



KiScon 2015

The Official Zine

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Rites of Spring

Ashaya T'Reldai

[Igor Stravinsky – The Rite of Spring](#)

*I have said, you are gods...
But you shall die like mortals and fall like one of the princes. (Psalm 82:6-7)*

I.

A metallic tang lingered in the air, biting at the back of their throats with each hurried inhalation: a byproduct of disruptor fire. Kirk motioned to Spock with the weapon stolen from one of their guards, wiping his bloody nose with the other hand. Slipping his head around the following corner to the right, Spock gestured with two fingers and a pumped fist: two more Orion guards in a dead end; no point going that way.

Behind them, back the way they came, the sound of hobnailed boots on metal deck-plating echoed. They had to move, or risk being recaptured – and neither of the *Enterprise* officers found the prospect of being sold into slavery an appealing one. Kirk nodded his head to move forward, and Spock fell in beside him as they did their best to hurry without running into unwanted resistance.

There was a guard up ahead.

"Damn!" Kirk hissed as the guard, surprised by their appearance, took a moment to register before raising his weapon.

"In here!" Spock loosened a panel – as luck would have it, a hatch to an access tube with a ladder leading down. Excellent. Kirk swiftly dispatched the hapless guard and climbed in behind Spock.

They scaled the ladder and found themselves at a junction with access tubes fanning in three directions. It appeared they had climbed down as far as the vertical tube would go, indicating they were close to the lowest deck of the ship.

"What now?" Kirk rested his hands on his hips, chest heaving. The air was already thin, and thinner here, in what were clearly the bowels of the slaver ship.

"If my memory of Orion ship design is accurate, we should not be far from a bay of escape pods," Spock replied. "This way."

Kirk nodded and took point, crawling along the right-most passage. It seemed to go on forever – or perhaps it was simply the threat of pursuit and the precariousness of the situation which made it seem like hours before the tube emerged through another portal into a corridor. And almost directly opposite the

portal were three escape hatches.

"Report, Mr. Spock," Kirk demanded after an inspection of the hatches.

"There are two escape pods; the hatch to the far pod is jammed, possibly sealed; the third hatch is missing its pod completely."

"That leaves just this one..."

"And unfortunately, the status of the pod indicates the oxygen supply is already at 65% capacity," Spock observed.

"Guess these Orions have no intention of anyone escaping the ship in the event of disaster." Kirk examined the status panel beside the hatch. "Well, Mr. Spock. There's no time to go looking for another route of escape. It seems to me there are two alternatives: surrender ourselves and resign ourselves to a life of slavery; or pile into this pod and try our luck."

"Captain, you are aware this is a one-man pod."

"And your point is?"

The sounds of scuffling echoed around them. Their course decided, Kirk hit the release valve on the hatch with the butt of the disruptor and gestured for Spock to climb in first. The Vulcan stretched himself out supine in the space barely bigger than a photon torpedo casing, and waited for Kirk to seal the hatch and release the docking clamps. The Captain finally slid into place beside Spock. They looked up at the roof of the pod, at the control panel.

"Can you operate this, Spock?"

There was a pause as the Vulcan's fingers danced over the pad, resulting in the pod being successfully shunted down a tube. It was going to be a rough ride. "I believe so," he replied belatedly.

Another push of a button, and their pod was shot into the free-fall of space.

"Do you think they'll fire on us?"

"While this is not Federation territory, neither is it safe for Orion traders. It would be in their interests to leave us to our fate." Spock continued to plug away at the pad.

"Hmmm," the Captain mused. "I suppose if they knew all their escape pods are compromised..."

"Indeed."

A moment's silence.

"So, Spock. Any idea of where we are?"

"The sensors on this pod are limited in range. I am able to say that we are light years from Federation space."

"How long were we in the custody of the Orions?"

"Approximately twelve hours, twenty four minutes."

Kirk raised an eyebrow. "Approximately?"

"... and fifty seconds. If precision is required."

"Fifty seconds."

Now the Vulcan looked at the Captain, who was clearly teasing him, giving him *that* expression.

Kirk laughed at his friend's mixed mild disgust and fond exasperation.

"Alright," he collected himself. "That procedure the Meriksians are carrying out on the ship means it will be at least another six days before Scotty gets back to his 'wee bairns', and another six days after that until shore leave is over. So another twelve, maybe thirteen days before we're missed."

The *Enterprise* had docked in the spaceport of Meriksos Magna for the final negotiations to bring the Meriksian system (nine inhabited planets in all) into the United Federation of Planets. The final event of the negotiations was an enormous gala dinner, to be followed by two weeks' shore leave; Meriksos Magna was a peaceful and tranquil place, the central jewel and locus of interplanetary government for the system. It offered a great number of recreational pastimes and activities – mountain hideaways, lakeside resorts, beach huts in the tropics, bars, women (and men, and others of indeterminate gender), museums, galleries, music halls, and so forth, something to suit everyone's taste. The perfect leave for a crew weary from six months of being on patrol along the Romulan Neutral Zone. The Captain and First Officer had been picked off by Orion slavers, kidnapped surreptitiously at the conclusion of the dinner as they walked back to their accommodation through the great central park.

"It is unlikely, after such length of time has elapsed, that the *Enterprise* will be able to trace the ion trail of the Orion ship." Spock did the mental calculations, pondering the half-life of negatively charged ions.

Kirk's lips flattened grimly. Out here, well beyond the edges of (known and explored) Federation space, the chance of anyone finding them was slim indeed. They had no way of knowing exactly how far they'd come; Orion ships were not well-constructed, but they were capable of warp 9.6 when pushed.

"Right. Are there any M-class planets nearby where we could at least set down? I don't much like the idea of suffocating and or freezing to death out here."

Spock pushed a few buttons on the pad. "There is an M-class planet 0.7 light

years from our current location. Beyond the fact that it is habitable, these sensors show no other details."

"Set a course, Mr. Spock. How long will it take us to get there?"

"The pod has a micro-drive capable of quarter impulse speed. Thirty hours."

"And how long will the air last?"

Another calculation. "Twenty eight, twenty nine point five if we conserve oxygen."

"Doable. Just," Kirk concluded.

Spock set a course and then turned down the life support as far as he dared in order to extend its capabilities. He was painfully conscious of the fact that he had just given the Captain an estimation; there was no way of knowing the efficiency of this Orion, poorly maintained, pod.

They lay on their sides, facing each other, carefully not touching.

It was extremely uncomfortable, and very cold. As an hour, two hours passed in a silence in which neither man breathed heavily, Kirk's chagrin grew. The Captain, of all people on the ship, was desperate for shore leave. He'd been looking forward to finding... companionship of the intimate variety while his Silver Lady of the Stars was microbially scrubbed. The Meriksians had technology which performed the equivalent of stripping the barnacles off old Earth sailing vessels, cleaning away space dust and grit that clung to the ship, both inside and out. They had offered it to the Federation's flagship as a gesture of goodwill. The fact that his desire for intimate company had been thwarted now left him feeling sexually frustrated. Sometimes on leave, the best way of relaxing was to have a (literally) fucking good time. And Kirk, continent as he had been for all those months in the Neutral Zone, yearned for release.

Of course, most of the time he was able to channel his sexual energy into command. One had to be well-disciplined to command a starship. Most of the time the enforced virtual celibacy for the sake of the Silver Lady of the Stars, his mistress, the one who commanded him, even as he sat in her command chair at the middle of her command centre, was endurable.

But now he was trapped in an escape pod on an all but hopeless journey with his First Officer, with little to no prospect of relieving the sexual urges no starship's tritanium and steel could quell. Spock was an attractive man. *Being*, Kirk corrected himself, for Spock was only half human. They shared an intimacy, a treasured friendship. He was not... sexually attracted to the Vulcan – at least, he didn't think so. Of course, his body was saying otherwise; cramped in a tight space with a warm body, which belonged to an intimate friend, his own body saw only Opportunity. It would be so easy to... But no. No, no. It would be unfair, a desecration of their friendship even to ask to use Spock so. The Captain instilled again, wearily, the discipline of containment, channeling that raw, sexual energy into the very real need to survive in this cramped and airless space.

Little did Kirk know, Spock had his own issues with this tight situation. To all intents and purposes most likely he would look to Kirk as though he had entered a deep trance – and to some extent, that was the truth; Spock had deliberately slowed his autonomic systems to minimize his need to consume air – and to afford the Captain greater use of the same. His human friend would need all the oxygen he could get; Spock at least had the benefit of Vulcan physiology, which required less of everything to survive. Nevertheless, Spock was aware with startling clarity of the peril they were in. Certainly, of their physical peril, the threat to their lives if they could not make landfall. But in some ways more pertinently, the danger of being so close to one with whom he already shared a deep link. Their proximity could only serve to deepen that link, regardless of whether they desired such intimacy or not.

He had, of course, informed Jim of the link. The Captain welcomed it, smiled warmly at Spock at the news – which was not what Spock had been expecting. He'd expected Kirk's anger, anger at being pinned down, chained to Spock in some way, his free spirit curtailed. In spite of the man's acceptance of the link, Spock assumed the link featured more prominently in his own consciousness than in Jim's. Jim could have no conception of the significance of mental links for Vulcans. There was the consciousness all Vulcans shared of all other Vulcans. There were the mental links of parents with their children; links between siblings; links between friends; and also the *kan-telan* or later, the *telik*, or marriage bond. All of these links situated an individual Vulcan mentally and psychologically, and without them a Vulcan suffered. Beyond all of those links, there was another... and it differed in quality and significance, was shrouded in the mystery and mystique of suppressed ancient drives. Spock barely dared to whisper such... sacrilege... to himself, even in the silence of his own meditation. And yet, that the was sort of connection he believed he shared with Kirk. If it were so, then no other bond he could make with another would ever compare to this pearl of great price. To Kirk, Spock's pearl of great price. The truth was, Spock... *desired*... that pearl greatly.

Yet desire was anathema to logical Vulcans. The obligation of one who considered himself *suvel nahan po-Surak* was to channel desire, along with the deep urges of the Vulcan psyche, into the pursuit of logic. The deep primal energy throbbing in Spock's depths had been honed and channeled where possible, suppressed where impossible. For the most part he sublimated his energies in the disciplines of meditation. Even his work as a scientist and the attention he gave to his duties as officer in Starfleet could be seen as meditative exercises used to channel his life-energies. But Spock also remembered the red sands of his homeworld, the fire in his blood at The Time, pulsing, beating with the ancient rhythms... and it was still there, to his shame, the triumph of logic incomplete. The *pon farr* was long over. And yet there was no escape from the reality that Spock was of Vulcan, and the natural cycles, the energy which pulsed in its core, were his own.

The temperature in the pod was dropping. Spock became acutely aware of the Captain's suffering; with his higher body temperature, and his inability to regulate his autonomic functions, Kirk would be feeling this more than Spock himself. Without thinking about it, he reached out and drew the Captain close.

Kirk resisted a little, and then gave, gladly pressing himself to his friend's body.

"Are you sure," he began through chattering teeth, "that you don't mind this?"

How could Spock object to such a precious opportunity?

"Negative. It is logical to share body heat."

They clung together like twins in a womb, waiting to be born into whatever unknown lay ahead.

"It was just as well," Kirk panted, his hands on his knees as Spock reached the lip of the ground on which the Captain stood, "we landed in an area with snow to cushion the fall."

He reached down a hand to help pull the Vulcan up until he stood next to him. Spock was barely winded by the climb up the hole the burning escape pod had punched through the snow.

They stood, looking around them, assessing their position. They were on the side of a mountain. Above them, its peaks soared into a thin blue sky. About a thousand metres below them the snow line petered out into the first green of early spring. Far off in the distance they glimpsed a river delta, the dark green of vegetation lining a watercourse. It was freezing, their breath ghosting before them.

Kirk turned to look at the Vulcan, noticing that his nose and the points of his ears were green with the cold. Vulcans... desert dwellers... right. He had to get Spock to a warmer climate, and quickly.

He pointed out across the vista to the north. "I think we should head that way, towards the sun and the warmth. The pod wasn't able to tell us whether the planet is inhabited?"

Spock shook his head, his teeth clenched to keep them from chattering.

"Then we'll have to take our chances."

They started their way downhill and northwards, trudging through the snow, falling into drifts which collapsed beneath their feet. The sun was closing on the horizon to the west as they cleared the snow line. They were surrounded by tundra-like bushes, low to the ground, tough enough to survive long periods of the year in extreme cold.

This presented a problem: there was no obvious place to take refuge from the wind which was stirring, blowing off the ice and snow further up the mountain. They plodded on, searching for a dell, a cave, a copse of trees, anything that could act as a windbreak. As they went, they each gathered a bundle of sticks and twigs; no food, no water (apart from handfuls of snow) – but at least they would be able to build a fire, assuming they found sufficient shelter.

Still heading downhill, they came across an outcrop of large rocks.

"This looks like it's the best we're going to be able to do for now. I'll start a fire. Will you go and see if you can find anything to eat, and any water sources?" Kirk asked. They'd been able to consume snow to replenish their water, but it had now been hours since they'd left the snow itself behind. "There must be a spring somewhere."

Kirk set to, making a ring of stones, laying the sticks, twigs and other wood they'd gathered in such a way that they would burn most efficiently. It wasn't the first time he'd been grateful for grandfather Tiberius' scouting instruction: within a few minutes of rubbing sticks together and with the sacrifice of some hair, he had a spark, then a flame, and then a very welcome fire. He sat for a moment savouring the warmth. At least if they could keep the fire going, the close circle of stones behind them should reflect the heat, and retain it for a few hours.

As he crouched beside the new fire, his vision shifted, and in the gathering dark he thought he heard and felt... something... Not voices. An awareness, an otherness... He gasped, a surge of energy passing up through his feet and out through the top of his head, raising the hackles on the back of his neck, and making him shudder.

"Captain?" Spock enquired, worry in his voice. He came over and knelt beside the fire, opposite Kirk.

