kirk gritted his teeth; he’d long since learned not to insult Spock when he was angry, because nearly every good insult he knew would have meant casting aspersions upon his late mother – and hell, he was *angry*, not *insane*.

“Fine.” Still glaring at Spock, he picked the bottle up from the table top and proceeded to chug the remainder of the liquid inside. He didn’t know what he’d expected it to taste like – but whatever he’d

expected, it certainly wasn't what he got. Did gold have a taste? Did light, or warmth? Because crazily enough, it tasted like all those things at once – it tasted surprisingly good – and felt oddly soothing as it went down.

Jim waited for something – he didn't know what – to happen. He waited to feel... *different*.

"The effects of the Waamini are not immediate," Iniwa explained, sensing Kirk's confusion.

"Will it..." Jim wasn't really sure what he wanted to ask.

"You will know, Captain, when it has taken effect." Iniwa took two long pieces of fabric off of the arm over which they had been draped, laying them on the same table. "You may now change into your ceremonial garments – and once you have put them on, it will be time for me to return you to my mother's chamber for our dinner. You will be reunited at that time with the other members of your party at that time."

"If you were wondering," he went on conversationally, "none of the other members of your crew will be required to drink the Waamini; that is a privilege and responsibility that is given only to the leaders of any newcomers who wish to be with us. Your friends have been spending this time with my sisters, who have been showing them other parts of my mother's home. It is, as you can imagine, very beautiful."

"You all have been most hospitable," Jim said with an effort to be gracious. "I'm sure my people have been enjoying their time with your sisters."

"Such is our intention, to bid you welcome." Iniwa held up one of the ceremonial garments – it was a robe of sorts, in a blue not unlike the color of Iniwa's own skin and plumage, though not quite as aggressively bright. "This, Captain, is yours. Commander Spock, the other –" he gestured toward a silvery dark-gray robe – "is for you."

He looked slightly amused at Spock's discomfiture – answering the question that Spock had not yet asked. "We require, Commander, that you remove your own clothing when putting on our garments." "All of our own clothing?" This was killing Spock -- he really was such a damn prude – and if Jim weren't still so pissed at him, he'd feel sorry for him.

"Yes, please. You will find that no area of your body that is not already exposed will be left uncovered by this robe, I assure you – and I believe you will also discover that it is quite comfortable."

"Of *course* he will, Iniwa."

Jim decided to do whatever he damn well could to make Spock just that little bit more uncomfortable – because he was still really, really annoyed with him for drinking that potion before Jim could stop him – and began to unfasten the top of his dress uniform. Spock was so damned modest that he always freaked out a little whenever Jim was less than fully clothed – though, come to think of it, it didn't seem to bother him when it was Scotty, or Sulu, or Bones... or actually, anybody else, for that matter.

*Kinda weird, that – not that it matters, though.* Jim pulled off his black undershirt, grinning wickedly at Spock's growing unease.

Iniwa seemed to notice the growing tension between these two alien beings, and with some confusion obvious in his voice, backed toward the door. "I will allow you privacy in order to change, and will return for you shortly." The door closed behind him again, leaving Jim and Spock alone once more.

"So, Spock? Gonna go ahead and get into that robe? Feels pretty good to get out of that Starfleet dress uniform, I'm not gonna lie."

Jim couldn't honestly say what kind of a reaction he was hoping to get out of Spock right now – he was just mad, and frustrated, and worried – and randomly trying to push Spock's buttons to see what would happen. "Of course, pretty soon I'm *really* not gonna lie, am I? Won't be able to, even if I might want to. Then again, you know how that goes – since you were so damn eager to drink, oh, I don't know – *twice as much* of that Waamini shit as I did."

"Captain." Spock's voice was tense; he was probably more than a little upset himself. "I would ask, please, that you collect yourself. I gather that you are angry with me for having drunk the Waamini, but I did nothing that was unsafe or unwise – or at least, nothing that you were not willing to do as well."

True enough, Jim had to allow – but that wasn't the point. Meanwhile, Spock had turned, averting his eyes so that he was facing the wall instead of Jim. "Also, I would greatly appreciate it if you would cover yourself – and if you would please face the wall while I change garments myself."

"Fine, Spock." Jim turned to face the wall, and pulled the long, flowing robe – which truly was unbelievably soft and silky – over his head before removing his pants and underwear from beneath the garment. "Though I don't know what it is about my body you find so distasteful."

*Wait, what?*

*Where the fuck had **that** come from?* Because God knew that Jim had had no intention of having said that – even if he *had* thought it. Now he was cringing inwardly at the thought of what Spock was going to say, because he'd just sounded completely needy, and pathetic, and... *gah*.

"On the contrary, Jim, I must assure you that I do not find your body distasteful in any way. Indeed, I find everything about your physical presence to be extremely esthetically pleasing."

It was Spock's turn now to look shocked ; when Jim whipped around in astonishment at Spock's utterly unexpected reply, he was somewhat surprised to see his normally staid first officer beginning to blush a most unusual – appealing, but unusual – shade of green.

"I think I see what's happening here, Spock," Jim said reassuringly.

"Yes, Captain – the Waamini is beginning to have an effect upon us both." Spock looked, if it were possible, even more miserably uncomfortable than he had before.

"Let's make a pact, Spock – let's agree that we won't get too fixated on what either of us says under the influence of this damnable stuff. 'Cause it's almost a given that we're both going to end up saying things to each other that we're going to wish we could unsay. Not that I lie to you – because I don't – but sometimes there are just, well... there are things I don't tell anybody. And it's pretty clear that this Waamini shit is going to have me telling you any number of those before we're out of this mess."

*I knew there was going to be trouble, didn't I? That James T. Kirk sixth sense – it's damn near infallible.*

"Agreed, Captain. I believe that our working relationship – and our friendship – are both strong enough to endure any unintentional truths we may end up telling each other under the influence of an alien substance."

Spock sounded relieved at their agreement – and Jim certainly was, as well. If Spock said they wouldn't worry about it, then they wouldn't.

"Because I can always trust you, Spock. Even when there's nobody else, I know I always have you."

*Fuck.* This really was going to be an evening of true confessions.

They finished dressing in silence – as much out of fear of what they might let slip as for any other reason – turning to face one another only when they were fully clothed in the Tuhuman ceremonial garments.

Jim found himself thinking that Spock looked absolutely amazing in that charcoal gray – it complemented the pale green of his skin and the dark brown of his eyes admirably.

*Stop that shit, Kirk – stop it, right now.* It seemed as though the Waamini had affected not only his words, but even his thoughts. *Damn it all to hell, anyway.*

All the same, he found himself wondering what Spock was thinking as he regarded Jim with such single-minded intensity. *Probably best not to know,* he concluded.

"You're looking unusually thoughtful, Commander," his mouth went rattling right on, without his permission and against his better judgment. "My grandma used to say, 'a penny for your thoughts.' I don't have a penny, though, so I guess I'm in no position to make the offer."

"No one on Earth has used coins as currency in centuries, Captain – so it would stand to reason that you would not, in fact, possess a penny. However, I was simply... intrigued to note that somehow, the Tuhuma were able to find a garment for you that matches the shade of your irises exactly. I do not know whether it was intentional on their part, but it is...fascinating."

*Well, I'll be damned – Spock's as bad off as I am.* Jim was amazed and aghast at the same time. *Now, please God, don't let me go out there in front of Kiofalme and all her children – and, holy shit, my crew – and start crushing on my first officer.*

Jim rubbed his face hard with both hands, as if to scrub that last thought from his mind.

But of course, as such thoughts always do, it stayed firmly in place. Because, dammit, there it was – he had a mammoth crush on Spock.

*And seriously – when the hell did that start?*

*But please, Lord – just help me not make a total fool of myself. I'll never live it down if I do – because even if Spock lets it go, there's no fucking way the rest of them are ever going to forget about it.*

“This could get pretty uncomfortable, Spock.” Kirk didn’t even want to think about some of the things he might end up saying – if for no other reason than that those thoughts seemed just now to go straight from his brain right out of his mouth.

Spock nodded briefly. “I understand completely, Captain; however, I think that rather than becoming distressed by the possibility of what might happen over the course of the evening, we must concentrate instead on our pact not to allow ourselves to become overly perturbed by what we say to one another while under the influence of the Waamini.”

At that moment, the door opened again – there was a muted buzz of activity outside in the corridor that hadn’t been there before, and Iniwa stood there with an unmistakably worried look on his face.

“My sincerest apologies on behalf of my mother and all of the Tuhuma,” he began, “but we regret that we must cancel the activities we had planned for the evening. We have already sent the remainder of your crew back to your vessel, and will send you as well as soon as it is safe to do so.”

“Safe?” Both Kirk and Spock repeated that word at once – then Spock gestured to Jim to go on. “What’s going on, Iniwa?”

“We are not entirely sure, Captain. We believe that we have detected enemy activity not far from where you originally landed – and we have reason to suspect that the activity level raised by your arrival might have alerted the Kuchu as to the location of my mother’s compound.”

At Jim’s suddenly concerned expression, he continued rapidly. “No, Captain – we do not believe that you brought the Kuchu here purposely. We are not even entirely sure whether it is a full force of the Kuchu that is among us now, or just a small raiding party. In times past, our mother told us that Wivukatili – the leader of the Kuchu and her one-time consort – would come alone in order to try to overthrow Kiofalme and take sole control of all the inhabitants of Siri Prime.”

Iniwa regarded them both solemnly. “He has never brought his army – which, according to our mother, is composed of many of our brothers whom Wivukatili kidnapped and stole from our family when our mother removed him from power many years ago. However, we are concerned now that if he has indeed found us, perhaps he is taking this opportunity to stage a full-scale attack upon us.”

Kirk felt his head starting to spin – and he was unsure whether it was confusion, adrenaline, or the increasing effects of the drug he had recently taken. “Wait, Iniwa – you’re telling me that the leader of the Kuchu is your father?”

Iniwa bristled. “We choose not to think of Wivukatili in that way, Captain. He is – he is an embarrassment to all of us, and particularly to his sons among the Tuhuma. Many of us have waited years for the opportunity to defeat him in battle – or, if not, to have the privilege of dying in defense of Kiofalme, our mother.”