Kirk broke out of... whatever it was, and turned his attention to the Vulcan, who was now warming his hands. Spock's hands: dexterous, multi-talented, strong, and delicate all at once; sensitive Vulcan hands, full of capillaries and with more than double the nerve endings of human hands, key to their telepathic communication... And utterly captivating, alarmingly sensuous.

He mentally shook himself before responding. "I'm fine, Spock. Any success?"

"There is a small stream one hundred and fifty metres that way," he pointed east. "I was unsuccessful in locating sustenance, although I did hear the sounds of small animals in the undergrowth. Whether they would prove edible I am unable to determine. If I had my tricorder..."

"But we don't. And even if the fauna is safe to eat, we've got nothing to catch it with."

"Nevertheless," Spock rejoined, "we cannot go indefinitely without food. Given that this area is clearly at the cusp of winter turning to spring, edible vegetable matter will be relatively scarce. When we come across the right materials, we should furnish ourselves with basic weapons."

"In any case, our immediate problem is keeping this fire going. My turn to get a drink."

Spock drew closer to the fire as Kirk departed, gazing into the flames. He meditated often using his asenoi, the flame a simple way of entering the meditative

state. There was something mesmerizing about contemplating these flames as they licked and danced, quite aside from meditative discipline. Looking into the flames, Spock saw the points of action and reaction which produced the fire. He blinked and looked again: it was as though series and rows of tongues were weaving together, dancing, as through the crackle and roar pulsed with the beat of drums... He felt his heart throbbing in his side in time with the beat of the fire...

How long he sat there he did not know, only that his attention shifted when Kirk returned to the circle of stone, dragging a whole dead bush to be broken up. Hopefully the wood of that bush would be sufficient to warm them throughout the night ahead.

Kirk stripped off his command gold shirt with relief, tying it around his waist. It was just as well: after nearly five days with little to eat, and with two and a half days of marching (albeit in an overall downhill direction), he needed something to hold his pants up.

They were now tramping across natural plains dotted with clumps of willowy trees. All around them spring was awakening, its fecundity a riotous celebration of new life. The rapidity of spring's progress they had witnessed in the past two and a half days of their journey was astonishing: the overnight sprouting of vivid flowers in grass, on bush, on tree; the amorous exploits of birds, the animals which were this planet's equivalent of deer, and even some ground-cats as they openly copulated, often and prolifically. The nights were still chilly, but the days were bright and warm, and would have been perfect for walking had they had adequate supplies.

The first copse of good trees they'd come across the two had fashioned primitive bows and arrows, and a stone whose serrated, sharp edge formed a primitive knife. At least now they were able to shoot game. Last night they'd even found some tubers and herbs which made a passable meal for Spock, who preferred not to eat the meat.

Neither man mentioned the odd experiences – a whisper, a sense of presence or awareness, a surge of energy rising from the earth. How could one put a name to the nameless force that seemed alive in this atmosphere? Or perhaps, naming the nameless force was merely an act of superstition – and as this was the logical conclusion, it was hardly worth discussing.

As he kept trudging on, the sun's heat strong on his now bared arms, Kirk reflected on the unsettling episode from last night. They had eaten, and were sitting on opposite sides of the fire. Spock's head was cast back, his eyes closed as he rested leaning against the stone which was still warm from the day's sun. Kirk watching him, marveling as the firelight cast Spock's features into relief, shadows weaving across the line of brow and lip and cheek. And then suddenly, as though sensing Kirk's observing gaze, Spock had raised his head, and looked directly at the Captain, his eyes black and burning with some flame flickering in their depths which left the human momentarily breathless before it was gone.

What was it? What had he seen? His heart pumped in his breast now, just thinking about the way Spock had looked at him, his guard down. Most importantly, what did it mean? Kirk felt energy stirring in his groin, in the roots of his being – and then dismissed the disconcerting incident as a product of their current predicament. Being surrounded by the mating antics of many species and the invigorating scent of spring, Kirk reasoned, was enough cause for his own body to join in the festivities. Once again, he took several deep breaths, willing his desire and instinct into active service.

Off to his right, a bird called to its mate, its cry haunting, beautiful. The response came from behind him, just as sweet and bitter. They'd heard this cry yesterday too, had traced it to a bird with one eye with a streak of green feathers down its chest and along the edges of its wings. It had been intermittent this morning, but ever followed them as they made their way towards the line of the river. Now he thought about it, that was... unusual.

"Spock."

Spock, who'd taken point, slowed. "Captain?"

"I think we're being followed."

Spock listened intently, his keen Vulcan ears hearing only the sigh of wind through grass and branch and over stone. They were currently in a place where the grass was almost waist-high.

"Let's sit down here for a while, and see what happens," Kirk whispered. If it came to it, if nothing happened, they could crawl through the grass for a while until they reached the next windbreak.

They sat, shrouded by grasses sweet with the heat of the sun, for a good half hour (Spock judged) before deciding silently to head off, crawling towards the closest stand of trees.

As he crawled through the grasses, Spock processed possible scenarios and calculated possible responses to them. The bird calls could be simply that: the sounds of those particular, somewhat unusual species. They could also be serving as the communication between sentient beings who were now tracking him and the Captain – and if that were the case, the odds became longer against their long-term survival. So far they'd seen nothing indicating technological advancement, no aircraft overhead, no tall buildings on a far horizon, no smog or smoke indicating settlement. For all they knew, the planet (at least in this area of it) was uninhabited. Although by the same token, the incident of indigenous species they'd seen already suggested that higher (sentient) life was at least a possibility.

But these considerations were only part of what absorbed Spock's attention as they crept on down through a dell, up the other side, and crossed a small spring. He was profoundly aware, with the earth of this spring-world on his hands and knees, of the smell of damp soil, of the richness and promise of life which seemed to call to his bones and thrum in his blood. The sensation was disorienting, primal, and not easily quantified.

Somewhat distracted, he came suddenly to where the grass shortened in the shade of the trees.

"*Karh!*"

He looked up. Kirk, a short distance behind him, sensibly stayed hidden in the grass. Spock found himself surrounded by a dozen Vulcanoid males with arrows tensed on their bowstrings and ready to shoot. It sounded like a command to stop. Slowly he raised his hands and straightened.

The leader, who didn't have a weapon aimed at him, said something sharp of which Spock was only able to make out the word *dah-kuh* (two).

"*Rai*," Spock replied, shaking his head, guessing that if these were Vulcanoid, then perhaps their language may bear similarities to his own. He and Kirk both had subdermal universal translator chips, but it would take the UT some time to be able to translate this language.

"*Da!*" the being insisted, closing on Spock and gesturing to two warriors, who bent low, searching in the grass until they'd located Kirk.

The leader drew close to Spock, fingered the velvet of his (now filthy) science tunic, turned his face one way and the other, examined Spock's pointed ears while feeling his own. He stepped back, turning with eyes wide with wild conclusions to speak hastily to his second in command.

The two warriors deposited a non-plussed Kirk next to Spock, who struggled to his feet. Another two stripped them both of their hastily made weapons.

"*Pud'ltor*," the whispers around the captives grew into an almost worshipful frenzy before the leader gestured for silence.

Spock took in the warriors' dress: animal skins for their upper torsos, and each man had a skinned trophy head of some prey as a genital pouch (for want of a better description). The outfit was cinched around the waist with a furry rope of some kind, possibly plant-based, possibly strips of skin wrapped in a skein – it was difficult to tell. Each man had a ragged-edged homespun and woven cloak attached to the shoulders of his skin-tunic. They all carried spears with metal tips and long knives. All had tattoos in different places on their bodies in swirling designs which reminded Spock of Vulcan calligraphy.

The leader spoke to Spock, too quickly for him to be able to decipher any of what he said.

"We do not understand you," Kirk began. "We come in peace."

The leader made a sharp gesture, and one of the guards struck Kirk across the face. More words, this time addressed to Kirk, with a glance and reproving tone directed at Spock.

Spock inched closer to Kirk, quelling an urge to leap to his Captain's defense.

"You will not harm the Captain or myself," he said, summoning every ounce of indignant command tone. "*Ish-veh nam-tor telsu t'nashveh. Ri-estuhl pudvel-tor t'nash-veh!*" (He is my bonded; touch not my chosen!)

The leader gave Spock a strange look, and then issued another command to the warriors standing by. Two grasped Spock, and two grasped Kirk by their arms, and they started off at a swift pace. The Starfleet officers struggled to keep up. Surrounded by warriors before, beside, behind, there was no opportunity for escape.

The march seemed to take forever, the pace unrelenting. Spock kept his eyes on the Captain, who was ahead of him, noting with worry the exhaustion and stumbling, and the rough-handed treatment by their captors of the human. Already weakened by days of little food, the human's reserves were low. Spock watched, helpless to protect the man, their impatient captors unsympathetic – or not cognizant of Kirk's struggle; for he was putting up a determined fight with his own depletion.

Abruptly, Kirk fell, bringing the party to a halt. The guards angrily urged him to get up and keep going, manhandling him until he was on his feet again. But they hadn't long started off when the Captain fell again. Spock took advantage of the fracas to escape his own guards and duck to Kirk's side.

"He is human; are you unable to see that he cannot continue as we have been? It is not logical to – " Spock's head snapped in a burst of stars to one side, and he tasted blood. He was roughly pulled away, and Kirk was hauled up to be dragged now between two strapping youths, barely conscious.

Finally, as night was falling, they came to a rough encampment, tents made (it seemed) of bark pitched between trees, with a large central fire. Kirk and Spock were deposited in one of the tents. Even Spock, who had the benefit of Vulcan physiology and greater endurance, fell gratefully to the pile of grasses and skins which served as a rough pallet.

They were left for a time with a guard at the front of the tent observing them, while the sounds of camp being made echoed around them. Spock gently unwound the Captain's shirt from his waist, and dabbed away the sweat and grime, noting the obvious sunburn. It was likely the man was suffering from heat-stroke.

"He requires water. *Masu*," Spock said to the guard, miming the action of drinking. The guard stared back impassively.

Even if they'd been able to overcome the guard, escape would be foolish; Spock wasn't able to carry the Captain indefinitely, and these bronze-age (it seemed) warriors were skilled trackers working in their own territory. The chances of escape were slim. There was nothing for it but to wait.

Eventually the sounds of the camp mellowed. Voices could be heard raised in song and laughter, though Spock couldn't understand the words. Footsteps came towards the tent and the entrance parted to reveal the leader carrying a bowl and a beaker.

He held the beaker out to Spock, who drank and then attempted to stir the Captain. Kirk moaned, but groggily accepted the drink. The leader watched, and then wordlessly handed the bowl to Spock. The contents of the bowl smelled edible, and he scooped some up with his fingers. It was not to his taste, and it was gamey. But it was food. He propped the Captain up now, taking more of the foodstuff on his fingers and holding them to Kirk's mouth. Weakly, the man ate what Spock offered until most of the food was gone.

The meal finished, Spock wiped his fingers on his pants, cradling the Captain who was somewhat delirious between his legs and propped up against him.

The warrior-leader squatted before them and asked a question of Spock.

Spock shook his head. "Our language is too dissimilar." He wrapped his arms protectively around his Captain.

The leader's lips pursed. "Telkar," he said, gesturing to himself.

"Telkar," Spock nodded. "I am Spock. This is Kirk."

"Spokh. K'rk."

"Spock. Kirk," the Vulcan repeated, encouraged.

The leader crept closer, raising one hand with the heel of his palm towards Spock. Unsure of what this meant, Spock flinched away.

"*Ryu*," the leader said, retreating, and then advancing again to raise his palm to the centre of Spock's forehead.

Spock felt pressure against his mental shields,

- and then was in mindscape.

Who are you?

I am Spock, he said to the other's presence. The presence of the leader persisted in pushing against Spock's shields, surprised by the strength of the barrier.

I am practiced in disciplines of the mind. You will find it difficult to breach my shields.

Difficult, but not impossible. It would be best if I do not need to force you.

My people see this as invasion.

The presence didn't respond for a time, and then withdrew.

It matters not. I have seen that which is needful. You are Chosen.

What do you mean?

You are Chosen, and he will reveal all.

The presence faded from Spock's mind.

Telkar grabbed Kirk and tore him from Spock's arms. Spock cried out and launched himself towards the leader – in vain, for the guard now fell on him, pinning him to the ground.

"Telkar, do not do this. He is human; he is not like us. His mind – "

The guard pressed Spock's face into the dirt until he began to see stars. When the guard let go, Spock gasped, choking and blinking soil from his eyes. Telkar's palm was pressed to Jim's face, and the Captain was moaning and struggling feebly against the stronger Vulcanoid form.

Primal rage filled Spock and his vision blurred green. In a great surge he pushed up and threw himself at Telkar, pulling him up and threatening with a clenched fist to bust the man's jaw.

"So," said the warrior-leader, "he is your bonded. Does he understand the connection?"

"Do not touch him again!" Spock hissed.

"Tell me, Spock. If he is your mate, why have you not consummated that which binds you?"

Spock dropped the man's clothing and stepped back, calling on old disciplines to calm his beating heart and labored breath.

"I see: you fear the energy, deny the power. He does not. You are yet... *r'plathorik*. He has had many *luk-sveptar*," Telkar said with a purring sneer. "But you want him, even if he is *s'cut*."

Spock didn't reply. The man was goading him; he refused to rise to the bait. It was interesting that the Universal Translator was now partially working – or perhaps some transfer had happened in the brief joining of minds.

"It matters not. You are *pudl'tor*, Chosen. The *pokro*, may their spirits be blessed, have chosen well." Telkar turned to the guard. "See that this one," he gestured to Kirk who now moaned fitfully on the floor, "is given ample water and *viktar* to reduce the swelling. Treat this one well," he continued, nodding at Spock, "for he is Chosen."

Telkar abruptly turned and left the tent, the guard grinning and leering now at Spock. At least for the time being they appeared to be safe, even if what Telkar meant by "the Chosen" carried ominous meaning.

Spock turned his attention to Kirk, and with the assistance of water, tended his

friend and Captain through the night.