His gaze focused on some point in the indeterminate distance, a resolute expression on his handsome face. “Hiding is shameful, and not for the strong, or the brave.”

After a brief pause, he returned his attention to the two Starfleet officers. “At this time, Captain, it is not safe for us to take you or the Commander back out into the chamber – which is the only place nearby in which your transporter technology would be effective. Therefore, I am sorry to tell you that we will have to ask you to stay here until there is no longer a risk of you being attacked by the Kuchu – which will happen either when we determine that the threat from the Kuchu is not valid, or when the battle has ended.”

Walking over to a small alcove in the corner of the room, Iniwa brought out a large cloth bag. “In here, should it become necessary, are provisions that will be sufficient for your needs for some time.

Meanwhile, I will leave you – and I will seal this door in such a way that no enemy will be aware of its presence. You will be entirely safe from anyone who might invade the compound.”

Spock articulated Jim’s unspoken question. “If you seal the door, then how will we leave the room?”

Iniwa looked somewhat uncomfortable. “You will not be able to do so.”

“That’s simply not acceptable,” Jim said flatly. “First of all, we can fight alongside you if need be – we’re not only well-trained, but exceptionally well-armed. Having Spock and me on your side would be an asset, not a liability, if you have to fight.” He glared up at Iniwa. “And you said yourself that hiding is shameful – why would you ask us to hide, when we’re ready to come to your defense?”

“Please know that your willingness to fight alongside us is much appreciated, Captain. But you must understand that we cannot accept the offer – first, because you are guests, and second, because you are strangers. We cannot, I regret, entirely trust you to be effective allies – as much as I personally believe you would be.”

He gestured with long blue fingers toward the empty bottle that still sat near them on the table.

“Moreover, you have both just taken the Waamini. It has not happened yet, but soon it will begin to affect you – not only mentally but physically. You will not be harmed – but soon you will also not be in any condition to fight, believe me.”

Jim felt an unaccustomed panic rising like a bubble in his chest. “You said, ‘when the battle has ended.’ What if – what if the battle ends, and you’re not victorious? Will we be sealed in here forever?”

Iniwa’s silently averted gaze was his answer, and Jim felt his stomach turn.

“Will we be able to communicate with our ship?” Spock’s voice was still calm – though Jim recognized the tension in his voice.

“I would’ve allowed you to do so, Commander, if the signal would not have drawn attention to our location. We have reasons to believe that it has been your communications technology that has enabled the Kuchu to find us after what has been centuries of invisibility – and we cannot, therefore, allow you to use your devices any further at this time.”

“What do you mean, you can’t allow us to use them?” Jim knew he was shouting; he didn’t care.



“They have been temporarily disabled; we have blocked your signals until our own safety is no longer threatened by their use.”

Iniwa’s tone held finality. “I have spoken enough, now. You need know no more until such a time as I return for you.” Without another word, he was gone – and this time, the door did not close behind him, but rather vanished completely, leaving only a blank wall.

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After Iniwa had gone, the sudden silence seemed to take on a life of its own; neither Jim nor Spock seemed willing to break it for a long moment.

“So, Spock – any ideas as to how we get ourselves out of here?”

Kirk moved to sit on what looked – and more importantly, felt – like a low settee. Jim was thankful that the Tuhuma did manage to have bodies most of the time – otherwise, things like clothes, food, and furniture would have been pretty hard to come by, and their captivity would have become really uncomfortable in addition to being just inconvenient as hell.

“At this time, Captain, I have yet to come up with any useful ideas.” Spock was looking more – well, *ruffled*, for lack of a better term – than usual. “And I suspect that Iniwa’s warning to us was accurate, and that the Waamini will begin to have a more pronounced effect upon us both shortly. I do not know if you are experiencing such difficulties at this time, but I find that I am having a great deal more trouble concentrating clearly on our current situation. My thoughts, as the human turn of phrase goes, are wandering – and it is disconcertingly difficult to maintain my desired train of thought.”

It was a moment before Jim realized that Spock had stopped speaking; he’d found himself, embarrassingly enough, focusing on the way Spock’s lips shaped his words as he spoke and listening to the low rumble of his voice.

*What. The. FUCK?*

Jim shook his head hard as if to clear the mental cobwebs – and the lingering image of Spock’s way-too-attractive mouth – but to no avail. His mental filter was totally gone – *damn the Waamini, damn Iniwa, damn Kiofalme and damn each one of the Tuhuma individually and as a group*. He listened to himself in detached horror as his mouth went rattling on without having previously consulted his brain.

“Your thoughts are wandering, are they, Spock?” Good Lord – Jim heard himself using his “I have every intention of getting lucky tonight” voice.

*Please, please don’t let Spock pick up on that...*

“Where have they been wandering, Commander? Anywhere good?” At this point, Jim was ready to rip out his own vocal cords – or to knock himself unconscious – or do *anything* just to shut himself the fuck up. Not, of course, that he was going to be able to do that. Damn all of it, anyway.

Spock had moved as far across the small room as possible, and seemed to be battling some unseen force as he answered. "Believe me, Captain," he said in a strained voice, "you do not wish for me to tell you the nature of my wandering thoughts."

Forget "ruffled" – Spock looked almost lost. It hit Jim all at once that as freaked out as he was with this onslaught of emotional honesty, it had to be so much worse for Spock – because at least Jim was used to dealing with emotions, even if he wasn't particularly good at it. Spock had next to no practice with this -- poor guy.

"I'm sorry, Spock. This has got to be awful for you, and I can't be making it better." Jim crossed the room and sat next to Spock where he sat, almost huddled, in a corner of the room. He moved to put a friendly hand on Spock's shoulder, and was taken aback when Spock shook the hand off as though it burned him.

"Captain. You have forgotten..."

"Fuck, Spock – you're right. Touch telepath – even through the clothes? Really? Should have remembered, anyway. Sorry." Jim slid down the wall then to sit near – *not touching, just near* – Spock, keeping his hands strictly to himself, clasped across his knees.

"No apology is necessary, Jim." Spock sighed then – *he never sighs*, Jim thought – and abject misery was written clearly upon his face.

"It's getting worse, though, isn't it?" Jim knew he was finding it harder to think clearly, to function effectively – and figured it had to be that way for Spock, too. "I guess that blue bastard Iniwa was right – we wouldn't be too effective as fighters right about now."

"Agreed." Spock was staring off into the distance. "I wish we had some idea as to the full effects of the Waamini – and how long those effects could be expected to last. It is most ... disconcerting not to have full control of one's mental faculties, and not to know when that control will return."

"I get it. But I'd have to assume it wouldn't be too long-lasting, would you think? I mean, I got the impression it was just for the duration of the dinner, and maybe a while afterwards."

"Realizing, of course, that we had no idea whether the 'dinner' would last for a matter of hours or a matter of days – we were simply never informed, and did not have nearly enough prior knowledge of the Tuhuma to do research about their customs."

"True." Jim sighed resignedly. "I hope Uhura got to spend some quality time with them, and that she got some good linguistic stuff to take back to her buddies back home." If he was looking for a bright side, at least most of the landing team had made it back to the *Enterprise* safe and sound, if Iniwa was to be believed.

"Fortunately, the remainder of our landing party was able to return safely to the ship." Spock said exactly what Jim had been thinking, and he found himself laughing at that not-nearly-so-unusual occurrence.

"What about my statement did you find amusing, Jim?" Spock looked downright baffled.

“What you just said – I was just thinking the exact same thing. And you do that all the time – it’s like you’re inside my head or something.” Jim found himself smiling at Spock’s confused expression – and then found himself feeling something a lot like confusion himself as that expression changed into something entirely different that Jim had never seen on Spock’s face before.

“I would wish, Jim,” Spock murmured, almost wistfully, “that I could be ‘inside your head’ at times.” Jim could tell by Spock’s suddenly mortified expression that he’d just had one of those “oh, fuck, my filter is entirely gone” moments as well.

Then it hit him, all of a sudden – whether it was realization, or drugs, or just raging hormones, there was no telling – but suddenly, Jim simply *knew* what was going on between the two of them. He wasn’t sure exactly how it was going to end up – but he knew with a sudden blinding certainty precisely what he wanted, and he was pretty sure he knew what Spock wanted, too.

“You *can* be inside my head if you want, Spock.”

He could barely hear his own words – they weren’t much more than a whisper – but he knew that Spock certainly had by the way those huge brown eyes got even wider as they stared into his own. “I mean, I know you and I avoid that whole melding thing after what went on between me and – you know, older you – down on Delta Vega, but... well. If you wanted to do that – if it’d make you feel better – I don’t have a problem with it.” He smiled wryly. “After all, mind meld or not, I’m betting that by the end of this little escapade, I won’t have any secrets from you at all.”

Spock was almost gaping at him, speechless for a long moment. “Jim – I do not believe that you are in any condition to make such an offer, as much as I appreciate your intentions. Moreover, I do not think that a mind meld would be entirely safe considering the instability of both of our minds at this time.”

Jim could tell that Spock had uttered those words with an effort – his long-fingered, graceful right hand was twitching on his kneecap, and it looked for all the world as though it was all Spock could do not to raise that hand to Jim’s face.

Leaning slightly closer, Jim placed his own hand on top of Spock’s ; he started violently yet again, but this time, as Jim had hoped, he did not jerk away from the contact. Instead, he stared silently at Jim with an almost painfully intense expression in those beautiful dark eyes.

“It doesn’t have to be a meld for you to know what I’m thinking, and you know that as well as I do.”

He leaned closer still, until their faces were near enough that they could feel one another’s breath. “In fact, I think you know what I’m thinking right now.”

Then even that last little distance was gone, as Jim threw caution to the wind, moving closer still, and covered Spock’s soft mouth with his own in a long, tender – and surprisingly chaste – kiss. He was amazed to discover that those full, warm lips were even more wonderful to kiss than he’d thought – and that was saying something.

He pulled away after a few moments, just far enough to see if he could gauge Spock’s reaction; with a sudden sick drop of fear in his stomach, he hoped he hadn’t overstepped his bounds, or that he’d been wishfully thinking that Spock had wanted that kiss as badly as he had.

The fear, it turned out, was entirely unwarranted – which Jim learned in the best possible way as Spock launched himself forward to resume the kiss. And this time – oh, this time was just so much better, because there wasn't any doubt that they both wanted it.

Wanted more than that, Jim noted with a fierce spike of pure lust as Spock, without breaking the increasingly fierce kiss, rolled them both onto the floor, pinning Jim down. Two things became clear quickly – Vulcans were heavier than they looked, and Spock...

...*Damn*. Spock was every bit as aroused as Jim, as evidenced by the hardness that pressed against his own aching erection. This was just weird, Jim found himself thinking in some remote corner of his mind; he wasn't used to having a hard on in an outfit that was more like a nightgown than anything else. He didn't have anything on underneath, and it all felt... well, weird.

Until the sudden realization hit – *neither* of them had anything on under these Tuhuman robes of theirs – and as if it had a mind of its own, Jim's hand had scrabbled down to the hem of Spock's robe, rucking it up so that he could reach underneath and feel that glorious hardness for himself.

Spock's sharp intake of breath made him temporarily break the kiss -- but a second later, that hot, amazing Vulcan mouth had latched onto Jim's neck, and Spock was biting and sucking at the spot at the base of Jim's throat where he could feel his pulse hammering frantically. Without thinking, Jim squeezed Spock's impressively large cock harder still -- and he couldn't have told who moaned louder at that moment. It was urgent, and savage, and just so, so *hot* that Jim could barely stand it.

Then, suddenly, Spock just... stopped, and shifted slightly so that he was no longer on top of Jim. For a second, Jim was ready to reach up and pull him back down, but then the expression on Spock's face changed his mind; he looked confused, distressed...

...*Miserable*. Jim stopped cold as well, removing his hand from Spock's body and quickly pushing the silky gray robe back down over his legs.

"Spock?" He whispered quietly into the elegantly pointed ear that was still so close. "What is it? Are you all right?" God, he hoped so; he hoped he hadn't ruined everything by deciding out of nowhere that he needed to jump Spock. He hoped Spock wasn't disgusted with him, didn't hate him...

"...*Jim*. It is not what you are thinking." Spock's words were whispered as well, but held an urgency that surprised Jim and reassured him at the same time. He'd forgotten for a moment that Spock really could tell what he was thinking -- or at least to some extent -- just by touch. And yeah, they were still touching -- though not nearly as much as they had been a minute ago.

Strong Vulcan arms tightened around Jim again. "I could never hate you -- you could never disgust me."

"But, then... what's the matter?"

Spock closed his eyes, dropping his forehead onto Jim's shoulder in what looked a lot like embarrassment. "I... Jim, I have never been in a situation like this before."

Jim knew that laughing wasn't the way to handle this -- but he couldn't help the snort of amusement. "Sealed into a room and doped up with some kind of crazy alien truth serum? I'd say most people haven't been in this situation, Spock."

"I do not find this amusing, Jim." He raised his head just long enough to look reprovably at his captain before burying his face back into the curve of Jim's neck. "As I said, this is a new experience for me, and although I find it... exceedingly pleasant, I find that I do not know how to proceed."

There -- that made all kinds of sense. "Spock," Jim said reassuringly, "it's not like there's an instruction manual, or any set way of doing, well, any of this. You don't have to know what to do -- sometimes you just have to let go and let things happen the way they're going to happen."

"I... I do not understand."

"I know you don't. And I don't know how well I'll be able to explain." Spock had been raised on a planet where pretty much everything really *did* come with an instruction manual -- so of course he didn't understand. Jim could sympathize -- but more than anything, he was feeling a rush of relief that somehow, he hadn't been responsible for fucking things up between the two of them, because...

*Well, shit.*

"You probably ought to know this before we go on, Spock." For once in the middle of this God-awful mess, he was glad of the influence of the Waamini -- or else this would have been a nearly impossible admission.

"See, it's like this -- yeah, I think you're beautiful, and desirable, and just generally amazing. But more than that -- way, way more than that -- I love you. I don't think I ever really even admitted it to myself, but God, I've loved you for ages -- for so long that I don't think I could even tell you when I started, honestly."

Jim closed his eyes and drew a long, deep breath. He could hardly believe he'd actually said it; that wasn't something he had ever said to anyone, not ever. Now he felt suddenly as though he had to keep talking to fill the silence, just in case Spock felt somehow obligated to say it back -- though with the whole "truth serum" thing they had going on, Jim wasn't sure how that would work.

"Anyway, that's why it's okay if you don't know how the whole physical thing is supposed to go between us -- it's okay because I'll take care of you, and I'll show you how to take care of me. And then you'll know."

Spock had raised his head again, and was looking at Jim as though somehow he had never seen him before. His hand went up toward Jim's face, and for a moment, he thought that Spock might initiate a meld. Instead, he gently smoothed back Jim's hair, then trailed his fingertips down the side of Jim's face in the tenderest of caresses.

"You love me." The whispered words were a statement and a question, all at once -- and the expression of wonder on Spock's face was something Jim wanted to never forget.

"I do, yeah. I love you." He'd managed to say it once -- so why not say it again?

He wasn't really sure why he was holding his breath, now -- but he couldn't help it.

"Jim." Spock wasn't smiling -- not really -- but he looked happier than Jim could ever recall seeing him look. He looked *beautiful* -- and if anyone wanted to argue with him and say that a man couldn't be beautiful, then they'd simply never seen Spock, that's all.

Then Spock spoke, and Jim stopped thinking altogether. "I love you too, Jim."

With those words, Jim let that pent-up breath out in a soft, disbelieving laugh. "No way," he said -- though it was clear from the expression on Spock's face that he was utterly sincere.

"You know that Vulcans do not lie." Now -- amazingly -- he really did smile, and Jim had never experienced anything like that in his life. "A Vulcan under the influence of truth serum must be considered even more reliably honest -- would you not agree?"

Jim laughed again. "I guess I'd have to agree with that." Without thinking, he reached up and stroked a silky strand of Spock's hair that had fallen, albeit ever so slightly, out of place.

"You love me." He echoed Spock unconsciously -- and he wouldn't have had any way of knowing that it was the same wonder that made him look up at Spock as though he were somehow lit from within.

Spock replied by leaning down, bringing their faces close together. "I do," he whispered against Jim's lips. "And I trust you, Jim, to show me how, as you say, to take care of you. It is," he murmured, pausing to kiss the curve of Jim's ear, "my greatest wish."

To Spock's surprise, he realized that Jim was shaking with mirth beneath him. "What have I said now to amuse you?" He could not decide whether he felt more confused or affronted -- but he hardly expected to be met with laughter at a moment like this.

"I was just wondering," Jim said, gesturing between the two of them with a laugh, "if Iniwa knew this part was coming. Because if he did, then he was really damn smart to insist that we shouldn't come and fight alongside them."

"We would have been... singularly ineffective." Jim was correct, Spock allowed; there was some measure of amusement in their current situation.

"Now we just have to hope there wasn't really a threat -- or that the Tuhuma are able to fight for themselves," Jim said, slightly more soberly. "Otherwise, we might be in here for a while."

"Once the effects of the Waamini have subsided, Jim, I have no doubt that we will be able to think of a way to extricate ourselves from this situation." Spock truly did believe this to be the case -- though he was well aware that in their current condition, neither of them had the mental capacity to find a way out of the room.

Not, he had to admit to himself, that either of them truly wished to do so at this time.

"In the meantime, Spock," Jim murmured in a delicious, sensual purr that sent shivers up Spock's spine, "I believe I owe you some lessons in... in all kinds of things." In a quick move that took Spock by surprise, he rolled them both over so that now Spock lay pinned under Jim's warm weight.

Jim's tongue lightly caressed the exquisitely sensitive tip of Spock's ear, and he closed his eyes on a wave of pure pleasure. The last coherent words that either of them spoke for a long, long time were Jim's: "I bet you're an excellent student."

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"It's about time you woke up -- I was starting to wonder if those damn feathered freaks had poisoned you both, after all."

Spock opened his eyes to the harsh lights that could only belong to one place -- Sickbay aboard the *Enterprise* -- and was immediately overwhelmed with confusion.

"Why am I here?" Searching his memories, he could not come up with any reason why he would have been ill or injured. He had -- yes, they had indeed gone down to the surface of Siri Prime, and had encountered some of the inhabitants. There must have been more than that, but, infuriatingly, he could not remember.

Looking around, he noted that McCoy stood alone at his bedside -- and he felt a sudden sharp spike of anxiety. If Jim were well, he would have been standing next to the doctor, waiting for him to awaken -- he always was, any time Spock was injured or ill.

"The captain -- where is Jim?" He struggled to sit up in the bed before being defeated by an unanticipated wave of dizziness, and McCoy's strong hands guiding him back down again.

"Right there," the doctor indicated a nearby biobed, pushing a button to raise Spock's own bed enough so that he did not have to sit up in order to see the bed to which he referred. As McCoy had said, Jim lay sleeping in the other bed -- entirely too quietly to suit Spock.

McCoy patted Spock's shoulder absently. "I wouldn't worry too much; as far as I can tell, he's all right. You two were out cold when the Tuhuma sent you back up to the ship -- and I don't mind telling you that I was pretty relieved to see you wake up. Tells me that it's probably just a matter of time before Jim does, as well; you know as well as I do that he always takes longer than most people to come out of stuff like that."

"They... the Tuhuma sent us back?" Spock shook his head. "Forgive me, Doctor, but I find that my memory of our visit to Siri Prime is badly compromised."

"Figures," McCoy said briefly. "They doped you both up pretty well -- the blue fella who brought you back felt real bad that it seemed to have a lot more of an effect on you two than it does on most of their visitors. Some kind of truth serum, evidently -- they gave it to you and Jim, but nobody else."

He went on conversationally, all the while examining the readouts from Spock's biobed minutely.

"Course, we had everybody else from the landing party back nineteen hours before we were able to get to you -- I think Sulu was ready to aim phasers on the whole goddamn planet to make them give you two back."

This was really almost more than he could process in his current condition, but Spock had questions that needed answers. "Why was our return delayed?"

"Turns out they were having their version of a world war down there -- only it turned out to be the war that wasn't, when it came down to it."

"Explain, please."

"Well, as far as I can tell, everybody down there has the same mother -- same father, too, but it sounds like he was kind of a son of a bitch. He was the one who'd been trying to attack all those years ago -- guess they live forever, or something like it -- and he took a bunch of the kids to turn 'em into an army. Meanwhile, the mom took the rest of the kids, and they went into hiding -- though it was hiding in plain sight, from what Chekov said. Not that I could really understand him, the way he went rattling on..."