He awoke abruptly, pulled to his feet by his hair, cold metal against his jugular vein. He caught a glimpse of a warrior holding a knife to Kirk's throat, alarm and fear coursing through him more for his Captain than for himself, before he felt a zing between his shoulder blades and sank into oblivion.

II.

Kirk groaned, wishing fervently that consciousness had evaded him. His head felt as though it had been split like a melon down the centre, and his vision was blurry as he blinked his eyes open. It was as though he had fuzz or fur in his eyes – a horrible sensation. He could just make out the form lying beside him, facing away.

"Spock?"

Kirk reached out shook the man gently. Spock immediately rolled over, his eyes betraying disorientation but also profound concern.

"Jim?"

"You ok?"

Spock's eyes clenched shut and reopened, better focused than before. "I am functional," he responded flatly, quite clearly non-functional, but attempting Vulcan stoicism.

"Well, I definitely am not. Ohhhh," Kirk complained as he attempted to sit up, clamping a hand to his forehead.

"Perhaps you would be best advised to remain in a recumbent position, Captain."

Kirk huffed as he lay down again. "I notice you didn't even try to get up, Mr. First Officer." He looked across at Spock, who raised an eyebrow, not dignifying this with a response.

They were under a shelter of woven branches and grasses, the interior about eight feet in height, and the "walls" sturdy palings bound together. They could see out between the palings to a village: there were children playing, canines scavenging, and women carting various things perched on their heads. From time to time a warrior could be seen sauntering between houses. Their pen – for want of a better description – was in what appeared to be a central gathering place, and it didn't look as though a guard were needed to watch them. Then again, while it was difficult to tell without conducting an inspection by touch and testing, the shelter was well-constructed and there was no immediately obvious way out.

"Where are we, and what's happened to us?" Kirk mused aloud.

"From what I have observed, we appear to be in what could be called a bronze age, Vulcanoid culture, similar to that of Vulcan four thousand years before the age of Surak. I believe we were rendered unconscious by a technique similar to the Vulcan neck pinch in that it involves the transference of psionic energy via particular meridians, in this case, those between our shoulder blades." Spock shifted, and Kirk became aware of a stinging tingling in that location, at just that point it was impossible to reach with either hand. "I would surmise that the warriors we encountered neutralized us, and brought us here to their settlement. For what reason, I cannot say."

They lay on the dried-grass-covered ground in silence, both their heads aching horribly – Kirk likened it to a tequila-induced hangover without the nausea. Eventually, stifling a groan Kirk pushed himself into a sitting position, determined to take stock.

The two officers watched as the angle of the spring-sun shifted into mid-afternoon. By this stage, the aromas of the evening meal being prepared wafted through the camp, and they were reminded of their hunger and thirst. At sun-down three beings drew near: two warriors carrying a skin and a wooden bowl, and a woman with a covered earthenware vessel. Curious: in order to access the interior, a panel had to be removed. The vessels were placed within and the three beings departed, swiftly re-affixing the panel.

It was difficult not to fall on what was the best meal either had eaten in days. The food in the dish was a rich stew; Spock was hungry enough to eat the vegetables, although he left the meat for Jim. They ate and drank and then sat back, and would have been almost contented except for the inevitable call of nature and the fact of their confinement.

"What do they want with us?" Kirk asked, leaning against the wall.

"Difficult to say, Captain." He told Kirk briefly about his 'conversation' with Telkar, the title *the Chosen*. Less willingly, Spock described Telkar's invasion of Kirk's mind. Jim's expression turned to flint.

"That explains the headache and a feeling of... I don't know. Violation? I've been feeling stripped, vulnerable – had been putting it down to being captive. But it's more than that."

Spock watched the anger in the man growing before he called on his formidable control and sublimated it; there was nothing either of them could do about Telkar's violation at this point. He debated within himself whether to reveal the other content of his... discussion... with Telkar. Jim deserved to know.

"Jim..." he trailed off, reluctant.

When Spock didn't continue, Kirk prompted: "Yes, Spock? Go on. You might as well spit it out."

Spock breathed deeply. "Telkar knows about the link between us."

"Oh?" Kirk's eyebrows rose.

"It is possible that he means to exploit it in some way."

"Yes. But how?" An interpretation occurred to the Captain. "Oh... the link's about our friendship, a sense of brotherhood, loyalty, that sort of thing. Isn't it?"

"Certainly, those aspects present vulnerabilities." Spock nodded, and lapsed into silence, unable to put words to the truth that there was nothing he would not do for this human. He sat opposite the man, pondering all that existed between them. No, there was quite literally nothing he would not do, nothing he wasn't prepared to risk for the safety of this man, nothing Spock wouldn't sacrifice for Kirk's benefit. Spock knew the link was more than Kirk imagined it to be, something which bound his being to this dynamic human. That awareness throbbed in his abdomen, visceral, compelling. He attempted to control it; who knew what that instinctive drive might lead to? Telkar's derisive sneer echoed again in his consciousness.

"There is also the possibility that Telkar – or the others – will attempt to exploit other aspects of the link," he continued.

"What do you mean?"

"Captain, these people are Vulcanoid. They possess telepathic capabilities, which, while undisciplined and untrained, are nevertheless of sufficient power to present a threat. He was unable to reach through my shields in his first contact with my mind. But the power of his mind is singular, and while I may be able to shield parts of your mind through the link, if my own resources are depleted or weakened..."

"I see. He could use me to get to you."

"Affirmative. He designated me as *pudl'tor*, Chosen. That we are being cared for adequately – or at least, left to our own devices – perhaps indicates that whatever it means to be Chosen has some sort of cultic significance. If that is so, it is possible that you are being maintained and not disposed of as they perceive you as integral to my mental well-being, necessary if I am to assume the role."

Kirk absorbed this. "I don't like the sound of that. I don't like the sound of that at all."

The village folk were gathering in the square their shelter faced: young women with infants on the hip, children, warriors, elders, matriarchs – all gathered in a susurating crowd.

"So Telkar probed my mind and found the link and was obviously intrigued by it." Kirk paused. "What did he find so intriguing, Spock?"

Before Spock could answer (and he was somewhat glad to be able to evade the uncomfortable question), the noise of the crowd died away and an elder stood on a

large stone in the centre of the settlement. He wore silver-white coloured robes, a long white beard, and on his head was a headdress featuring a glittering red crescent, two golden orbs, and a spangling of several white gems which flashed when they caught the last light of the sun and the fledgling flames of a central fire built next to the stone.

The wizened being began to speak in a portentous if quavering voice.

"What's he saying, Spock? Can you understand anything? Damn UT still isn't functioning," Kirk cursed.

Spock listened for a moment. "I am still unable to interpret certain words and phrases; however, I will attempt to translate.

"Three days hence we shall engage in the K'sti-vorkh ritual. Usually at this time... your... young r'plathorik would now be sent to the fjord to begin the Choosing. We faced the curse of Dh'uk, and there are few r'plathorik among us this k'sti season. But the pokro, may their spirits be blessed, have provided for us. They have sent us a sign, an omen, signaling a great change in our fortunes. The time to come shall be of great abundance. The Choosing will occur as part of the K'sti-vorkh. For pokro have given us a Chosen to be for us, and we are spared."

There were murmured and calls: "Vi? Vi?" ("Who?" Spock translated dutifully.)

"Our warrior-brothers captured two beings, and one was revealed by pokro to Telkar as the one who is Chosen. He is r'plathorik. He is like us, of the people. With him is a strange demon who gives him life. We must honour the gift of pokro, may their spirits be blessed, and ensure that the Chosen is tended, and that his ... is able to give him life until the ritual begins."

The elder continued, but his next words were obliterated by excited calls and conversation.

"Show them to us! Show us the Chosen!" a chant emerged from the hubbub. The elder gestured for silence.

"Spock, I don't like this."

"We have little choice, and a less than 1% chance of survival were we to attempt to flee."

Two warriors came forward and fiddled with the front screen of the enclosure, which fell away suddenly to reveal Kirk and Spock, now on their feet. There were gasps, and several villagers fell to their knees with loud... ululations? Paeans of praise? It was impossible to tell, but involved much raising of hands and presumably calling on their deities. It was exceedingly uncomfortable for both Starfleet officers to face the scrutiny of this crowd.

Spock stopped translating. Kirk observed, not knowing what was being said, but watching anxiously.

"Bring him out! Let us see and venerate the Chosen!" The chorus of voices rose.

The elder nodded, and the warriors came towards Spock, who shied away. Kirk leapt in between Spock and the warriors, and was grasped by another warrior from behind and held pinned as Spock was frog-marched from the enclosure to the area beside the fire. The people cleared a path before him and the warriors.

There were admiring noises and cries of thanksgiving... and for the moment the crowd seemed content to merely gaze on the face of the Chosen as the final light of day faded and the shadows flickered across his form, bronzed by the fire.

"What is that he is wearing? Is he... real? Is he... as we are?" murmurs grew.

"Of course he is of the people. Behold his ears, his brow." But that wasn't enough. The discontent grew. The elder sighed and gestured to a warrior, who took his sword from its sheath, and drew closer to the Vulcan.

So close did the warrior's menace come that Spock assumed he was about to inflict damage on his body. Instead, the warrior took the front hem of Spock's tunic and undershirt, and tore them up the middle using the sharp blade, all the while fixing Spock with a gloating, possessive gaze. The warriors who were holding Spock pulled the fabric from his shoulders revealing the Vulcan's torso.

Still not enough.

"He looks like us. But does he bleed?" a well-endowed woman demanded.

"Foolish woman! He is Chosen, the gift of the pokro. Would you cast their gracious gift in their face?"

"Chosen he might be, but unless he bleeds like us, how do we know he will satisfy the ritual? Your wine has addled your brains, Poktar, go back to your bed!"

"Not so, Mishtah. Or would you have us take your R'kalia instead?"

"She is not of age," the woman said with great indignation, stepping up to the man with her hands on her hips. *"Make him bleed, Poktar. The pokro you serve will not accept a Chosen who is not of the blood."*

"Very well, Mishtah. But this unbelief be on your own head."

The woman nodded and stepped away from the old man, and went up to the warrior who had sliced Spock's clothing from his body. She took his sword with a saucy "just so" glare, and closed on Spock, stepping into his personal space.

"Tell me, Chosen: do you bleed?"

Spock said nothing as the woman placed the tip against his upper chest.

Kirk held his breath as he watched, a gut-wrenching fear for his friend clenching his heart. At the same time, he was ashamed to feel his loins stirring. Spock

was... a very attractive man.

"You do not speak?"

Still he said nothing, and the woman's eyes took on a vicious glint as the tip of the sword bit into his flesh, not deeply, but enough to sting. In one move, the woman drew the sword in a flourish across his torso. Verdant green sprouted in its wake.

"Ah!" a sadistic triumph gleamed in the woman's face. *"He bleeds. Yes. But is he... capable of luk-sveptar?"*

Laughter.

"Mishtah," the old man warned.

"Keep your britches on, Poktar. I'm not going to touch him. Just..." she undid the fastenings of Spock's pants, and pulled them down, revealing his briefs. *"Such strange undergarments,"* Mishtah murmured before pushing them down to his knees. Spock's genitals bounced free. She ran a hand through his pubic hair, fondled his testicles, grasped his penis and examined it, Spock shrinking from the intimate and humiliating touch. *"I just wanted to see for myself that he is... a man."*

Mishtah turned around to face the crowd, still holding Spock's member. They murmured at the confirmation, a sort of hunger developing in their midst. As he watched, Kirk wasn't sure what was more shocking: that his friend was being publically sexually assaulted by their captors; that he was being gloated over by a quickly and almost inexplicably maddening community – including the youngest of children; or his own arousal and the mixed feelings of shame and disgust that came with it.

"Alright Mishtah, you've seen that he is of the people in every way. Do you now despise the gift of pokro?"

"Gift of the pokro? I think not. But," she shrugged, giving the virtually naked Spock a once over from head to foot, *"he'll do."*

She turned on her heel and walked back to her original position in the crowd, swishing past Poktar defiantly on the way. The old man gestured, and the warriors roughly re-clothed Spock and led him back to the enclosure.

"Prepare yourselves for the tam horam K'sti-vorkh. No elder is to take luk-sveptar until the evening of the third day. Prepare yourselves, that you may be worthy of the gift of pokro. I have spoken."

The man stepped down off the stone and disappeared among the crowd. A few curious onlookers watched as the warriors delivered Spock back to their enclosure, and shored up the door.

"Are you alright, Spock?" Kirk asked softly, going to crouch beside his friend, who had been shoved to the floor.

Spock pushed himself up to a sitting position, brushing off his hands. "I am... undamaged."

"Apart from that..." Kirk gestured to the wound which was seeping green on Spock's chest.

Spock drew the sides of his shirts over it, wrapping his arms around himself, ignoring the sympathizing look on Kirk's face.

"What was that all about, Spock?"

"It doesn't matter." Spock turned his face away.

"Oh, no you don't. Don't you hide from me, Mister. I heard a great deal about *pokro*, *luk-sveptar*, and *r'plathorik*, and I suspect you know what they are. I order you to tell me what you know, Mr. Spock."

There was a silence as Spock gathered himself. He truly had hoped never to have to reveal these things to the Captain. However, *kaiidth*.

"When Telkar probed your mind, he discovered the link."

"Yes, yes. We've already established that," Kirk commented impatiently.

"He also observed that I am *r'plathorik*, and he asked why we had not... consummated the link, given that you have had many *luk-sveptar*. It is a matter of great puzzlement to him."

"Consummated the...? Wait just a minute. Back up. *R'plathorik*. Let's start with that. What does it mean, Spock?"

"I believe... it is a term applicable to those who have not yet had sexual intercourse with another."

"Right." A penny dropped. "Riiiiight. So to have had many *luk-sveptar* presumably means that one has had many... sexual encounters?"

Spock nodded. "So I deduce."

"So you're the Chosen... because you're a virgin?"

He nodded again, unable to help the blood rising in the capillaries of his face.