"Doctor." Spock knew he sounded as frustrated as he felt.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. Anyway -- when the Federation contacted the Tuhuma, the new signals alerted the dad as to where they'd been hiding, and he figured that was the time to make his move and take over the planet."

McCoy shook his head bemusedly. "What this guy hadn't counted on was that his 'great fighting machine' wasn't, so much. I mean, yeah, they were trained and all -- but once they saw their brothers, and their sisters, and their mom who they hadn't seen for centuries, they dropped their weapons and just flat refused to fight. All of 'em -- both sides -- ended up banding together to capture the dad; they sent him into exile on some God-forsaken outpost planet, and now they're all back together again -- one big happy family."

He turned to check another array of instruments before continuing. "It's not often that you hear of a war getting settled in such a sensible way, do you? This sounds like a bunch the Federation could learn from -- hope they pay attention."

"Indeed," Spock replied absently. He had stopped paying attention to the doctor, his mind whirling with partially-formed thoughts and unanswered questions.

"How long have we been back aboard the ship?"

"Let's see..." McCoy looked at a chart, then over at the chronometer between his bed and Jim's. "Thirty-two hours, twenty-six minutes... and change. You don't really need to know the seconds, do you?"

Spock was stunned. More than an entire day lost -- and next to no memory of what had happened in the day before his extended period of unconsciousness had begun.



"This 'truth serum' that we were given by Tuhuma -- I do not understand." Spock could not imagine having taken such a thing, or having allowed Jim to take it; somehow, it must have been forced upon them.

"The fella who came back with you both -- Iniwa, his name was. Nice guy -- kinda unnerving how damn *blue* he was, but that's just me."

"Doctor."

"Right. Anyway, he told me that y'all were told that drinking the potion was required of you as leaders - and you couldn't go to their big ceremonial dinner without it. Said you went over it with the tricorder for a long time before you'd let Jim near it -- and then you drank most of it yourself to keep Jim from gettin' too much of it."

The doctor looked at Spock with grudging approval. "You couldn't have done any different, not once the instruments told you it wasn't dangerous. It was part of the mission; there wasn't any avoiding it. You did the best you could when it came to takin' care of Jim -- couldn't have done it any better myself."

He patted Spock's shoulder again -- leaving Spock to wonder if the doctor recalled how very little Vulcans appreciated being touched.

"Are we still orbiting Siri Prime?"

"We sure are," the doctor confirmed, "and now that the threat of war is over, we're their welcome guests. Been sending down a few landing parties to see the place -- haven't been down myself, of course, since I've been here with you two, but I hear it's gorgeous. Chekov's afraid that Sulu will get all wrapped up in studying the plants down there and forget to come back to the ship." He chuckled at himself. "Like we'd ever see the day that Sulu would forget to come back to Chekov. That'd be about as likely as Jim forgetting to come back to you."

Spock had turned his head so quickly toward the doctor that he found himself briefly dizzy again. "Yet again, Doctor, I do not understand."

That earned him the first full-fledged glower he had seen from Dr. McCoy since he had awakened.

"Of course you don't," he grumbled exasperatedly. "And I'm damned if I'm explaining it to either of you."

Spock was left to contemplate McCoy's words, knowing that any further questions he had would now likely go unanswered.

"Oh, before I forget," the doctor said suddenly, rummaging in a small bag near the foot of the bed, "that fella Iniwa left you something -- said you should keep it as... wait. What did he say? He said you should wear it in good health, and keep it to remember your time with them. Nice enough souvenir, I suppose." He pulled a length of silky dark-gray material from the bag, handing it to Spock -- then yanking it quickly out of his hand again after a few seconds.

"What the hell did they put into this thing?" McCoy was irate. "You no sooner touched this than your readings went berserk -- what are they trying to pull, here?"

"No, Doctor. It is not as it seems." Spock's eyes were squeezed shut, and he seemed to be fighting harder than ever to regain his equilibrium.

"Fine, then what the hell is it?" McCoy demanded.

"He gave the garment to me to remember my time with them. " He sighed heavily, rubbing a hand over suddenly weary eyes. "Once I touched it... suddenly, I remembered."

"And you wish you hadn't." It was a statement and a question, all at once.

"I honestly do not know what I wish, Doctor."

\*

After an hour or so of observation, McCoy was willing to release Spock from Sickbay -- "as long," he insisted, "as you go straight to your quarters and lie down, or meditate, or whatever it is you do to calm the hell down."

It would, Spock realized, take a good deal more than meditation to calm himself down -- and he scarcely knew whether calming himself down would even be possible.

It had all come back in a rush of memories, sensations, and emotions -- Jim had said he loved him. He had kissed him, caressed him, and shown him pleasure in ways he would never have dreamed possible. Just the thought of Jim's mouth as he had trailed hot, wet kisses down his chest and stomach before taking...

*Stop, Spock. Stop, now.* Jim had yet to awaken from the Waamini -- and once he did, it was highly unlikely that he would remember their time on the planet's surface. Before he had left Sickbay, he had noticed that Jim's blue robe was still in the bag at the foot of his bed; without really knowing why, he had taken it with him.

Did he not wish for Jim to remember? After all, the Waamini, though it had temporarily destroyed their inhibitions, had still caused them to reveal their deepest feelings -- and Jim had said he loved him. He had told him repeatedly, and then had shown him in every way possible -- and there was no reason for Spock to disbelieve him.

Moreover, Spock had told Jim he loved him -- did he not wish for Jim to remember that?

Rolling over onto his stomach, he buried his face in his pillow and tried to sleep -- though he knew there was a very high likelihood that he would not succeed.

Vulcans, it turned out, did occasionally dream after all. And daydream. And -- as Spock learned to his enduring discomfort -- fantasize.

It was another nineteen hours before Jim finally awakened. McCoy, stopping by Spock's quarters to examine him yet again, assured Spock that Jim had not suffered adverse effects from the Waamini, other than the slight disorientation that he himself had experienced.

"I sent him to his quarters to get his bearings -- don't know how long that'll take. When he's cleared for duty again, I'll let you know." He looked at Spock, long and searchingly. "And I know you took the other robe -- which I'd bet money was Jim's, wasn't it?"

Spock's downcast eyes were answer enough, and McCoy sighed gustily. "Don't know what you're afraid of, Spock. I don't know what the hell happened down there -- don't want to, frankly -- but I know the two of you well enough to know that you're both good men. You wouldn't have done anything down there that you needed to be ashamed of."

He waited for Spock to look up to meet his eyes again. "I also know the two of you well enough to know what kind of truth you two might have told one another when you didn't have any other choice." Spock opened his mouth to reply, to argue, to... he did not know what he would have said when the doctor raised a preemptive hand to stop him.

"I've been Jim Kirk's best friend for enough years now that there are things I know. And one of the things I know is that although he'd die sooner than make you uncomfortable by admitting it, he's in love with you. And I'm sure as hell not your best friend -- God forbid -- but it doesn't take a particularly perceptive person to figure out that your whole 'unemotional Vulcan' act goes right out the window when it comes to Jim." He sighed yet again. "Can't fool me -- and I don't rightly know why you seem so anxious to fool yourself."

He had turned to leave the room when a flash of blue in Spock's closet caught his eye. "You can't even leave Jim's robe out of your sight, can you?" McCoy shook his head bemusedly. "Y'know, Spock, there's no shame in being happy if you can. Hell, it's right there -- *he's* right there. Just be happy, Spock. It's not that hard."

Perhaps not -- but it seemed easier still to avoid the confrontation he knew was coming with Jim.

By dint of carefully monitoring Jim's location aboard the Enterprise, Spock managed to be where Jim was not for 30.6 hours before Jim called him on his communicator.

"Spock here."

"And exactly where would *here* be, Spock? Because try as I might to find you, I haven't seen hide nor hair of you since we were on Siri Prime -- and you know damn well we need to debrief after that away mission." He could not tell from Jim's disembodied voice whether he was angry, or upset, or simply confused -- but it was plain that he was not happy.

"I am currently on Observation Deck Three, Captain." He had spent a good deal of time there over the past few days; there was very little to do in terms of real work as they continued to orbit the planet, and Spock had found his quarters to be too confining. He found some slight measure of respite from his rushing thoughts up there in the near-darkness, watching the cool black of the sky punctuated with the vivid sparkle of stars and the bright smudges of faraway galaxies.

"So I see." Somehow -- had he turned off his own location device? -- Jim had managed to come up behind Spock without warning. But even without turning around, Spock could feel Jim's presence -- the smell that was fresh and uniquely Jim, the vibrant energy that seemed to fill any space that Jim entered.

He did not know how much longer he would be able to fight these feelings that compelled him toward Jim -- and he truly did not understand why he felt it necessary to try.

Spock turned, then, to face a toweringly angry Captain James T. Kirk.

"Explain your actions, Commander. You've intentionally avoided me for days, and I want to know why."

Spock was grateful that the Waamini was well out of his system. "I believed, Captain, that you required rest after your ordeal on Siri Prime, and --"

"Bullshit," Jim spat.

"I beg your pardon, Captain?"

"You heard me. I said, bullshit! Try again, Commander -- and see if you can make it the truth this time." Spock was startled to see a stricken look flicker across Jim's face. "Or is the truth just too damn distasteful?"

"Jim?" Spock was lost, now -- something was wrong, and he had no idea what it was.

"Bones said you forgot what happened down there -- that it took holding the Tuhuman robe again, for you to remember it, and that you were freaked out but fine once you got your memories back. That you made off with my robe, thinking I'd need it to remember as well."

Spock nodded, unsure of how to reply.

"Well, surprise, Spock. I remembered it all, right away, soon as I opened my eyes. Remembered telling you I loved you -- remembered hearing it back -- remembered... hell, you know what I remembered. Woke up by myself in Sickbay to find out that the man who'd said he loved me wasn't there waiting for me to wake up -- that instead, he'd run in the other direction as fast as he could. That he couldn't bear to be anywhere near me."

Spock felt a cold dread creep through him -- he had been a coward, and had been afraid to face what he and Jim had shared. Now, he had hurt Jim deeply, and made him think that somehow he was not loved.

"You mistake my motives, Jim."

Jim's voice was cold in response. "Do I?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that you are, in fact, far braver than I?"

"No. Not ever."

"I find myself thinking of what Iniwa said to us at one point: 'Hiding is shameful, and not for the strong, or the brave.' And yet I hid from you, Jim -- and I caused you pain, and for that I am ashamed."

The anger left Jim's face, leaving only a vulnerability that very few people ever saw there; Spock knew only that he wanted that look to go away.

"Jim?"

Silence.

"I can only ask you to forgive me; do you think that is possible?"

He shrugged. "I don't know why not," Jim replied quietly. "I know you didn't mean to hurt me."

"And yet you do not understand," Spock went on, frustrated at his own inability to express himself.

"Understand what, Spock?" Jim still looked as though he were waiting for something awful to happen -- and that simply could not continue.

"Understand this." Without further thought, Spock seized Jim by the shoulders and swung him around so that he was pinned against the Plexiglas of the window. "Understand that now that I have you, and I have your love, I will not do without them ever again." He leaned down then, claiming Jim's mouth in a kiss of fierce possession.

Jim froze, stunned for a brief moment, before responding to the kiss with a low moan in Spock's mouth that made him feel as though his very blood was on fire. Before long, the fierce clash of teeth and tongues had turned into a frantic ripping away of clothes as the two wrestled for dominance, first against the window and then, moments later, on the floor.

\*

Much later, they lay sweaty and tangled together on the floor of Observation Deck Three, only the sound of their gradually quieting breathing breaking the silence. Spock was beginning to wonder about prosaic details such as where the various pieces of their uniforms had gone; after all, they would eventually have to leave the deck, and it would be unseemly for them to do so in their current state.

At just that moment, they both heard the beeping of a code being entered at the door.

"Did you not use your Captain's code to lock the door?" Spock was fairly sure Jim had done so -- though his concentration had been focused elsewhere at the time.

"Yup -- it's Bones. Medical override." Jim blushed slightly -- endearingly, Spock thought -- at the prospect of McCoy walking in on them like this. Best friend or not, it was... awkward.

"Great -- what the hell are we going to tell him?"

“The only thing that is necessary, Jim -- the truth.”

# Babel

## Seperis

"I hate Babel," Jim says without reference to context, stretched out on his ready room sofa with an expression that might have fit the New Federation Standard dictionary entry for 'sulking'. "I have to be nice to diplomats. I have to dress up. I have to give a shit about politics. Do I look like I care about politics? Do I look like I even know what they're talking about?"

"No," Spock admitted after a moment of contemplation; the neck of his uniform was unbuttoned and he'd deliberately refused to permit Yeoman Rand to polish his boots. While fresh from a truncated but surprisingly busy leave on Risa, the details have already entered public discourse in a way that can no longer be simply considered 'gossip', even though Spock can consider it nothing else. Celebrity and Starfleet commissions were never meant to mix when the subject was captain of a starship and a decade younger than the mean age of those of his peers that had achieved the rank.

Of course, that would assume that James Kirk had peers; his age was also a story of how he could count himself as among the elite but not one of them. The history other officers built with classmates who shared the duties and drudgeries of being an officer before a captain is not one that he can never share. He has no peers, in the strictest sense; seventy-two percent of them had died with Vulcan, and the children currently filling Starfleet Academy have as little in common with him and his remaining classmates as he does with the older officers who never look at him but to find fault.

He remembers Pike's murmur, laced with regret: *He's so young, Spock. Too young.* Spock had understood what Admiral Pike had meant then, finding it even truer now than it had been then; the human body Jim wears hasn't yet reached thirty, but the mind within has far outstripped it. It makes Spock sometimes wish that the gossip of Jim's activities on Risa reaching promiscuity most often found in felines--or so the wires suggest, at length--was true in more than simple fact. A young captain is forgiven a thousand peccadillos and habits, and this one, the man who defeated Nero, would be forgiven far more. There can be no surprise in young Jim Kirk acting his age; that, Spock thinks, is the entire problem.

Jim snaps a hand out, finger pointed in Spock's general direction. "Give the boy a prize. God. And McCoy says he won't fake an embarrassing social disease in my file either, not after all the work he did to make sure I didn't have any." Jim glances at him, waiting for disapproval; Spock offers it on command. "You and Uhura are presenting on sound waves, right?"

Spock tilts his head thoughtfully; he supposes mentioning that he is aware of who had accessed their paper since they'd posted the draft to the ship's public boards would be 'cheating'. "The fact that the Devit evolved to use subspace as their primary form of communication is unprecedented," he says to a man who Nyota permits, on occasion, to review her work. "The Academy's xenolinguistic department has been rather insistent that we share our initial findings."

("The benefits of sexual competition in academia," Nyota had said thoughtfully. "It wasn't like he was going to stop hitting on me, so why should the physics department get exclusive domain? Xenolinguistics needs genius as much as engineering does. And you wouldn't believe who I had to get to peer review before I got him up to snuff.")

Jim's eyes flicker; his mastery of sarcasm has never been in question no matter the language, and Spock does not think it betrays the beliefs of his people to assure Jim was aware of its manifestation in the Vulcan language. "Sounds boring," he says, closing his eyes. "Tell me when we get there. I have a thing and then another thing--"

"And I understand you've been invited to lecture on situational tactics in combat situations," Spock adds with a careful lack of expression. "I admit I look forward to it."

That gets Jim's undivided attention. The blue eyes flicker open. "It's at eight in the morning. On the last day of the conference."

Spock looks his acceptance that Jim understands how to utilize a schedule.

Jim rolls his eyes, sitting up in a single fluid motion. "You're welcome to show up, but trust me when I say, I'm pretty sure my hangover is going to keep me in bed for the remainder of the day. Possibly two, and with any kind of luck, no memory of anything I did but maybe a commemorative tattoo." Jim ponders. "Maybe I should work up a design now?"

"You could avoid overindulgence."

Jim grins, leaning an elbow on the arm of the couch. "Now Spock, why would I want to do that?"

\*

The Babel Conference began its existence as a diplomatic exchange by United Earth that grew into something both more and less; diplomacy may be still considered its most important purpose, but its position as a neutral territory for the various members of both Federation and Unallied worlds had expanded its influence in academic circles, both within Starfleet and within the various universities and educational institutions that made up the explored quadrant. Even rare Klingon emissaries were known to bring along their Thought Masters in the rare time between armed neutrality and armistice, because politics may be the province of governments, but academia bows to no one.

Spock and Lieutenant Uhura accompany Jim and Dr. McCoy to the welcoming reception; Jim's relationship with the formalities and courtesies of Starfleet officers is strict in letter and calculating in spirit. Tradition has long restricted the reception to Captains and all ranks above, men and women who stand alone in space and command Starfleet's outposts and ships; the only guests were spouses who share the burdens of marriage to the Starfleet's elite in tightly knit clusters that scatter the room. This is where the loneliness of command is discussed in singular, because the accomplishments of a ship belong to the Captain alone.



Jim brings his three highest officers and Spock wonders if Jim would ever admit the implicit message that his crew has long understood. Jim is the most famous captain in Starfleet history and has proved in three years that his place is in the Captain's chair; what he tells them when he introduces his officers is that what he has accomplished belongs to his crew. What he doesn't say is what they do not wish to hear: a captain's success is the success of his ship, and no Federation captain stands alone.

Jim thinks they indulge him in flouting tradition; Spock has yet to inform Jim they understand the compliment and the honor that Jim would be horrified to admit. He can't deny, however, that he does look forward to Jim's expression when he tells him; he has promised Lieutenant Uhura and Dr. McCoy they may be present to see it as well.

"Eight o'clock in the morning on the last day of the conference. And here I thought we weren't students in the Academy jockeying for position," Nyota says acidly when he invites her to share his evening meal after the formalities have been observed and they return to the ship before the morning's open ceremonies. The end of their physical relationship has changed very little between them but where they spent their nights. "It would probably help," she adds, with the faintest trace of malicious pleasure, "if he'd stop being good at his job and rubbing their faces in it. One good failure and Starfleet would be happy. They really thought he'd coast on Nero and prove Pike wrong."

"We were scheduled for the hour before the midday meal," Spock says, not needing to glance at the schedule on the data padd in Nyota's hand. "Lieutenant Commander Scott has been assigned to present his transporter theory against the ambassador's reception."

"It's almost like they want to make it clear that the *Enterprise* crew doesn't have much worth talking about, isn't it?" Picking up her fork, she stabs a vegetable with unnecessary force. "Not that I'd accuse the Babel committee of being dicks--"

Spock raises an eyebrow; not for the first time, he recognizes the applicability of psychological theory when it relates to sons and their methods in choosing their partners based on familial familiarity.

"--but this is getting ridiculous." Tossing down her fork, she frowned at the datapadd. "He's going to skip it and piss them off instead of letting them finally get a semi-public and completely aboveboard way to go after him. He should have been a diplomat; we'd either be in the middle of a galaxy-wide revolution or a new *Pax Romana* by now." She frowns. "I don't blame him, don't get me wrong--"

"Politics."

Nyota sighs, leaning an elbow on the table. "Pike's recruitment for the Academy has been controversial; he's been pulling hard from the colonies and the newer Federation member planets and less from the traditional sources for Starfleet officers on Earth and on the founding member planets. The Academy is protesting they have to lower the educational standard--"

"Most of not all of the recruits have easily surpassed the traditional Academy students by their second year--"

"Education in this case isn't about academics." Nyota reaches for the bread absently, splitting it between her fingers before absently beginning to shred the interior. "It's an open secret Jim didn't complete his secondary education and the Academy didn't even bother asking for transcripts when he

presented his application. He's had a place there since the day he was born."

"Captain Kirk completed coursework in command with an academic emphasis on linguistics and applied physics in ship engineering in three years."

"And now you know how Jim Kirk reacts to being told it's okay if he's stupid, they'll give him a ship anyway. You know, when they're ready." Nyota's smile fades. "They think Jim's fucking with them when he attributes everything to his crew; they also think it's true. They have to; they have to think that he's not any different than any other Starfleet legacy coasting on his family name, no matter how smart he is. This," she picks up the datapadd, "is supposed to be a message. To his crew."