"But you say Telkar wondered why we hadn't... consummated the link. What was he talking about, Spock? What more is there about this... link we share that I don't know? What aren't you telling me?"

There was another acute silence as Spock gathered his shaken reality and attempted to reassemble his mental equilibrium.

"Captain, we are linked, linked in the way of Vulcan warriors of old. The link is

not merely about brotherhood and friendship. It formed because of our great compatibility and quite spontaneously. It is a link most prized among my people, a connection only possible between those who are close friends, with ancient overtones."

"What ancient overtones?"

"You must understand that in the campaigns and with the rigors of warrior-life for my people when they were at the stage of development of these people, it was not always possible for males to return home at their Time. Moreover, as you have no doubt yourself observed – for Starfleet is a military organization – the exigencies of life lived in close contact with others under similar pressures leads to all sorts of... arrangements of a sexual nature. The bond we share, Jim, is that of *t'hy'la*: shieldmates, brothers, friends, and may involve sexual expression. I presume that Telkar's warriors have similar arrangements, and without the benefit of logic, there is no way of sublimating – "

"What?!" Kirk said, his stomach suddenly cold and leaden. "But I don't think of you that way. Friends, brothers... never lovers, nuh-uh. How could you let this link form, Spock? And when would it have formed? We've barely touched... Was it in games of chess? In shared battle? In the ritual combat on Vulcan?"

Kirk's anger and his words pierced Spock's being more deeply than the sword used to cut his chest. "Jim. Jim!" he pleaded quietly. "It was never my intention to reveal this to you. I understand both your orientation towards women, and your commitment as Captain to the ship above all else. I, of all people, know the burden of command."

Kirk exhaled. "Spock. Yes, of course. Of course, you're right."

"And, as it does not preclude the formation of a marital bond, it need never be consummated."

"Yes, I see. I'm sorry for my reaction."

"The link formed without my volition, and yes, most likely as a result of the close contact we have had over the past three years."

"It's alright, Spock," Kirk attempted to ameliorate, "I don't mind the link. I actually... quite like it. It gives me a basic awareness that you're ok. And... I like that. Like knowing you're there." He smiled a little, wanly.

The silence between them was charged with something electrical. They sat opposite one another, not looking at the other.

Spock struggled, in the silence, with a welling energy within him. He found it every bit as difficult now to speak of things pertaining to the raw, unbridled, illogical energy of procreative life, as he had when his Time had come upon him eighteen months prior. He realized in those moments the dangerous power, the beating pulse of ancient rhythms which throbbed within him and which drew him to Kirk's own magnetic, throbbing energy.

"Well, we're best friends. And Spock, I hope we can always be friends."

Even as he said it, Kirk felt something rich unfurling in his abdomen, something he could not deny, but which pulsed within him. Ever since they'd lain side by side in the Orion escape pod, the dilemma of Spock and the *Enterprise* which he had pondered in the cold silence as they plummeted towards this planet had been churning unacknowledged at the back of his mind. Now it sprang forth like a dam bursting... And he knew as a reality in his body, in his deepest self, that Spock and the Silver Lady Goddess of the stars, his mistress, were linked in his mind. He couldn't think of one without the other – it was literally unthinkable. And as he felt a visceral connection with that starship *Enterprise*, where the life that pulsed through its core pulsed in his own bones, so he knew a visceral connection to his austere, yet dearly loved friend, Spock of Vulcan. That same devotion of body and soul he had to the ship was the same he applied unconsciously to Spock; Spock was indispensable to him, an extension of himself, just as the ship was an extension of himself. In some ways, he realized in a flash of instant clarity, Spock was the embodiment of that...

And then the clarity faded, and he shook his head. That way lay danger: Spock was no lady, no woman, no goddess. Although as he contemplated it, Spock did have all the allure of the yearned-for alien Other. And Kirk himself was partly to blame for the depth and significance of the link they now shared; he had tasted of it, and perhaps that connection with Spock as the embodiment of all his command stood for had been part of his motivation for accepting the Challenge on the red sands of Spock's alien homeworld: something – someone – to fight for.

The fire in the square was dying to glowing embers and the chill of the spring evening descended with the depth of night. Stillness crept into the village, except for the sound of infants crying for a quickly proffered breast and domestic animals huffing and scrabbling in bedding down until daylight sprang again.

"Guess we'd better sleep too," Kirk injected into the sacred silence of night.

No blankets being provided, the two lay next to each other, back to back on the grasses which covered the ground in their enclosure.

But sleep was nigh impossible for Spock. Long after Kirk's breathing had settled into the deep, even rhythm of slumber, Spock lay awake, unable to sleep, unable to meditate. The public humiliation had, for some reason, rattled him more than he'd realized. Vulcans were an intensely private people, albeit that logically, the body was just the body, and physicality was not a thing in and of itself in the way that nudity was for humans. But then, Spock was not fully Vulcan. And while he prided himself on his accomplishments in the mental disciplines of his father's people, Spock was once again confronted with the illogical shame he held for his nude body. A shame he was now disconcerted to note he had not as successfully dealt with as he had thought.

He breathed deeply and recited the first mantras which took him at least to the second level of meditation. Here, he discovered a part of himself long denied and suppressed, and he stood before a certain door. He was seized with an impulse, and curled his mental fingers around the door's edges, prying it open, unbearable light pouring into the space beyond Spock as the door grated back on its hinges. The light

pulsed and there was a ululating cry of long-chained and imprisoned primal need. And Spock knew the truth in its devastating clarity that the energy he usually channeled into his meditation and his career could only go so far before it betrayed him. And the betrayal was complete: he was suddenly painfully aroused, almost enough to cry out as the energy of life itself was loosed in his mind. And he knew that his whole being – not merely incorrigible flesh, but all that he was – yearned for intimate companionship, for friendship of a quality beyond brotherhood.

An aching sorrow pulsed in his mind. He examined – almost as a doctor does an open wound, prodding and prying – his image of James Kirk: sometimes almost venerating him as a god among men (and the bitter irony was not lost, that the villagers so lately had so venerated Spock as a gift from the gods); at other times, his image of Kirk was of one to be protected, held back from rushing headlong to his own destruction. Always Spock placed his own considerable intellect and being at the human's disposal, a sacrificial gift offered on the altar of duty and service – or the casting of cloaks and palm fronds before the conqueror's feet. For Spock was indeed conquered by this man. All that remained was for Spock to be claimed and taken. With the primal need loosed, so the yearning for that blessed event clutched Spock and left him momentarily breathless. The throbbing need overwhelmed him, disorienting, dizzying – desire for the promise of full and generative psycho-sexual union with James Kirk...

Spock recoiled in horror, shuddering. How could he so desecrate his god? Gods by definition existed on their lofty pedestals of infinite, eternal, immutable purity, far beyond the realm of ordinary being – and relationships with them of necessity were to be beyond mere physical joining, transcending the base needs of primitive ancestral blood. In any case, Spock reminded himself, Vulcans had long, long ago dismissed their deities. Deities, if they had any existence, any meaning now, remained symbols for aspects of the Vulcan psyche, at all times subordinated to logic and the search for the dissolution of the self into the All. Yet Kirk remained an idol, refusing to be broken or dissolved, defying definition, at once unknowable and intimately, incarnately known. And Spock's errant being longed for him.

He shuddered again. Surely it was illogical to lie here at Kirk's back barely sharing body heat. It was entirely logical that he roll over and press his own needful body to the sleeping human's form.

Kirk sighed and unconsciously took hold of Spock's embracing arm, drawing him closer. Ironically, now that he could touch, could breathe deeply and inhale the salty, musky smell of this one, Spock sighed deeply. At last, the troubles tormenting him slipped beneath the tide of sleep, and he buried his face in the neck of this precious human.

The next day and a half passed in almost-silence, each man pondering the fearful truth they faced. At times, both noted the almost audible rhythms of earth and wind, sun and rain, fire and water, an intensity wavering sometimes just beyond the edge of vision, hazy with impending meaning. The pulse was strong, calling to parts

of themselves long feared – and which they found they were powerless to resist.

The villagers approached with awe and reverence (for the most part – presumably those who were of Mishtah's skeptical frame of mind kept their distance). Small children came and pressed their noses to the palings which made the "walls". Young men and girls in the first blush of womanhood came more surreptitiously to gaze on the Chosen and know the first awakening of sexual desire – or so it appeared from the way the girls bit their lips, and the boys grunted and palmed their crotches. Women heavy with child, and young mothers brought gifts of spring flowers and pressed them like prayers between the palings, tributes offered to the one Chosen by the divine spirits. They were well-fed and watered, let out twice a day by their guards to relieve themselves, and at one point, bathe. At these times they would be followed by a procession of people chanting praises. And ever around them, the whispers of *pudl'tor, pudl'tor, pudl'tor, pivah pudl'tor*, until Kirk was thoroughly sick of the refrain.

It wasn't until mid-morning of the second day of their confinement that Kirk was able to let go of his slight jealousy over Spock being Chosen, glorified. He was disturbed by the courting behavior directed at Spock. When he finally applied his mind to the uncomfortable feeling, he realized with some intuition that this must be part of the ritual, whatever it was. And that scared him. Through the afternoon he paced the cell, restless, caged, his frustration mounting until he called for the guards (against Spock's futile and half-hearted pleas to the contrary), and demanded to see Poktar.

Spock looked slightly dazed, and this concerned Kirk greatly. Over the hours, he'd noticed Spock's withdrawal, his face drawn, almost as though he were weakening.

He clamored again for the old man, until finally – finally, the elder came, flanked by four guards. The wall came down, and the old man entered, examined Spock briefly and turned to Kirk and said something.

"Dammit!" Kirk shouted. "I don't understand you barbarians!"

"*Throk-mors*," Poktar replied calmly, and raised his palm. Recognising the action, Kirk shrugged.

"Fine, alright. If we can only speak by communicating in a meld, fine. Do it." He crossed his arms, although he knew that would be no barrier to the old man's telepathy.

Spock protested mildly, but Kirk silenced him with a reassuring gesture.

There was a blanking out – and then Kirk found himself in a no-place with a silvery presence beside him, fluid and wild.

There was surprise.

You are a commander?

Yes.

And he is your...

My First Officer, my right hand man, my partner.

In more ways than one.

Yes, he said belligerently.

The old one laughed. *Ask your questions*, he said.

You keep calling Spock the Chosen. Why? What are you going to do to him?

The pokro have been kind to us. They sent him, sent you, at this time when we perform the Rites of the new year. Rohik must die in the arms of the pudl'tor, the r'plathorik, the Virgin parent of all, Ma'atre, and through his/her sacrifice rise again. In this time, that which has lain dormant is stirred up, the power of life again is released and the world renewed.

But Spock's being decorated like a pageant queen. You say sacrifice. Are you planning to kill him?

It is forbidden to speak of the central, most holy rite. It may only be experienced. You shall experience it.

Can't you take me instead of him?

You are not the Chosen. And, you are not r'plathorik, but have had many flesh-sheaths, the old man leered.

Embarrassment.

He shall serve well as r'plathorik pudl'tor. It augurs well for a fertile, abundant year.

The old man made to withdraw.

Wait, wait!

And then he was gone, leaving Kirk reeling. He sat on the floor, head in his hands.

"Captain, are you alright?" Spock asked softly.

Kirk looked up. The guards were gone, and so was Poktar. Gazing at his friend, Kirk's heart overflowed with a mix of fear, love, friendship and the sense of its imminent loss, frustration, helplessness as he watched Spock weaken, being drained of energy. The thought that this gentle being, this compassionate soul could be offered as a sacrifice to prehistoric gods was offensive, tragic. He had to do something.

"Spock, we need to review what we know of fertility rites from ancient Earth, Vulcan, and other Federation planets." He quickly recounted Potkar's information – which did help at least in understanding what was going on. "We need have some idea of what this central rite involves so we can be prepared for it."

Spock sighed. It was nothing that hadn't been already almost dancing before his eyes in the past hours.

"Ancient cultures bear striking similarities in how they dealt ritually with fertility. Such rites often involved virgins, and even more commonly, sacrifice of a victim – whether male or female, infant or pubescent or adult, firstborn or the most beautiful of a group, depending on the deity invoked. Another common thread is that of the virgin being united with the god sexually – whether ritually or physically, the role of the god being assumed by another. Most often the virgin so united to the god would be sacrificed after the so-called 'marriage' was consummated. There were, of course, variations in how this occurred, and what constituted 'sacrifice'. But most commonly fertility is tied to the shedding of blood in a sexual ritual of some description."

The Vulcan paused. Neither of them could avoid making the inevitable connections. He continued in as neutral a voice he could summon.

"These people apparently have fertility rites in which the whole village participates, with the intention of invoking their gods' favour and fruitfulness for the coming year. It seems they have had a less than optimal year, or had a series of less than optimal years approximately fifteen of their years ago, given the lack of pubescent youths available. If their population had been decimated around that time, it makes sense that they are still attempting to rebuild, and sacrificing the young who are on the cusp of becoming productive adults would be illogical in their quest for survival. Potkar sees our advent as a divine sign, and I have been named Chosen, a suitably virginal substitute for their people."

"I can't accept that, Spock," Kirk protested.

"And yet we have little choice. This central rite involves the Chosen virginal victim in a ritual act – most likely along the lines of the ancient primitive cultures we've encountered or know of... The Chosen becomes the metaphor of the earth, and an other or others enact the role of the deity planting its seed. In the best case scenario, this will be symbolic, the rites of death which brings new life metaphorical, the god and the victim 'dying' together in sexual ecstasy. In the worst... Jim, it is equally likely that once I have fulfilled the role of the Chosen, they will sacrifice me."

Kirk lurched forward from where he'd been crouching, and grasped Spock's shin. "We can't allow that to happen, Spock! I can't allow that to happen. I won't. I need you, Spock. I can't just... let you..." He grasped Spock by both arms. "Don't you understand? I *need* you, Spock! Not just as my First Officer. Not just as my friend. This time we've been caged here, I've finally come to see that I need you more than anything, more than the ship, more than my command. More than life itself."