Spock lets out a breath; despite being the son of a diplomat, familiar with all the machinations of politics in both the abstract and concrete, he'd still chosen not to see. "I had wondered--"

"He knows it, too." Putting the data padd back on the table, Nyota looks away. "Are you still considering Captain Voltran's offer? Not every day you're guaranteed a captaincy in three years on the Laurentian Fleet's flagship." Her eyes flicker up, mouth curving in a rueful smile. "Communications is twice the size of the *Enterprise*. So maybe I toured it when I was on leave. I liked the ship. And the increase in rank isn't anything to sneeze at."

"True." Spock folds his hands on the table. "I sent my response when we received our orders. Jim was rather insistent; apparently, he felt his efforts at a recommendation letter should be rewarded."

Nyota wrinkles her nose. "Same. He pointed out he'd spellchecked it and everything." Picking up her glass, she raises it in playful salute. "To Jim Kirk, who believes 'letting go' and 'kicking people off his ship' are the same thing."

Spock picks up his fork. "Indeed."

\*

To no one's surprise, Jim shows up at their presentation with the general impression that it was the first room with an available chair, of which there are unsurprisingly many. Subspace lingual theory is an extremely narrow field, and few have either the interest or the ability to follow Lieutenant Uhura's leaps in linguistic theory; fewer still see the value of being seen attending the lecture at a conference where as much importance is placed on what you choose to attend as the actual content of the lectures. Those with the academic background and interest, however, care very little for politics, and Spock is anticipating further correspondence with several of them after the conference is over.

Jim, being Jim, had skipped out on two high-profile roundtable discussions led by newly promoted Admiral Nogura and Commodore Wilson, entertaining himself with telling highly embellished anecdotes about the *Enterprise's* most recent missions, most of which seem to involve an unusually attractive native who wished to acquaint him with their local customs and occasionally, a ceremony declaring Jim an omnipotent deity.

Jim's performance of a thoughtless, reckless captain would be more effective if Spock wasn't aware of the datapadd that Jim thinks is better concealed than it is, or that Jim wasn't surreptitiously taking notes with the assumption that the chair in front of him hid his actions.

("Just watch," Nyota says gleefully during the fifteen minute period of refreshment before they begin the second half the lecture and Jim mentions his need for a drink. "He'll sulk until I send him my notes. He was always weak in tonals, you know; drove him nuts.")

Dr. McCoy accompanies Jim back to the room for the second half of the lecture, the emergency medicine presentation being somewhat less informative than he had hoped. With them were several Unaffiliated planet representatives who had apparently escaped a reception the Federation had organized for them with inadequate refreshments that Jim had helpfully provided before mentioning that a new theory on biological processing of subspace wave frequencies was currently in progress.

The Federation did not have have an unblemished record in sharing technological advances with Unaffiliated Worlds for various reasons both practical and philosophical; exchanges such as the Babel conference were one of the few methods by which non-Federation members were able to gain access to the academic theory if not the technology itself.

Jim, smug in the accomplishment of persuading thirty Unaffiliated delegates to leave what he'll term as "the most boring reception in history; even Pike was falling asleep!", returns to tapping something on his datapadd with a look of incipient boredom. Spock already knows it will appear on his console with a "Admit it, you made up 'variations in multi-tonal subspace frequencies' just to fuck with people," and from the look on Nyota's face before she begins the second part of their lecture, she's resigned herself to the same with the implication that knowledge is best shared in inadequate lighting with a musical accompaniment.

("One day, I'm going to say yes just to see the panic," she tells Spock with gleeful malice. "Totally worth it.")

Jim and Dr. McCoy leave just Nyota begins accepting questions, doubtless to prepare for the evening banquet with the assistance of synthehol; when they meet in the transporter room before the banquet, however, Jim's good mood is neither a simulacrum nor the result of McCoy's predilection for mint juleps.

"Pike wanted to see the ship since the last refit," is all Jim says, but Spock thinks of Pike in the reception watching Jim charm the representatives of planets who have few reasons to think kindly of Starfleet and many to distrust the captains who were often their first introduction to the Federation, and remembers how many of the ones that at the lecture were from planets the *Enterprise* had discovered and more importantly, how many were not.

"Lieutenant Sulu and Ensign Chekov do not plan to attend?" Spock asks.

"Officer's dinner starts later," Jim says with more than a trace of envy. "I heard stories about those dinners. By dinner, I mean--"

"I know," Nyota says with a laugh as the transporter chief starts the last power refresh cycle in preparation for transport. "Remember when Gaila was invited after she worked out those new

algorithms for extended message transmissions in hostile space our third year? Not that she would tell us *where* she was, but--"

"Yeah," Jim says wistfully. "She still doesn't remember how she got that tattoo." Shaking himself, Jim gives them all a frown. "You can still get out of it. God, I wish I could get out of it." Jim gives Dr. McCoy a narrow look. "But no, I'm perfectly. Healthy."

"And I told you," Dr. McCoy says serenely, "syphilis is extinct."

"When advances in medicine lead to me having to give a lecture at eight in the morning, I'm not seeing the benefit to humanity," Jim complains as the transporter hums. Nyota glances at Dr. McCoy and nods at Spock before following Jim to the transporter pad. Spock positions himself behind Dr. McCoy as the transporter comes online.

They materialize just outside the entry to the complex network of buildings that make up Babel's famous conference and academic center. From outside, the sheer immensity of Babel is invisible; a large but unassuming building that hosts the city's musical and theatrical performances.

"We named it Babel," Jim says softly. "Back then, United Earth had a sense of humor about itself. We'd finally figured out that homogeneity isn't an actual goal to be admired; we achieved union because we'd finally accepted being one people didn't mean we all had to be the same people. We were a people and also a thousand peoples, with a single language and a thousand languages, with the same goals and a million different ones. The Federation was negotiated in San Francisco, but it started here, where we learned that the word 'people' wasn't the exclusive venue of the human race."

Jim pauses.

"To get here, every planet in the Federation and Unaffiliated space has to petition the Council for admittance and passage on one of only sixteen ships with Federation clearance to even know Babel exists, much less know where it is or how to get there. They have to pass three separate Federation security screens and each delegate's life history is examined in excruciatingly boring detail. And that's just to get you on the ship; permission to step foot on the planet's surface is a whole other circus.

"The *\*Enterprise\** was the sixteenth ship given the coordinates for Babel and the codes to get through the security network. It's been thirty years since the last time the Federation commissioned a new ship for Babel duty; no one in the Fleet except the captains of those ships knows who has Babel clearance. Remember our first yearly review and they locked us down? One week, seven days, eight hours a day, they drilled us on every goddamn thing we'd done the entire year, no communication and a lot of seriously humorless security watching every minute. I couldn't even remember half of it, but I still had to defend it." Jim shrugs. "I was pretty sure they were getting ready for a court martial or something and it would have been nice to remember what I did to get one before it started, you know?"

Spock nods, though Jim never looks away from the pitted exterior of the building that was built when the Earth's most powerful empire had just emerged from the remains of Republican Rome.

"The last day, I was called into a room filled with admirals and they told me my ship had been cleared for Babel duty. It's the most open secret in the Federation; the conference that decides admission to the Federation, that negotiates treaties with Unallied planets and Empires, where we share new

technology and new ideas because we don't need to be a single people to be *people*. Sixteen ships in the entire Federation are responsible for the future of the galaxy. And the *Enterprise* is one of them."

McCoy's mouth quirks. "You keep this up, someone's going to figure out you like being a captain for more than the free drinks."

"I do like that part a lot," Jim says thoughtfully. "Which clashes with consciousness at eight am, but we do what we have to, right?" Shaking himself, Jim straightens, glancing at Nyota in surprise when she takes his arm with a grave formality that doesn't match her grin. "You realize this is just encouragement, right?"

Nyota murmurs a response that makes Jim flush and laugh; as they walk toward the security waiting for them and possibly speculating on why they're lingering in the middle of a deserted city square, McCoy falls into step beside him, letting their pace slow enough for Nyota and Jim to be out of hearing distance. "I don't know what changed his mind, but it wasn't Pike. He was frustrated, but mostly with conference for indulging in petty politics to appease a few Starfleet officers indulging in a fit of spite."

Spock nods.

"Thing is," Dr. McCoy says slowly, "you know how he gets when he thinks he's being left out. Like, everything in the goddamn world is a test on whether he really deserves that chair. Can't blame him; Starfleet doesn't mind reminding him exactly how he got it."

Spock stops short. "He will host a lecture that he's well aware will be a forum to draw attention to what Starfleet deems his mistakes during our missions because he considers it a requirement of an officer?"

"It only sounds crazy until you remember this is Jim we're talking about. You haven't heard Scotty's attempts at public speaking, have you? It's a nightmare," Dr. McCoy adds with a shudder. "The Q&A? I've seen battles that ended with fewer casualties."

"I do not see how Lieutenant Commander's deficiencies as a public speaker--"

Dr. McCoy grins. "I'll let you ponder the illogical mess that we know as Jim Kirk while I get something to drink. Come on, the *Enterprise* crew has a reputation to uphold."

\*

Admiral Nogura's promotion was recent enough that even Jim was aware he couldn't avoid direct interaction and with Nyota in attendance offered his congratulations with all the charm that he was famous for both in utilization and more often, in its deliberate absence. Telling Jim that his constant state of armed neutrality with Starfleet's highest officers was only exacerbating the situation had only taught Jim to practice subtlety.

Jim Kirk's attempts at subtlety were not an improvement by any definition of the word. Watching Nogura's slow smile at a remark of Nyota's should not be enough for Dr. McCoy to relax into his seat by

the buffet so abruptly he seemed to have lost bone density, but Spock realizes his own breathing has evened and not for the first time, considers the possibility that his time on the *\*Enterprise\** has eroded his discipline unacceptably.

"The thing is," Dr. McCoy says, having finished his glass in a single long drink, "it's classical conditioning in action right there. "Okay, I'm not saying Jim would ever have been great with authority—"

Spock looks his concern that Dr. McCoy's drink contains something other than synthehol.

"I know!" he answers defensively. "I'm saying--" McCoy pauses, looking at his empty glass. "Actually, don't know where I was going with that."

"Perhaps you meant that Jim's--" Spock pauses, "--relationship with the admiralty and his fellow captains would be less strained if he was more conversant with the unwritten rule surrounding the social and political etiquette involved in the chain of command."