Spock raised a weary eyebrow.

"Do you understand?" Kirk said again, the tempest past, the storm petering out. He abruptly let go, distressed, and leapt to his feet, beginning to pace again. He stopped, electrified.

"What if? What if..." he turned and crouched down before Spock once more. "Of course! It's an obvious solution. You know, we could always take away the condition on which they've predicated your suitability for being Chosen."

Spock stared at the man, disbelieving. "The fact that I... have not yet been intimate with another."

"Your virginity. Yes."

"And you would relieve me of this condition, in the belief that this would disqualify me from being their Chosen."

"Yes, Spock."

Spock considered this, his mind foggy. It was difficult to sift the reactive anger he felt, his astonishment at what Kirk was proposing, and logical reasons for rejecting the notion outright. He wasn't sure of anything except a certain revulsion for the notion that Kirk should engage in sexual intercourse with him only in order to render him no longer virginal. It smacked of... exigency, crude physicality, and it went against all of Spock's instincts.

"Has it occurred to you, Captain, that our lives and continued existence may be predicated on that very... condition? And that, were you to render it void, it would result in our deaths? I am reasonably certain that the only reason our captors have not terminated your own life is because the existence of the link between us serves their purposes." He neglected to explain the other reason for his outrage at Kirk's suggestion: the jeopardy of Kirk's safety. Were they to take that next step, the link they shared, though mentally unconsummated, would become strong enough in its joining of their life energies that were Spock to be killed, Kirk would most certainly die, and vice versa. Spock refused to countenance this.

"The only option is for me to go through with the ritual. You must find a way to escape while the ritual is in progress. Captain, your survival is critical."

"And what about your own, Spock? Have you thought, have you considered that you mean the same to me?"

"Jim," Spock reached out and took his arm, pleading gently, "yield to the logic of the situation. You must survive... Besides, I believe your experience of... need, directed at myself, is not need which should be channeled into the life-bond which would form were we to take the next step. You prefer the company of women; any 'port in a storm' in this case will not do – you do not understand the nature of Vulcan bonds."

"It's not like that." Kirk shook himself free of the gentle hand of his friend.

"Is it not?" Spock raised an eyebrow again. "Knowing what you know of me, knowing that this capitulation answers the deep calling in my katra, can you truly say that your desire to... deflower... me is anything more than desperation?"

"Spock – "

"Jim, do not push this. I would not wish desperation to taint our link. If it were to be completed, it would need to be in the context of mutuality. And this situation in which we find ourselves prohibits and prevents the conditions for the true forming of a life-bond. "

Silence grew between them, anguished. Kirk turned and took Spock's face between his hands, joining their foreheads.

"Oh, Spock," he sighed.

Spock closed his eyes, leaning into the hands cupping his cheeks, his own hands coming up, one to cover Kirk's left hand, and the other curling around the man's neck, drawing them together.

Spock was right. From a command perspective, Kirk's duty was to survive until Starfleet could locate him, them, whoever survived. The likely cost of that survival was a price Kirk did not want to pay.

He pressed himself closer, wrapping Spock in an embrace: the embrace of dear friends who feared imminent sundering. That night they slept together, unashamedly clinging to each other as though by clinging the unknown's execution of tomorrow could be stayed...

III.

The village was bustling, excitement palpable from the hour before dawn. Women hurried from one place to another carrying all manner of things. Children scurried on messages from harassed mothers to other members of the community. Warriors sang as they sharpened their weapons in the dawn's early light.

It was the day of the Ritual, and the two Starfleet officers greeted it with grim resignation.

The activity in the central gathering area began after breakfast. Various stations were set up and the villagers passed through each one: a bathing station, where each villager stripped naked and washed in a tub of water imbued with aromatic herbs; a station where they were given a long piece of fabric about a foot wide and five feet long which they each fastened about their waists as a ceremonial skirt; and another station where their bodies were festooned with ochres in vivid blues, yellows, reds, whites, and greens. As the paint was applied, songs were sung by the matriarchs applying the paint, songs of stimulation, of fertility and blessing. Females and males

were dressed alike, the only difference being the painting of a square on the males' foreheads, and a triangle on females'. Once they were "dressed", each went to a final station where they ran their palm over a knife, allowing several drops of their green blood to fall into a wooden vat.

The matriarchs and elders were last, including Mishtah, Poktar, and Telkar – whom Spock and Kirk hadn't seen since their delivery here. Their paint differed from that of the others in that the men's foreheads were painted with circles surrounded by dots, while the women had two crescents aligned in different positions in relation to each other – the phases of the planet's moons perhaps. In addition to this, Poktar was robed in a cloak made of stringy bark, and with a white pointed woven hat placed on his head. Affixed to this hat were green sprigs and new grasses in a mane, an array of other trinkets which caught the light. Telkar was given the skin of a ferocious animal, its head hollowed out and made into a mask which was fitted over his head. He and his warriors decorated their swords and tied them to their sides.

A group of seven warriors approached the shelter and began to remove the front paling wall.

"Spock!" Kirk said desperately, clasping his friend.

"Jim," Spock responded as the warriors entered and forcefully parted them, Kirk struggling in their arms. "There is no logic in resisting this."

Kirk was bound hand and foot, a gag placed in his mouth so that he couldn't call out. Nothing would be permitted to disrupt the sacred ritual of the spring solstice.

The warriors hoisted Spock between them, and carried their hostage into the centre of the gathering place. Laying him on the central stone (the one on which Poktar had given his oration three days before), one warrior held each of his limbs, while another sharpened a stone knife.

A chant rose among the warriors, one beating a skin drum. Telkar took the knife and held it aloft to the cries of those gathered.

Poktar, presiding, stood off to one side, and nodded for the ritual to begin.

With his knife, Telkar sliced the clothing from Spock's body, rendering him naked and exposed from head to foot. The warriors fastened leather thongs on his wrists and ankles, and tied them to a frame, which they then set upright in the ground. Telkar took the pot of white ochre and drew one line down Spock's face from the top of his head to the centre of his pubic bone, another over his right eye and down to the toe of his right foot, and a third on his left side.

Poktar took the knife from Telkar, and the vat was brought over and placed beneath Spock's right hand. Poktar held the instrument up, its blade catching the morning light and greeted with the same ululating cries as before.

"We make the Chosen one with us, and one with us the Chosen shall represent all." He took the knife and sliced Spock's palm, squeezing so that a good amount dripped into the vat. *"His blood is our blood, and our life-blood shall flow in his*

veins."

Spices were brought, and three large pots full of what appeared to be fermented fruit juice, its golden-orange liquid mixing with the blood in the vat as sanctifying songs were sung over it, Poktar's hands extended. It turned a vibrant green.

Someone brought a silvery chalice to Poktar, who dipped it into the vat, and then poured its contents over Spock's body, and over his head, holding it to his lips and forcing Spock to drink the first cup. As the Chosen imbibed, a cheer went up. People began to dance on the spot, an energy spiraling in their midst.

The concoction was sickly sweet, carrying an overpowering kick whether alcoholic or herbal, Spock couldn't say. Its scent filled his nostrils, intoxicating, inescapable.

Poktar took the pot of yellow paint and smeared his thumb down Spock's penis before stepping back. The drum beat intensified, and each villager, each warrior, man, woman, child, lined up and processed past him, dipping their fingers in one of the jars of paint and then applying it to some part of his body.

Dizzy and disoriented from the nectar and hard living since arriving on this planet, Spock's shields were battered by the emotions transferred through the villagers' touch. Some were cynical, joining the ritual because of social pressure; through others flowed lust, desire, and wild and primal need. The children's touch was curious, innocent. Most distressing was the touch of those who genuinely believed in what they were doing, and whose minds reverberated with prayers that they might indeed be one with the Chosen, and so find fruitfulness and blessing for the coming year. All of the touches claimed him, claimed relationship to and with him, pulled part of himself from him, the magnetism of these people's telepathy almost too much for his depleted state. His mental shields survived – just, although the people's claim now rested on him like a heavy, invisible shroud.

The cup was held to his lips again and he was made to drink.

The song changed: it was lighter, more wild, yet pure and untouched. Some of the young people came forward to untie the thongs which bound Spock to the frame. Dazed, he did not try to escape as they took the ties in their hands and began to dance in a configuration involving concentric circles, dragging Spock along with them.

He blinked, trying to clear his vision. Something was weaving in and around the dancing youths, a flow of... something. And then it was gone, impossible to catch or pin down.

The older people (minus the elders and warriors) formed a circle around the youths as they danced, performing much slower and sedate movements. The drums began a flowing rhythm, warriors taking up other instruments (pipes and whistles made from bone and wood and reed), and the dancers began to move en masse through the village away from Kirk's shelter. He watched as Poktar fitted the knife into his skirt, and the warriors and elders began their own angular dance, following the others who were bearing Spock away.

One of the warriors turned back and came towards the gagged and bound human. Moving behind the man, the warrior applied the technique to the man's back, ignoring his muffled protests. Kirk knew no more.

The dancing youths led the dazzled Chosen One to the place where the ritual was repeated year by year: where the two rivers met, and between them, a large clearing surrounded by scrubland. In the centre of the clearing was a low ring of stones, and in the centre, a large platform with horns carved into each corner representing the four directions.

Arriving in the clearing, the youths filed off, and the women and men who were mated emerged, moving in a close formation. Spock found himself buffeted by the dancers, the complex rhythms and patterns of their movement indiscernible by him in his drugged state. All the while they shepherded him until he found himself standing within the central circle of stones.

Next, the warriors, skins of various animals over their heads, circled the stones in a slow, prowling movement, before drawing their ring closer and closer around Spock. Once more he was pushed and buffeted and sometimes caught up in the movements the men made, until he was hoisted by them onto the central platform.

Poktar mounted the steps, and made Spock drink once more from the chalice as he was pinned to the platform by four warriors. He choked and sputtered on the pungent nectar, and was allowed to sit up as the warriors returned to their circle around the central platform.

Through the hours which followed (though Spock lost track of time), different groups of the people danced in turn, sitting and crouching and watching the others until their time came again. Some of the dances demanded the Chosen. In one slow-moving rite, he was lifted and passed over the head of the dancers. In another more frenetic dance, he was taken by the ties and made to join the dancers' steps.

As the afternoon drew on towards dusk, several fires were lit in a circle around the stone circle. From time to time the nectar was passed from dancer to dancer, all, including small children, imbibing, drinking the collected "blood of the Chosen", and with it, their own.

Spock's consciousness struggled against the intoxicating drink, and against the mesmerizing ritual of the dance. The primal rhythms that had been on the edge of his awareness since the escape pod had plummeted into the snowy mountain side throbbed now, beating in his flesh, echoing in the cavity of his chest and skull. He was becoming one with the beating heart of this people, one with their earth, their Chosen representative. And as that process unfolded, he felt the gradual loss of his mental faculties until the world was no longer rational thought and well-ordered concepts, but instinctive and primal. He fought the slide into mindlessness. But it was hard, for the images he saw, the spirits of the people, called to him, mocked him,

ridiculed his virginal state. He wanted to cry out defiance, but he had no voice. There were other, darker forms which crouched, lascivious, destructive, raw, and ready to slake their thirst in his need – and they crept ever closer to the circle of stones and to the Chosen, weaving their own dances among the people.

When Kirk came to, the sun had just set, the dancers now leaping and shouting, singing with abandon in an ordered chaos and confusion he couldn't make sense of. He found himself on the edge of the clearing, bushes and low trees behind him. Two youths guarded him assiduously. He tested his bonds: tight, but not impossible to loosen with time and the right luck.

Where was Spock? It was almost impossible to see through the endless frenetic movements of bodies. He caught glimpses of his friend, sometimes being passed from group to group in the dance, or pushed back into the central circle of stones. Spock was not himself, passive, possibly drugged or in a trance of some sort, if the look on his face was anything to go by. The Vulcan's breath was shallow and rapid, his eyes glazed, his lips parted as he breathed. He was flushed, his hair awry and thus disarrayed; he was naked but for the paint.

Panic and horror flipped in Kirk's gut. What?! He had to get free; had to get to Spock.

But his guards noted his movement and drew closer. There was no other alternative but to watch, observe, and wait his time to take action.

The dancers were calming down, sitting around the fires. The drum beat changed and the pipes and flutes took up a wild and windy tune. The matriarchs and married women stood and began a seductive, slow dance with sensuous movements, moving like the branches of trees in a breeze. They threaded into the sacred circle and surrounded the central platform where Spock stood, reaching to caress his feet with hands that could have been twigs or leaves. Young people followed, bobbing like flowers or grains and fruits in the sun: the homage of flora paid to the Chosen, the whole of the plant life claiming in the dance a union with the Chosen on the altar. Next, the warriors in their animal skins mimicked the mating calls of the animals whose skins they wore, lumbering around the Chosen: the offering of fauna and animal life which flourished on this world. For the ritual was not merely for the people, but for the whole world.

Those seated around the fires drank again of the nectar as this dance continued, hollering with the cries of the various animals, or whistling with the calls of birds as the warriors' dance continued.

It marked a change in the dynamic of the dances. Darkness deepened, and so did the sexuality of the dances increase, dancers in all groups taking the part of male and female animals of the same species – birds, what looked like armadillos, bears, and felines.

There was a great clang of a gong, and the whole assembly rose as one and began a furious square dance. Spock too leapt up on the central platform and began to dance with the same actions as the tribe – as though hypnotized. Kirk felt the power of the call in his bones, and had he not been restrained, he too would have leapt compulsively and danced for all he was worth, stamping, twisting, rocking, leaping. As it was, his guards joined the frenzy. When he was assured of their complete attention being taken by the call of the dance, Kirk rolled himself into the bushes, wriggling on his stomach until he was surrounded by trees and shrubs. Now as he made his assault on his bonds he was driven by urgency; Spock looked exhausted already, and Kirk had an awful sense that something nasty was going to happen, and soon.