"No, not that. It's more, if he wasn't so conversant with it, they'd forgive him faster for completely failing to even try. He knows what he's doing; what Starfleet wasn't already in his blood Winona nailed into him between missions, trust me. He just doesn't get why he shouldn't have to fight for something his name and Nero handed him on a silver platter."

Dr. McCoy gets to his feet long enough to get two glasses from a passing newly commissioned Academy graduate acting servitor and looking a little dazed. Spock studies the wide-eyed amazement and excitement on the young face and then looks at Jim talking to Nogura. The new ensign is no older Jim was the day he was promoted to Captain, but even then, Jim had not looked this young. None of them had, the smallest class that had ever graduated the Academy since its founding, receiving commissions that should have been years beyond their reach to fill the positions of all those who had been lost.

The glass is abruptly plucked from his hand; Nyota grins at Dr. McCoy's, "You left him alone with an *admiral*? We'll be court martialed before dessert."

"They're fine" she says, turning enough to direct their gaze toward Admiral Pike and a slim, dark-skinned woman wearing the insignia of Commodore. "That's Commodore Esra; she was one of Starfleet's most successful recruiters in the United States of Africa. She's been working with Pike on expanding the Academy's profile for new recruits." She pauses, possibly to provide emphasis. "She's also currently involved in personnel assignment."

Nyota finishes her drink as Spock watches the conversation between Jim and Commodore Esra grow unexpectedly animated. "Perhaps we should join them," he says as Nyota eases Dr. McCoy unwillingly to his feet. "Captain Kirk seems to find their discussion quite fascinating."

"Think he'd actually ask for recommendations to replace us when we're standing right there?" Nyota asks brightly. Dr. McCoy seems to have some trouble swallowing; Nyota absently reaches over to take his glass before the remaining liquid spills across the millennia-old rugs. "Let's find out."

"I hate you both," Dr. McCoy says weakly, snatching a glass from passing tray. "Right. Let's get this over with."

\*

Attendance at formal Starfleet functions has certain unspoken but nonetheless strict requirements in both the correct time for arrival and the minimum time required to negotiate various mandatory conversations with other attendees before being permitted to retire. Those rules are far less binding for them; only Jim is required to be present the entire four and a half hours.

The first time Jim had asked them to attend as his guests, he'd made that very clear. "Seriously. It's like hell. Or intro to comparative philosophical processes in non-corporeal life, which--right, you probably liked that." Jim gave them a look of disgust. "And you know you don't actually have to come, right?"

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it," Nyota had said as she stepped on to the transporter pad. "It can't be that bad."

She was in error, as was Jim; Spock had not found that particular course enlightening.

Spock pauses in his conversation with Admiral Pike to see Jim watching Captain Voltain intercept Nyota at the buffet table, before he turns back to Admiral Pike. Nyota lingers for a few minutes before returning with two glasses. "Captain," she says, catching Jim's eye despite his best efforts to avoid it, "do you mind--"

"You're going to the fun party now, aren't you?" Jim says with the faintest trace of a whine. Finishing his drink, he plucks hers from her hand. "Go with your deity of choice, Lieutenant. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"I wasn't aware that was possible," she answered, taking formal leave from Admiral Pike before bending for friendly kiss. "Mind if I steal McCoy?"

"Go for it." Jim slumps back in his seat, glancing up at Spock and then away "You too. I don't need handholding to play nice with the admirals."

"Yes, you do," Nyota answers. "But we'll pretend to believe you."

"Whatever." Taking Nyota's other drink with a "It's not like you need it," Jim wanders toward a knot of people near one of the windows, leaving Admiral Pike free to say, looking grim, "Captain Voltain seems to be under the impression that Jimmy's charming." His eyes fix on Spock suspiciously. "Never let me find out why."

"Yes, sir," Spock answers honestly as Nyota starts toward the door. "Have a good evening, Admiral."

Admiral Pike looks at his empty glass with something like regret. "You as well, Mr. Spock."

\*

Jim is one of the last to leave, pausing outside the doors to find his communicator; when the last voices fade into silence, Jim takes a deep breath, expression unguarded for the first time since he was informed of Captain Voltain's offer and embarked on an unsubtle campaign to convince them to take it.

Leaning against the wall, Jim looks at his communicator for a moment, then shakes himself.

"Transporter, I'll be out in a minute. Prepare to--"

"Captain."

Jim's head snaps around, blinking at Spock with unconcealed shock. "Spock?"

"If I could have a moment, Captain?"

Jim hesitates before saying, "Belay that," closing the communicator reluctantly. "What are you doing here?" Before Spock can do more than raise an eyebrow, Jim adds, "You know, I have that thing in the morning, so I'd better--wow, okay, no, even I don't buy that. You can stop with the eyebrow now." Tucking the communicator away, Jim leans against the wall. "What can I do for you, Mr. Spock?"

"I believe I owe you an apology, Captain."

Jim's expression melts into confusion. "Um. What?"

"Despite your efforts to conceal it, I am aware you are no longer comfortable in my presence. Further prevarication is not necessary; I--understand why you avoid my company."

"Spock, I haven't been..." Jim stops, giving Spock a glance filled with something between guilt and frustration before looking away. "I'm not avoiding you," he says after a moment of thought, staring at the wall just behind Spock's shoulder. "I've just been--" Jim's eyes flicker to Spock uncertainly. "Why would you think--"

"I assume," Spock answers calmly, "that you interpreted my--preference for your company as attraction and did not--"

"No, that wasn't why--" Jim catches himself, and groans softly, tilting his head back against the wall and shutting his eyes. "Nevermind, start over. Spock I never thought it was anything like that. Don't worry about it."

"Curious: I had assumed my intent was obvious."

"It wasn't obv--" Jim stops short; for the first time in weeks, when he meets Jim's eyes, Jim doesn't look away. "What?"

"Captain--"

"Drop the captain shit, Spock. Chain of command has nothing to do with this."

"The Captain of my ship formally requested an interview where it was suggested I evaluate Captain Voltain's offer in terms of advancing my career in Starfleet--"



Of *course* you should be advancing your career; I don't expect you and Uhura--it's a Laurentian fucking flagship! It's a promotion! Why are we arguing about this?"

"Captain--"

"Exactly. I'm your Captain. And it's my duty to--"

"Despite your efforts on behalf of what you feel was your *duty*, neither Lieutenant Uhura or I have any intention of accepting Captain Voltrain's offer. I would say your behavior since we informed you of our decision is more than unusually irrational, but you seem to regard that as a challenge."

Jim scowls, pacing a few restless steps away. "I'm not the one that turned down the Laurentian flagship here, Spock. Mirror, Spock, try it. And what the hell, you thought I was *throwing you off my ship*--"

"Indeed. In light of your assurances, it is obvious my logic was in error."

Jim stops short, eyes narrowing before he lets out a breath and reluctantly smiles. "Point, Mr. Spock. I apologize--I know, not logical, just roll with it. God, I hate Babel. The sooner we're out of here, the better." Taking out his communicator, Jim smiles at Spock. "Ready to get out of here?"

Spock nods and follows Jim to the door.

\*

"...and we never let Scotty present anything, ever. I get he's a crazy genius theorist, but making up new laws for physics doesn't mean you get to make up new words to describe it."

"I reviewed his paper--"

"Been nice if he'd stuck to that," Jim says with a sigh as they wander through the dark, quiet halls. With third shift reduced to a skeleton and most of the crew on leave on the planet, the ship seems deserted, the hum of the engines clearly audible in the quiet. "He was okay up until the questions," Jim says, humor fading. "His old commander showed up."

Spock glances at Jim's face; despite the low light, he can the tight line of Jim's mouth, tension building again. "I do not think the...animosity between Lieutenant Commander Scott and his former commander is due to his service on the *Enterprise*."

Jim gives him a sharp look. "Where did you get the idea--"

"You are the Captain of the *Enterprise*; your duties do not extend to taking responsibility for Starfleet's...prejudices."

Jim's alarm is strong enough that Spock can sense it, even with the inches that separate them. "I don't know where you got the idea--"

"If you wish to be subtle, I would avoid kidnapping members of the unaffiliated planets to listen to a lecture--"

"It's an important advancement in communication," Jim argues. "Who doesn't like technological advancement?"

"Lieutenant Uhura and I were aware when our request to speak at Babel was granted that--"

"They'd use it as a new and creative way to remind you that you're on the wrong ship?"

"It was neither new nor was it creative."

"Old, petty, and predictable, that's much better, my mistake." Jim shakes his head as they come to his door. "Lights," he snaps as he drops on the small couch. "And you went along with it."

"It was," Spock admits, seating himself at Jim's impatient gesture, "a fascinating subject of study."

"So fuck Starfleet, right, that...makes sense." Jim slumps into the cushions. "Scott knew his commander would be there. Not like that was a secret or anything."

"Lieutenant Scott is a brilliant engineer," Spock says. "Perhaps he could use further instruction in public speaking."

"Or just someone else to do it for him," Jim says, staring up at the ceiling. "I want a drink; you want something?"

"Water will be--"

"We did talk about the human custom of strengthening friendship with the application of alcohol, right?" Jim says as he gets to his feet.

"Your soliloquy on the advantages and disadvantages of the 'beer bong' was enlightening."

"I did thorough research on the subject." Pausing at the replicator, Jim murmurs something before two glasses materialize, condensation forming on the translucent surface almost immediately. The liquid within is a pale yellow with a trace of green; Spock identifies mint and sucrose beneath the sharper burn of synthehol. Forgoing the sofa, Jim sits on the edge of the small table facing Spock before taking a drink. "Mint julep. Ask Bones about them one day; my senior thesis was shorter."

"I am curious," Spock says slowly, watching Jim's fingers tighten involuntarily around the glass, "why you have decided to attend --"

"My own lecture?" Jim shrugs. "You know how much I like the sound of my own voice."

"Jim..."

"Just because half of Starfleet wants me to think the only reason I'm here is because I got the guy who killed my dad doesn't mean I have to provide the proof. So I'll be a good officer and let them rake me over the coals for the fun of it." Jim looks at Spock over the rim of his glass. "How's that for personal growth?"