Free his hands. He had to free his hands. A stone? Yes. He sat with his back to a sharp stone and began to saw his wrists against its rough edge. After what seemed like an hour at least, the leather gave, and he made short work of untying the gag and the bonds around his feet.

Now free, driven by a need he didn't understand and couldn't analyze, he crept back, approaching the clearing by doubling around to the other side, opposite where his guards had been. In the furor nobody had missed him; he thought it unlikely they would discover his absence until they'd slept off their hangovers from today's excesses. He had to get to Spock, rescue him, bear him away.

He found a vantage point: a stone sheltered by a bush, which meant he was both elevated as well as hidden. Here, he was afforded a clear view of the central platform and Spock.

The oldest women and frail elders had by this stage shepherded the children and those who had not yet been sexually initiated back to the village (and presumably, bed). Those who were left drew nearer to the fires, closing a large circle in which they joined hands as they sat cross-legged on the ground, humming. The warriors, still dressed in their skins formed another circle, and closest to the platform the elders and matriarchs sat in a ring around it, chanting.

A gong was struck, its sound reverberating off tree and stone and in the bodies of those in the clearing. The elders, matriarchs and warriors stood and held out their hands towards the central altar and Spock, who leapt up and began a vigorous dance. Kirk noted with dismay that his Vulcan friend was beyond reason, acting on automatic impulse, his autonomic systems governed by some collective spirit and will of those who had declared and claimed him as Chosen. Spock danced as though possessed by an ancient spirit, in ritual steps he could not have known before this day. As he danced, there was a slow pulsing of energy which saw those gathered breaking off into pairs either with mates if they were mated, or with one who was willing. Some couples were openly copulating beside the fire, feeding off the mass of energetic power sweeping the clearing. Others began to slip into the shadows of night, finding a more private place to engage in intimacies. All of them appeared to be well and truly caught up in the trance and the pulse.

The warriors for the moment remained, observing the dance of the Chosen. Spock danced around the area bounded by the sacred stones, sometimes approaching warriors imploringly – his feet were bleeding, and he was obviously exhausted. Yet

he was compelled to dance. The warriors maintained a psychic barrier, arms crossed, unmoved and unmoving as the Victim threw himself at them in an attempt to escape. There was no fleeing from this, the pulse of power almost as audible as the throb of a warp engine in Kirk's ears.

The Chosen was wearing down. Every so often, he collapsed on the ground. And even then, he continued to twitch, the movement constant, forcing his body to respond. Up he leapt again, the vigor of the dance momentarily undimmed before the exhaustion became evident and he fell again. It seemed to go on for hours (and it may well have been hours), each fall grabbing Kirk's heart and squeezing it.

Finally, the Chosen fell and did not rise, his chest heaving, his limbs still twitching weakly. Four hefty warriors carried the Chosen back to the altar and laid him there, face up to the cold night sky.

The psionic energy being generated by the elders and matriarchs continued, pulsing, arousing, and the warriors now paired and melted into the shadows. All the other villagers safely out of sight (or out of their minds and caught in the ancient rhythms of lust and release), the last dance was left to the elders.

Poktar climbed the altar steps. *"May the last dance begin, the dance that brings life, the dance of the wise and the old, the dance of death. From darkness, light; from the old, the new,"* he chanted, the elders and crones taking up the refrain.

As one they rose and closed on the altar, beginning a slow dance. One at a time, they took turns to run their hands over the shivering body of the Chosen, who arched into their touch and keened. Poktar danced an elaborate dance with the sacrificial knife. Each time he passed by Spock's feet, he would run either the cool flat or the sharp blade over some part of his body, eliciting an erotic moan.

The dance continued, clockwise and anticlockwise, for twenty-four cycles. The elders and matriarchs stopped, raising their hands to the heavens and ululating. The dance began again, with one of them, the first a male, climbing the platform and moving to the Chosen's prone and twitching, moaning form. He bent down and touched the Vulcan's body erotically: he trailed fingertips around the shells of his ears, took the pebbled nipples one by one in his mouth and sucked vigorously, causing the body to moan and buck, and then took the now erect phallus into his mouth. The elder attempted to stimulate the Chosen to orgasm for twenty-four cycles of the dance... and then retired, defeated, back to the dancing circle, and a woman stepped forward.

"Dance, O Chosen one! Dance and die. For in your death lies our salvation, another year guaranteed. Dance, Chosen one of the pokro. Dance and die," the chant continued. The elders sang of what they were doing: Each of the twenty four elders attempted to elicit a response from the Chosen, for his orgasm would be the spasms of the earth preparing to receive the fructifying of the gods. The elder who could bring the Chosen to orgasm would be the one elected by the *pokro* to take his virginity by penetration or by being penetrated, wearing the face of the sky god taking to bed the lover earth-god. And having been so taken, the Chosen one's veins could be opened, the mingling lifeblood of the people, of earth and sky, flowing out to make the world rich and fertile.

In spite of himself, Kirk was unbearably aroused, to the point of distraction. He shook his head: he thought the shadows were dancing, unseen shapes weaving and pulsing. Closer to the epicenter of energy, the elders knew it too: many, unsuccessful in bringing the Chosen to completion, nevertheless brought themselves to swift conclusions, their sexual energy adding to the throbbing vortex of psionic power. While watching his friend being sexually harassed and stimulated by the elders was horrifying, Kirk knew that alien energy pulsing in his roots, urging him too to find sexual completion.

All the elders and matriarchs failed in their attempt to make the Chosen one orgasm, and the song faltered, the dance confused and taking on an aspect of desperation. This had never happened before. One woman began to badger Poktar.

"This cannot be the Chosen. The Chosen should have been brought to completion by now."

The bruised and abused body on the altar moaned, the pain of hours' long arousal without release pure agony, blood seeping from the cuts all over his skin, some of the trails drying and congealing.

Kirk wondered too, by what ill luck Spock hadn't been able to climax... He shook his fuzzy head again – and then thought of the link they shared. At once, the answer seemed obvious. Vulcans required mental bonds in order to find completion; that was the tragedy and majesty of *pon farr*. The solution was clear: he must join with Spock. The villagers had been foolish to leave him out of the ritual, as he, having a link to Spock's mind, was the only one who could accomplish what they desired. Spock had been right all along; the key was to go along with the ritual, because it was through engaging with it that they would find freedom, the new life of the ritual their own lives.

Against the pulsing, throbbing energy coiled in his loins, Kirk fought to retain his command impulse to rescue Spock and carry him away, escaping from this hell. But the visions he battled were becoming increasingly real to his sight.

Spock was utterly spent, every muscle aching and sore, his skin smarting, alive with myriad painful sensations, his mind battered. He battled with flame and shadow, the primal energy of the earth causing the ancient strains of his own blood to surge up, like sap up the roots of a tree, or like a new spring welling and about to burst forth. He fought still for logic, barely holding onto reason, his ability to control stolen from him hours ago.

In the tiny part of himself still able to think, he concluded that the juice he'd been forced to drink had hallucinatory properties, for he was seeing things that no mortal could or should see. This altered state of consciousness was exhilarating and terrifying. Or was he seeing the true reality behind all that is?

For in this state, the god the elders longed to embody had already chosen mortal form, and hovered off to one side, veiled by trees and observing the virgin's abortive dance, his agony, and the people's attempts to rouse the god within the Chosen one. Off in the shadows the shining god waited, like a bridegroom awaiting a bride being prepared by those who wait on her, his own eyes burning with the rising wave of desire.

His whole being cried out, and he stretched his hands towards the one who would be his savior, his release, his hope.

How could the shining god resist that call of the wounded, a call which echoed through eons and seemed almost to shake the stars themselves? How could he remain unmoved, unmoving in the shadows when the virginal bride called out in an ecstasy of need for what he and he alone could bring?

Kirk found a moment of curious clarity in which the clamour of his energy abated. Spock was failing. His death-song cut Kirk to the quick: he had to act.

On an impulse, the last illusions of flesh falling away before the world of spirit in which the visions became reality, Kirk broke out of his hiding place and plunged through the circle of elders. Once he achieved the altar and stood beside flushed body, he roared and the fires rose in a torrent of flame.

A great pulse of primal creative energy entered the soles of his feet, grounding him, and making his whole body tingle. Vision and material reality blurred.

And for the first time, he beheld with the eyes of a god, the god who would be his equal, his spouse, beautiful beyond words, primed and ready for him, verdant with a desire which matched the raw need in himself. He laughed. His being thrilled with the pure virility of the virginal one awaiting him – and then he saw the answering knowledge in the other's eyes, who was also transfigured. With the divine knowledge came awareness of what must be done. The natives were wrong: the god must first embrace his generative energy, and then offer it to the other.

Yes! came the answer, and the god became aware of Vulcan-shaped thoughts circling him like cats about to pounce on a bird, or like a dance of veils about to bind inseparably.

We must both let go... the restraints... hindrances... boundaries we place on this creative, erotic power...

Yes! they cried together –

And an infusion of energy, or the new connection to his own unknown energy reinvigorated the Chosen one, and he rose from the slab, the primal throb of nature keening through him, fire kindled in his blood at the sight of his mate. And this one who came, his savior, his divine consort, glowed with the light of sun, moon, and

stars, was arrayed with the mantle of sky, and sang to his katra in a chorus of radiant dawn and the high tinkle of star-song.

Two energies, the silver-green of the earth god and the gold and blue of the sky god joined in a conflagration. Like the demigods of old, they knew themselves full of light and the mystery of all-that-which-is. They laughed with the exhilaration of it: for they were no longer James Kirk and Spock of Vulcan, but deities with infinite power and majesty, their psychic fields glowing and fizzing with energy as their whole beings touched, kissing at levels other than mouth and lips.

The Vulcan Chosen one raised a hand in the manner of his people, the minds of the two mortals immediately interweaving warping and wefting until mentally they were one. Fierce, wild joy danced ecstatically, and the heavenly bodies sang in this mindspace: the marriage-song of heaven and earth.

The words echoed in the joined light-world of their psychic fields, glittering, shining, shifting only from glory to yet more heart-piercing glory:

Parted from me and never parted; never and always touching and touched.

Over and over it repeated, until the last strands joined and the inner flame swallowed the newly formed bond.

We are one.

The elders and matriarchs fell back beyond the holy circle, for the light and heat and real-ness of the coming of their gods was too much to bear, material reality itself trembling with the impact of multiple dimensions coming together. Never had the tribe actually seen their gods, and now they knew not whether to bow in worship or to join in the sacred act. The burning glory filled the clearing and turned the night sky almost to day, as though stars had fallen to earth in bodily form.

They watched, as in the centre of the flame the Chosen one tore the clothing from sky-god's form, his brilliance glowing. They watched, as in a great triumphant cry, the aching rod of earth pierced the sky, and the two moved, their desire matched, their potent need throbbing as it were through the cosmos. Each thrust, each answering push by which the sky-god opened his boundless horizon, made reality itself tremble and shimmer in folds of satisfaction.

The first shared climax spilled the seed of stars on the earth, and planted them deep in its core, at the same time as earth erupted, shooting points of burning light like sequins back into the midnight mantle of sky.

The elders and matriarchs watched, their own beings caught up in the erotic symphony of life itself, and carried away as the hours unfolded. They watched as sky plunged into earth, and earth cried out and gave itself to the falling asteroids of sky. They watched as the earth was parted and consumed, as sky washed the wounds of

earth, biting, licking, weeping on its breast. Through the long night they watched, until as the dawn's new light grew on the edge of the world, the people's shining gods gradually stilled in their writhing, the glowing passing with the death of the new fires.

In a mess of red and green, of tangled limbs and matted hair, the mortal bodies lay, utterly still and spent. The Rites of Spring, like never before, were complete.

The elders and matriarchs slowly crawled back to the sacred altar.

But as they reached to touch the bodies which had housed their gods, the wasted, holy sacrifices disappeared in the soft susurrations of a shower of golden sparks. And they were gone.

Never again did the tribe perform the Rites of Spring. Never again; for the gods had come, and they knew them to have departed. The people decided all life was holy to the *pokro*, all that is imbued with their reality. And so they turned to peace, their civilization avoiding the wars of their distant cousins on the dry red sands of Eridani's satellite.

And long they kept alive the tale of how the gods appeared – and were taken from them in physical form.

IV.

"There a' too many Vulcanoid lifesigns tae distinguish Mr. Spock, Doctor," the Chief Engineer complained.

"Then try for Jim's readings."

"Ah! Wait a moment... Aye! I hae a human signature. But it is... No! It's gone!... No! there it is."

"Lock on, man, and bring him home. For the love of sweetness and light, Scotty, do it!" McCoy bellowed.

"I'm tryin', Doctor McCoy. But these human lifesigns, well, they're nothing as I've ever seen before."

"Just do it."

The transporter whined and shimmered, but the confused image failed to materialize.

"Boostin' the annular confinement beam."

It was touch and go. McCoy held his breath, barely daring to hope...

He'd discovered the Captain and First Officer's disappearance the day after the dinner. They'd booked cabins next to one another at a lovely lakeside resort at the base of a former volcanic mountain range, and had been intending to climb to a lookout with spectacular views over a waterfall that morning. Unfortunately, with the resources of the locals exhausted at the point of discovering that neither man was on the planet, there was nothing that could be done until the maintenance being done on the *Enterprise* was complete.

What the local investigations had revealed was a history of poaching by Orion slavers – just one more reason why membership of the Federation was desirable to these folk. Thankfully, they had a database of forty years' worth of readings on the Orion ships which had entered orbit, a great deal more information than Starfleet had been able to garner. So it was that even though the ion trail of the slaver ship which had picked off the two Starfleet Officers had degraded significantly, once the *Enterprise* was ready to go once more, they had the capability to pick up the trail.

They had located the slaver ship; the captain was even now languishing in the *Enterprise's* brig, and they had 200 beings on board to be delivered to their homes, liberated from the clutches of slavery.

But first they had to find Captain Kirk and Commander Spock.

In the course of Scotty and Chief Giotto's... interrogations... they had managed to wheedle the story out of one of the guards, a story of flight and fight and a lost escape pod. Comparing this against the Orion ship's logs (the ship was now in tow), Ensign Chekov determined three possible M-class planets to which the two officers could have directed the pod: an area of two square light years, but a hell of a lot better than having to search the whole sector. That is, if the *Enterprise's* commanding officers had survived long enough to get there.

And so they'd discovered this green jewel of a planet, orbiting a K class star, the second planet in a system of nine, but the only one in that system capable of supporting life. The fact they had detected a bronze-age Vulcanoid culture had given both cause for hope and cause for concern.

For hours they'd been unable to lock onto anything on the surface; some sort of energy dampening field (natural, by Scotty's assessment) prevented them from rescuing the Captain. But over the last half an hour the field had faded and then disappeared abruptly.

The object on the pad shimmered into horrifying reality.

"My God," McCoy breathed.

It was a mass of red and green, a tangle of limbs – and the bodies appeared to be... joined.

He whipped out his tricorder as he leapt up to the pad. Both barely alive, lifesigns fading. No wonder Scotty had had trouble locking on to them. The Doctor raced to the intercom and hailed sickbay.

"Two anti-grav gurneys, stat! And hop on that, Petrikov! Call Dr. M'Benga and ready both operating theatres."

With med teams on the way, McCoy examined the pair more closely. Jim's body was beneath the heavier form – kind of. For his torso was twisted around, one arm locked around the Vulcan's head, legs interwoven. One battered green hand clutched a human breast, the other trapping his flaccid penis in a bruising grip... and it appeared the Vulcan's own member was still buried inside the other's body, and his teeth... his teeth were still latched onto the human's shoulder. Jim's other arm was bent at an odd angle, obviously broken.

"Jim, Jim, Jim. What have you gone and done?" Bones murmured to himself.

The stretchers arrived and they hastened to the medical bays, the CMO calling for other surgical support staff to scrub up. There was work to do if the lives of their commanding officers were to be saved.

It was a slow coming to a sterile medical consciousness, the scent of sickbay immediately assaulting his nostrils – one of the many familiar smells that said "home".

Kirk groaned and attempted to roll onto his side. A hand stilled him.

"Easy now." McCoy's face, lined with weariness and worry looked down at him.

There was a delicious golden warmth surrounding him. Through his immense discomfort he felt Spock all around him, wrapped up as though in a welcome blanket. He discovered one of his arms was completely immobilized. With some confusion, the satisfaction of his awareness of his new bondmate's thoughts and presence faded as he returned Bones' gaze.

"What... ? S-Spock?" he struggled to speak around the sandpaper in his mouth. The Doctor placed an ice cube on his tongue. He sucked at it gratefully.

"Don't you worry about Spock, Captain. He's currently in a healing trance. But the moment he wakes up, you can be guaranteed he'll be thrown in the brig," Bones said sententiously.

"No. Don'... und...st'nd." He tried to grip McCoy's sleeve with his good hand, but the man shook loose.

"It'll be ok, Jim. We'll make sure he gets what he deserves."

Kirk chewed the ice and swallowed it. As it went down, its coolness soothed his ragged throat.

"No! Listen, Bones. He didn't hurt me," he rasped, determined to get his point across.

"Bullshit! How can you say that, Jim? How can you say that? I've spent seven hours in surgery trying to patch you up after what he did to you. Aside from that broken arm, I've had to do a complete reconstruction of your rectum, you have three fractures in your pelvis, you're covered in bites and bruises, and you've got all the signs of having been raped violently and repeatedly over several hours. I'm not even going to go into the contents we pumped from your stomach..."

"It wasn't rape. Well, not exactly."

"What, he said to you, 'Do you mind if I tear you a new one, Captain? Do you mind if I bite chunks out of your shoulder muscles? Do you mind if I bend your arm to the point that it breaks'?"

"It wasn't like that, Bones. It wasn't," Kirk put out his good arm to stop the Doctor's movement either towards or away from him.

"Look, I can't explain right now what happened; I'm still trying to work it out myself. But it wasn't rape. I went to him willingly. We... you know." He waved a hand. "Yes. But it's Spock you should be worried about. He was assaulted physically and mentally."

"By whom?"

Kirk looked at Bones and opened his mouth, then closed it again. It was all too much to describe right now. He felt completely overwhelmed.

"I really can't put it into words. So... tired." He yawned.

McCoy relented. "Alright. You sleep up and heal, Captain. We'll talk when you're up to it."

Kirk nodded and closed his eyes, reaching for the warm presence of Spock within him. He wondered briefly how he'd ever lived without that connection, before sleep took him.

Spock blinked his eyes. There were... faces? No, only one face, red, eyes popping with ire. He couldn't hear the vicious words the thin lips mouthed.

Another slap which made his ears ring and then pop, and he grasped the Doctor's wrist.

"About time, you green-blooded son of a bitch."

For all of the healing properties of his Vulcan physiology, Spock's bones ached.

But there was also brightness, a shining reality within and suffusing him, closer to him than his own breath...

"I don't know what you think you were doing to Jim, but know this," McCoy shook his finger at him, "mark my words, Spock: you're going down for this."

Cold shame gripped his gut, and guilt began to bombard Spock with the return of disconnected fragments of memory: the taste of iron in his mouth and his own growl in response; a warm body beneath him into which he pounded mercilessly, sheathing needsome flesh; the sweet intoxicating scent of skin and breath which called to Spock's primitive blood... And at the same time: guilt, animal satisfaction, pride in conquering and claiming a mate – and then shame again settled like frost about him. Then through the frost, the sharp bite of metal as it seared his skin, the endless prayers and lusts of countless minds battering his own and leaving no part of his self inviolate... Curse his eidetic memory! Every tug, every pinch, every thrust, the endless chanting – all of it, all of it rolling into an awareness of violence and sacrifice.

His newly wakened awareness overloaded, the Vulcan shuddered, shaking, the intensity too much to bear, unable to make sense of it all.

The Doctor's eyes widened as he observed the fit taking the man before him, and the last thing Spock remembered was the prick of the hypospray against his neck and the relief of oblivion descending.

Oh! The shining brightness! The god surrounding him, its presence – ah! A balm for wounded souls, like honey and wine. He drank it up, drank up that liquid, inexhaustible light – and still it shone, filling the darkest corners of his life with comfort and peace.

My own, he said to the presence, *as I am thine*.

It smiled. He bowed his head, the dazzling beauty of the god too much for mortal eyes to bear. He felt that when he... emerged from this space? Became himself again?... he would have to veil the glory, lest his eyes fail, and lest others perceive the transformation of his katra, a most private reality.

He sighed, feeling great warmth along his left side, even as the image of the god faded from his awareness and was gone like a dream. Spock tried to move his leg, and found it immobilized by – the human form of his bondmate.

Bondmate! He flinched. That which he had sworn never to do had been done. Grief... ah! To have what he had so long desired – his Captain, his *t'hy'la*, his Jim – yet at what terrible, terrible cost?

The Doctor appeared in the doorway and observed Spock's reaction to Kirk's presence on his bed. He came over to check the Vulcan's charts.

"He would not be dissuaded from plastering himself to you. Don't ask me why, after..."

"Doctor," Spock said, warning in his tone.

The Doctor grimaced, assessed the charts, replaced them in their holder, and stepped back.

"Is he...?" He looked with worry at the man beside him on the biobed.

"He's fine, Spock. I was able to heal all his injuries. He doesn't blame you – and it's only his emphatic refusal to press charges that has prevented us from putting you in a secure room. All I can say is that whatever mental voodoo you did to him, you have him convinced that what you did was consensual. I don't believe that for a minute. And my medical report's going to say as much."

"Say what you must, Doctor," Spock said tersely.

McCoy's lips thinned. He nodded and left the room.

Thankful for privacy once again, Spock relaxed a little, letting go of the tension in his shoulders. Tension meant emotion; he was Vulcan, and emotions must be controlled. But in his depths they still warred: his covetous desire to keep his new bondmate, and his revulsion for the violence in which that bond had come to be.

The bond could only be a mistake, a horrible violation of his Captain's mind. While they had been captive on the planet they had spoken of their mutual regard – at least, in oblique terms. Kirk had offered to relieve Spock of his hitherto virginal condition. But Spock couldn't fathom how Kirk could so eagerly welcome what he had done. Kirk had been most emphatic about his preference for women. More than that, while they had melded often in the line of duty, Kirk had been most protective of his own mind. Among Vulcans, the taking of another's mind without their permission was forbidden, considered tantamount to rape. Kirk must have done what was necessary, getting more than he had bargained for in the process, his trust poorly rewarded. Feeling nausea in his being which had nothing to do with his physical recovery, Spock came to only one possible conclusion: the bond must be severed, before it settled. The Captain must go free.

To this end and in order that the damage of the bond might be mitigated, Spock called on disciplines he'd been unable to utilize on the planet (and not without a sense of relief that *that* ability had returned). He gently attempted to close the bond, in spite of his whole being protesting the denial of that transcendent reality.

Against his leg, Kirk stirred, coming to full consciousness in seconds with a cry, clutching his head.

"Ahhh! Spock! What are you doing? Stop it! Please! Make it stop!"

Anguished hazel eyes opened from their squint, boring into Spock's own, and the man dropped his hands, unclenching them.

How could Spock resist such an appeal? He immediately desisted, and the bond shimmered brightly again.

Jim rose swiftly from the bed and turned to confront Spock. "You were trying to shut off the bond, weren't you?"

Spock said nothing, holding his breath against swirling fear and exhilaration. Kirk's countenance darkened into sorrow, and he frowned.

"I thought you wanted this bond. No, I don't just think that. I know that. I've seen your depths, Spock, and I know you. You've wanted this for a long time. And now? Why are you..."

"Because, Captain," Kirk recoiled as though struck by Spock's use of his title, "you did not choose this. You did what was necessary to redeem my life, and in return I raped you and forced myself into your mind. On Vulcan the penalty for such crimes remains to this day execution. Such things are inexcusable. "

"Inexcusable? Inexcusable that... that you should ravish me? That you should... take what I offered, and give in equal measure?"

"That is precisely the point: it was not equal."

Kirk's eyes narrowed dangerously. "So what are you saying?"

"Simply that this bond was created by means of violation."

"That's bullshit. Spock, I came to you *willingly*." Kirk held his hands palms out to Spock and dropped them to his sides, a gesture of pleading as much as it was one of defeat.

"I cannot believe that. I understand that you saved my life, and that you intervened in an untenable situation. I am grateful for your friendship, for being the brother I never had, my *t'hy'la*. But under the circumstances..." Spock trailed off, unable to complete the thought because truly, his being revolted against the thought of severing this precious connection. There was no doubt that they fit together in the most unexpected ways. Yet nothing could alter the fact that he had taken Kirk as his mate outside of the tradition which vouchsafed the integrity of the other's mind. Moreover, given Kirk's orientation to women; it would be... anomalous at best for him to desire Spock – though Spock did not voice this last thought.

Kirk was silent, his disbelief palpable.

"It would be wise for the bond to be severed. It has not yet settled, and as such..."

"What?!"

"In certain circumstances bonds may be dissolved," Spock responded softly.

"Yes. But what was all that you said about *t'hy'la* bonds? Didn't you say...?"

"That they cannot be severed by death? It is a legend among my people, nothing more." *Lying, Spock?* his subconscious accused. *Dissembling rather*, he told himself sternly. *There is a fine distinction*. The truth was that their life force was connected too deeply for it to be any other way. "And in any case, while the *t'hy'la* link may last beyond death, mating bonds may be removed." Another half-truth: in all likelihood the bond had augmented the existing link.

Kirk was silent, running his hand through his hair in distress.

"Well. I don't know what to say. Except that whatever my life was before we landed on that planet, whatever the situation of its formation, I know now that I want to keep the bond." The wind left his sails abruptly, and he collapsed into the chair beside the bed in silence.

After some time, Spock ventured a further reflection: "There is another aspect to this bond that we should consider, Captain."

"Oh yes?" Kirk said cynically.

"When I... took your mind, took your... body – "

"When we made love," Kirk interjected bitterly.

"When we joined, we were not ourselves. We were merely... the sacrificial offerings, the vessels, channels for the gestalt of the people, or some natural energy force present on the planet."

"But don't you see, Spock? It wouldn't have been possible for it to happen unless there was already an underlying desire – in both of us – for the bond."

"That which already linked us, nothing more," Spock said definitively. "It need not have formed at all; the link that was there need never have been extended or reinforced, even if we were under the influence of outside sources. I'm afraid that as the one in the possession of the necessary abilities, I am culpable for the deepening and transmutation of the bond."

Kirk rose and began to pace furiously.

"But you weren't yourself; you just acknowledged it. So how come the link became a fully-fledged mating bond?"

"I do not know."

"But it has," Kirk argued. "And therefore I think we shouldn't be hasty in... breaking it. Our subconscious obviously wanted it. And I'm telling you now: I consciously want what is between us."

Another realization hovered on the edge of Spock's conscience, but he resolutely refused to give it space. Kirk, being human, was not so reluctant to name the truth.

Kirk stopped. "You know what I think? I think you're projecting. I think you're rejecting this bond because of what happened to you before it was even formed. I think you're running away from what's really hurting, deep down, and blaming the bond. Oh yes, don't look so surprised. I can read you, Spock. And with this bond linking our minds, I get the sense that you're feeling confused and hurting and fearful. What those people did to you was wrong ten ways to Sunday."

Kirk paused, watching him closely.

Spock looked down and clenched his eyes against a sudden burst of memory... *and there were hands touching him, a Vulcan, who habitually avoided the touch of others owing to the pain in the transfer of unwanted thoughts. Hands caressing endlessly, dragging along his flesh, pinching him. And with them, the eager bloodlust of predators transferring in a constant thought-stream... It seared his katra.*

He started, reality reasserted with the gentle hand of his mate wrapped around his own.

"What was it, Spock? What did you just remember?"