Spock thinks of Jim tonight at the banquet and his reaction to Captain Voltrain's offer; Jim taking surreptitious notes regarding subspace harmonics and attending Lieutenant Commander Scott's attempt at explaining how the laws of physics are less immutable than nature would have once suggested. "Dr. McCoy has often complained that you do not allow yourself sufficient time to rest. It would be logical to take advantage of the opportunity presented and consider his recommendation."

Jim's glass pauses mid-rise. "What?"

"I understand the closing brunch will begin at eleven hundred hours and continue until the closing ceremonies," Spock answers mildly. "As your presence is not required until then--"

"Are you..." Jim looks at his glass as if he was unsure of its function before drinking the remainder and setting it aside. "You--*you*--are telling me to blow off Starfleet? To sleep?"

"No." Setting his glass aside, Spock shifts to the edge of the chair, waiting as Jim's expression begins to melt into uncertainty. Carefully, Spock reaches for Jim's glass, aware of Jim's shiver at the brush of their fingers. "I would simply prefer to have your undivided attention for myself."

"You've always had that." Jim's hand closes over the edge of the table, blue eyes narrowing. "You knew that all along, didn't you?"

Prevarication would be an insult to them both. "Yes."

Jim nods, looking away. "Right. So--"

"Jim." Jim's skin is human-cool under his fingers, the faintest roughness of stubble along the line of his jaw, soft at the hollow of his temples. Jim's eyes fall closed, leaning into every careful touch. "I knew. And I wanted more."

Jim looks at him, blue eyes hazy. "I don't think--" Jim draws in a soft breath when Spock tilts his head up. "Are we still talking? *Why*?"

"I wish to be clear."

Jim eases back, studying him for a long moment before he smiles, slow and pleased. "So this is a negotiation."

"It is not." Spock hesitates; the reasons he has avoided this thus far have not changed. "I understand that humans tend to form...casual attachments."

"Spock, you are the *least* casual thing in my life. Possibly in my entire life from birth on."

Spock attempts not to grit his teeth, aware he's failing. "Do not be facetious, Jim."

"If you're saying you're worried I'll fuck around on you..." Jim trails off, uncomfortable. "I won't. I mean, not that my reputation to date would support that, but I won't."

Spock nods, aware that changes nothing in his reservations, but it also does not change his intent. "Very well," and loses both words and their meaning when Jim kisses him, the angle awkward and uncertain, but no less surprising. It should not be a surprise; Jim throws himself at what he wants without hesitation. It's a skill that Spock could envy.

Jim pulls back, respiration more rapid than their activities thus far can account for. "I won't," he says, softer, more certain. "So could we--"

Spock stands up, pulling Jim to his feet and catching his mouth in a kiss before he finds his balance. Jim's very good at this, Spock is well aware; he has watched Jim with lovers before, the casual, easy skill that is displayed with unconscious, reflexive ease even constrained by the limits of what is acceptable to public view. It does not make his response any less genuine.

"Stop thinking now," Jim says, then abruptly pulls away; Spock has a moment to recognize the sparse accommodations of Jim's bedroom before a foot locks around his knee and unbalanced, he stumbles, reflexively catching himself on one hand as Jim's fingers lace around the back of his neck and pull him into another kiss, slower and somehow warmer. "Or you know, think all you want. About *me*."

"You are not easily ignored," Spock says honestly. A great deal would be different if the man did not fascinate him as much as the captain he followed. When he'd chosen this ship, he had anticipated that, given time, he'd grow to value a relationship with him beyond that required by duty and their positions on the ship. Perhaps he should have wondered at his own certainty, despite how short and somewhat acrimonious their acquaintance had been then.

Abruptly, he catches his breath, shocked at the feel of Jim's touch, human-cool and sure, tight around him. Jim watches him with an unreadable expression for a few long seconds, then abruptly reverses their positions, leaning forward to bite Spock's lip once, hard, then moves away before Spock can touch him, hands quick and efficient when they slide his uniform pants down and take him in his mouth.

It does not take long; Jim hums his easy enjoyment, and this close, Spock can sense the vague shapes that define the surface of Jim's mind, too vague to be more than feelings; the faintest trace of lingering surprise and wonder, the pleasure of having Spock in his bed, his enjoyment in what he's doing and Spock's response to it. Beneath it is something else, a shapeless mass that Spock cannot quite identify and does not touch, too close to the limits of what is permitted a telepath with the mind-blind without the ability to shield what is private. That limit is not something Spock has ever had to maintain during sex; he's aware of an almost subliminal irritation with it now.

Then the pleasure of Jim's mouth overtakes thought; as if from a distance, Spock hears his own breathing catch, pause, the growing *want* releasing abruptly in a sensory flood. Jim kisses him, satisfaction rolling off of him in waves, sharing the faintly bitter, metal-edged taste before he begins to draw away.

Jim, Spock realizes, is still fully dressed, despite the fact there is no reason he should be. Jim laughs softly, attempting to assist with the clasps of his uniform before Spock pushes his hands aside. The tan Jim had acquired on Risa has faded back to pale gold, easily discernible despite the darkness of the room. Jim likes to be touched, responding with murmured encouragement, quick catches of breath, fascinating sounds, with everything but his mind, a space of deliberate emptiness, flashed with occasional, involuntary slips, a flare of shocked *please* when Spock's fingers are inside him. "Spock," Jim says, voice rough, "no one likes a tease. Come on--"

*I like to watch you*, Spock thinks, deliberate and careful. Jim tips his head back against on a startled gasp, murmuring, "Whatever you want, just *don't stop*."

It's difficult to stop himself from reaching for Jim's mind when it's like this, teasing the edges of his awareness; it's nearly impossible when he's easing inside Jim and the words trail off into soft gasps and the pull of Jim's thoughts.

"You--" Jim suddenly grins, eyes shocked and blue beneath a fringe of sweat-slick hair, "--you don't have to--" *That's teasing. Show me.*

Jim's mind opens at a touch, offered without restraint, even the instinctual panic of the mind-blind to the feel of another presence. The few melds Spock had initiated between them had always been surprisingly easy, but the rigid ethics that governed such access had afforded him only tantalizing glimpses that he forced himself to disregard.

Time vanishes into the calceophony of sensation, Jim's pleasure thrumming through him, the complex web that was emotion and thought and sense-memory, the intensity of Jim's feelings for him; he's aware, somewhat distantly, of their bodies, the building twist of tension that releases in an abrupt, blinding shock of sensation that snaps him back into the limits of flesh enough to remember what they were doing. It's just enough, though, to deal with the practicalities, gently ease himself from the heat of Jim's body and shift them both beneath the layers of blankets to avoid the cool of the room before reaching for Jim's face, fingers settling over the psi-points, the words breathed against Jim's skin as his mind opens in eager welcome.

\*

"You still insist on attending."

Jim, seated on the edge of the bed, emerges from his thirty second contemplation of his boots with a blank look, as if he was unsure of their function, then abruptly begins to slide one on. "Kinda in a hurry, Spock, so--"

"The purpose of Lieutenant Commander Scott's lecture was to elaborate upon his recent discoveries in transporter technology; the attendance of his former commander was unexpected, but it did not change the original subject, merely--"

"If you can use the word 'merely', you're seriously underestimating what happened in that room."

"--added to Lieutenant Commander Scott's--"

"Stress level and brogue? Universal translator so did not help."

Spock concedes the point. "However, the reason you were scheduled to speak is being utilized as a forum to erode your credibility, despite the fact that Starfleet found no fault in your actions."

"Public humiliation never goes out of style," Jim concedes, putting on his other boot. "But this is about *me*, not my ship, and that's why I have to do it. Spock, if it was you, you wouldn't even hesitate."

"What I would require of myself I would not and do not require of you."

"Yeah, and I have pretty low standards myself," Jim says flatly, "so good to know we're in agreement. My crew, however, deserves something better."

"You do not need to prove yourself to us."

Jim get to his feet, looking at Spock for the first time. "My crew is the only one that I should have to." Jim frowns at him, eyes skimming over him in belated realization of what Spock is wearing. "You're wearing a dress uniform. Why--"

"I had anticipated your decision," Spock answers calmly. "If you are ready, there is sufficient time to procure coffee before we--"

"Oh no. So not happening. Spock. I don't think I can deal with you--with *anyone*--seeing this."

"I do not believe," Spock answers thoughtfully, "that you can stop me."

\*

Jim continues his arguments through the procurement of coffee, continues to the transporter room, and is only interrupted by the few milliseconds of dematerialization before he begins again. Spock considers adding his own explanations, but Jim does not seem to require his input.

"...and wait, what am I saying, I'm *ordering* you to go back to the ship!"

Spock glances into the already partially filled room; while it is still twenty minutes until Jim will begin, there are few seats remaining. "If you are certain--"

"Beyond. Words." With a final glare, Jim turns toward the doorway and stops short as Nyota waves from the first row. Dr. McCoy, slumped in the seat beside her, gives Jim a miserable glare and types briefly into a datapad before passing it to Lieutenant Sulu and Ensign Chekov. "So this is a conspiracy." Then, "Tell me they didn't bet on this."

"I believe Lieutenant Uhura and Lieutenant Commander Scott won," Spock observes. Jim spares him a narrow-eyed glare before returning his condemnation to the other crew. "Captain--"

"You know," Jim says softly, "what they're going to say about me. Having you--all of you--witnessing--"

"You are incorrect; we are curious what they will say about all of us."

Jim turns around. "They're not judging any of you for following my orders--"

"I believe they are judging out actions, Captain," Spock says deliberately. "You have always attributed the success of our missions to the actions of your crew. Logically, if there is fault to be found, your crew shares it."

Jim stills. "That's--that's not how it works."

"I do not believe it just to deny us what is ours by right." Spock inclines his head toward the door. "After you, Captain Kirk."

Jim hesitates. "You don't have to do this. You don't have to--to prove that, or prove *anything*--"

"You are the only one that we should have to."

Jim closes his eyes briefly. "Yes, this is stupid. And we're doing it anyway. Like all our missions."

"Yes, sir." As Jim starts toward the door, Spock adds, "I find myself--unoccupied for the remainder of the day, if you have no prior engagements."

Jim stumbles, one hand braced on the doorway; it was so slight that Spock doubts anyone inside was aware of it. "Not--really."

"I look forward to it, Jim."