"I... I cannot."

"It's ok. I understand." Jim patted Spock's hand and then let go, standing up to take his leave. "All I ask is that we don't make any decisions right now. Let's wait until we're both back on our feet before working out what to do. In the meantime, you rest up. Bones has me on bed rest for the next two days, before a return to light duties. I'll leave you in peace to rest and heal, and I'll come back when I can. I think we both need time on our own to process what happened."

"Indeed, Jim."

Kirk smiled, a brief, tight and wan expression. He watched as the Captain walked out – and with him, a part of Spock's own being. This too demanded reflection.

Physical pain was something that could be controlled. But the damage to a Vulcan's mind was another thing altogether. Spock was fatigued beyond anything he'd experienced before. Whether that was because of the effort required for bonding, or from channeling vast amounts of energy, or from the abuse he'd experienced at the hands of the elders and matriarchs, he was unable to say. In any case, his recovery was longer than usual in coming about. He was detained in sickbay for another two days, and then was sent to his quarters on leave for five more.

All in all, while it was logical that he recover, Spock immensely disliked confinement. And never more than now, ordered to remain in his quarters, barred

from working, too exhausted to do more than sleep and meditate. His sleep was plagued with nightmares, and his meditation... his meditation brought painful self-knowledge, the shaking of the foundations of who he'd thought he was. Not so easy now, the channeling of his life-force energy. Not so easily tamed were his desires, his flesh. No! It was more than lust. It was *need*, *need* which broke him (so he thought), *need* which brought him to his knees in every way. *Need* for a bondmate, his new mate. It should not be this way! The fires of *pon farr* should be enough to satiate that all-pervasive, whole of being *need*.

Not so! For the bond had been formed outside of the Time, a misbegotten chance owed to a misguided native people and their religious beliefs.

Misbegotten, Spock? his conscience smote him. *You would call something so... tender and lovely... misbegotten? How convenient. For what is labeled negatively is called such through fear, differentiated as disposable. Cast out fear, not that which is feared. And you shall find that that which has been feared is not so fearful.*

Very well then. Spock breathed deeply as he knelt on his meditation mat, seeking the calm centre – which was anything but calm. He allowed the fears to rise, just as he did yesterday and the day before. This time, they would not overwhelm him; they would not leave him lathered in a cold sweat; he refused to allow his fears dominance.

So what did he fear?

In his meditations and dreams these past few days, he'd identified that it was fear which sparked his reaction of desiring the dissolution of the bond. Fear. He was Vulcan; to fear was to feel – oh yes, and his feelings and emotions ran deeply, for he was Vulcan. That most primitive of instincts, fear kept his ancient ancestors (on both planets) alive in the midst of predators, threats to life, and so forth. Fear (it trembled on the edge of his consciousness as he pondered these things). He did not need to fear for his survival at this moment. (Although he did: what would happen to him should the bond be abandoned, when that Time came again?)

What did he fear? Where was the threat to him?

A vision of James Kirk dying a thousand ways sprang up before him, and he felt his heart wrenched from his side, watching it tear. Old and grizzled, he died alone.

Visions: a bruised and battered, red and bloodied body, still now beneath his own as he alternately pounded his *need* into it and tossed it around like a ragdoll in the fires of the *plak tow*.

A hundred missions in which he made the decision to save his mate's life at the expense of duty.

Watching as yet another conquest did the early morning walk of shame back to the VIP quarters; the sight of his mate snoring, sprawled on the bed on his back, flaccid member resting against his leg and still coated in the fluids of *that woman*; the scent of a floral perfume and the taste of another on the lips of his mate as he bit them and rutted on him to reestablish his claim.

He saw them attempting to copulate, Kirk drawing back, dissatisfied, for it was no god with whom he joined, but a Vulcan mortal inexperienced in the art of love-making, and unable to respond emotionally or physically in the manner of humans. He saw dark clouds of conflict and dissatisfaction leading to hatred of him and the shackle-like bond.

The raw life-force energy required to maintain the bond pulsed within him. But would maintaining the bond take away from the energy he usually channeled into his work? Would it destroy that which it attempted to maintain through its fierce power?

Bonded to a human, he saw his hard-won Vulcan discipline sliding away, and that which he had chosen not to be usurping his identity so that he became that which he had denigrated and denied.

Spock's vision shifted. He had faced these fears, naming them one by one. Now came the last, that which caused the most difficulty.

He battled revulsion: for he had violated the one who had been as a god to him. No more could James Kirk exist on a pedestal of deity; by taking him body and mind, Spock had forever removed him from that lofty Asherah pole. And now a vacuum existed in that place. Blood and seed had shown him to be an ordinary being in a vulnerable body. Spock himself was embodied – and now... Now... now... their very bodies symbolized violation and the crossing of boundaries that should never be crossed.

He clutched his head, heaving great sobs. He must face this, must deal with it, must...

It wasn't the fear after all. Or it was, but not of Kirk, nor of their relationship. Rationally, logically, Spock knew that most of his fears were not insurmountable. But it was easier to deal with the cloak of fear and cast it around the bond than to deal with the immediate circumstances of its creation.

Knowing what the ritual and his designation as Chosen might entail in advance had done nothing to soften the reality as it unfolded on and in his person. It was disturbing to him in the extreme not only that he had been drugged, but also that his body (and to some extent his mind) it seemed had been taken over by... another entity. And that because of that possession, he had not been in control of his motor functions for much of the ordeal. He had danced an ancient dance – and its rhythms still echoed in his blood, though he'd never learnt the moves. He had lain on the stone altar-slab unable to move his limbs or fight back against the stimulation he'd been forced to endure. The pain of the slicing and the literal penetration of that personal barrier which signified a symbolic breaching of his person; the pain of the hands touching with touches that should have been for pleasure but were for torture. The sensation of some of them tugging his genitals, of various of them – male and female – plunging themselves down and riding him, their juices running down over his abdomen... The effects of the drugs, and the possession of his faculties by some energy force meant his mental shields were down – leaving his mind vulnerable and unprotected against the assaults of the others –

He leapt up from the mat and hurtled to the bathroom, making it to the commode just in time to vomit.

Fear of it happening again. (His heart was racing.) Fear of perpetrating something similar on his mate. (He shuddered.) A certain degree of loathing the bond because of the way it had been formed. Grief and shame that he could hate something so beautiful, and a reminder that the bond itself and Kirk were not to be blamed for any of this. Something good could still come from this dark morass.

He wept tears as he regurgitated the little he'd been able to eat, and not all were involuntarily from the bitterness of the stomach-bile which passed his lips and burned its way up and out through his nose.

The last waves abated from his gut, and he sat on the floor beside the toilet curled in on himself in misery. So much for "casting out" anything... The bond should be dissolved because how could Jim possibly think him worthy of love, worthy of friendship, worthy of anything... after this? No amount of command training could have prepared Spock or his new bondmate for this situation. He'd been trained to expect some of these emotions – all command cadets were trained in rape and its trauma against the possibility that they or someone they knew or were responsible for might have to face it in the line of duty. Spock had imagined he could deal with it in the same way he did any emotion: through meditation and the disciplines of his father's people. But where there was another involved? This was a complex scenario.

Caught in a nexus of the power of his desires, his fears, and his experiences, Spock gave himself up to a feeling of profound lost-ness.

V.

The ship's Captain wandered Deck 8 aimlessly, unsure of what he was searching for. Was he looking for anything in particular? Yes. But it was on Deck 5, and he was not going there. Not again. Too many times in these last three weeks he'd found his footsteps led him to a certain door before he realized where he was. Too many times he'd stood uncertainly outside Spock's quarters, pining... For what? His First Officer? His bondmate? His friend? His love? He no longer knew.

At first, he'd been adamant about wanting the bond. He loved that warm sense of *Spock* in and through his awareness, loved the connection it embodied. But – and it was a big "but" – while he enjoyed the warmth of his friend's presence, did he love Spock? Did it matter? Yes. No. Maybe... He loved him as a friend; that had survived the experience on the planet intact. Kirk liked the Vulcan, regardless of any other attachments or detractions. So yes, he loved Spock as a friend. He'd felt a measure of desire, raw animal lust, for him on the planet. Because let's face it: Spock was an attractive man. But had that been just the influence of the raw energy which had shimmered and pulsed in the planet's atmosphere, and which had surged through both of them on the altar in the clearing?

But was he capable of feeling romantic love for Spock? There was a world of difference between love and lust. Ah well. Perhaps love would come with deeper knowledge and sharing. (*Was that an admission, Kirk, that you don't love Spock? Or that you do?*) But that required a two-way street. Was Spock up to that? What sort of "two-way" was possible between them?

Ahha! The spectre arose again, making Kirk twitch with discomfort. In the experience of the past month or so he'd come to see the relationship in his mind between Spock and the *Enterprise* in painful, stark clarity. He had to have both. He had sworn his life to the ship, and now, by some fate, he was sworn for life (and death) to Spock. And he wasn't altogether sure how he felt about that, on a number of levels.

First of all, it really wasn't fair to Spock that Kirk should desire him (in any sense) as an embodiment of the ship capable of give and take. Spock, if Kirk were to love and desire him at all, should be loved and desired *for himself*, not for what he could bring to Kirk as a representation of his Silver Virgin Mother Goddess.

Secondly, to be wholly committed to Spock would put the ship on a secondary level. He'd said on the planet that he needed Spock more than his command, and that was the truth. If it ever came to a choice between Spock and the *Enterprise* (or even the command of any starship), Spock would come first (especially now that they shared a bond). That didn't mean it would be an easy choice. There was something within Kirk which whined in protest and anguish at the thought of losing his ship. But to lose Spock instead? The price would be his immortal soul.

The other area of uncertainty with which he wrestled was the bond itself and its nature. From what he could determine (and perhaps some of Spock's tortured meditations filtered through into his subconscious) the bond was exclusive and life-long. The only committed relationship he'd had had ended when Carol Marcus discovered she was pregnant and didn't want to have a child with *him*, given his first priority was command of a starship and not settling down to a nice planetary post. Correction: the only committed relationship he'd had with another being hadn't lasted. He was in a committed relationship, albeit that it was one way: starship commanders were virtually married to their ships. How would he go, transferring that – no, wrong word: establishing a new, separate committed relationship with another living, breathing being?

As for the bond's exclusivity: Kirk still found himself aroused by favourite feminine masturbatory fantasies. Try as he might, he couldn't find that arousal thinking of men. He just wasn't that way inclined. Would Spock be enough to fulfill his fantasies? What would he do when he was tempted? Could he be faithful when the Ambassador for whichever planet they were assigned to was throwing herself at him with all her feminine charms and curves in all the right places?

When he thought of Spock... Well, let's say he hadn't jerked himself off with such vigor and in so short a time so often since he'd first discovered the pleasures of doing so. It was confusing and troubling. Did he think of Spock as feminine? No! (*Don't be ridiculous, Kirk. You couldn't get a more... thoroughly masculine being than Spock.* He felt a thrill of arousal at the thought.) Spock was, perhaps, Other, different to himself. But not feminine.

Was it just Spock's otherness in which he found allure? What about the politics of dominance and submission? With women, Kirk usually took the dominant role. During what had happened on the planet, what little memory he had suggested that Spock had been dominant (although he did remember taking the Vulcan himself at some point as a necessary part of bonding). Given his own proclivities and preferences, how long would the excitement at being dominated by the Vulcan last? Or was it possible that they could negotiate, and that rather than being about domination and submission, whatever they shared could be an ebb and flow of mutuality – whatever made the other feel good? Whatever served the other's needs best? If they could do that...

Kirk sighed at that hope, for it would be more than he'd ever had with any woman. And sighed again as he realized the truth: that romantic love for Spock would pale in comparison to what was already between them. If they continued this bond, this partnership, it would transcend anything either had known before, and it would complement what they already had. He just hoped that Spock would come to see it that way.

After being released from sickbay, Kirk had returned to his quarters, done his time on sick leave and then partial duty, and finally gone back to his regular shifts. Spock had been released to full duty a week after Kirk sat again for a full shift in his command chair. In that time, Kirk had found his footsteps drawn repeatedly to sickbay, and then when Spock was sent home to rest, to Spock's quarters.

Their conversations had been stilted and terribly polite and careful. Spock made it clear that he required time to process his experiences, and from the dark smudges beneath the Vulcan's eyes and the strained expression (though no one else could see it, Kirk was sure), Kirk gathered that processing wasn't easy for his friend. Once he was back to full duty, Spock's attention had been absorbed by science department issues; there were some vital experiments they were undertaking in the area of reconciling quantum theory and relativity – groundbreaking stuff, from what the Captain could see in the reports going to Starfleet Command.

When he did see the Vulcan, Kirk found himself longing, having to hold himself back from touching him. He yearned to feel the softness of cheek, the tender point of an ear, to trace the black silken eyebrow. He yearned to reach out and embrace the man and take him to himself, to hold him and to fend off the troubles he carried.

At night he often found himself restless and unable to sleep, and had taken to roaming the ship. And ever, ever, his footsteps were drawn always, always, back to the Vulcan's door.

Which is where he found himself – in spite of his earlier resolutions – now. It was the beginning of gamma shift, and Spock should be there, completing his tasks for the day or perhaps meditating.

Kirk stood on the threshold having the same old debate with himself: to ring, or not to ring.

The door opened unexpectedly to the sight of Spock wrapped in a midnight blue

and silver robe. His bondmate looked at him with haunted eyes as Kirk filled with embarrassment.

“I, um, I... ah.”

They looked at each other.

“What I mean to say is...”

Wordlessly, Spock stepped aside. Taking it as an invitation, Kirk debated briefly with himself the merits of walking away and wishing Spock a good evening before entering the Vulcan’s quarters. The warm red glow welcomed him. He turned to face Spock, who had now followed him in, the door sliding to behind him.

“How did you know I was there?”

A saturnine eyebrow rose.

“Did you know I’ve been wandering all over the ship, and that every time I do, I’m drawn back here, to your doorstep? Is that the bond?”

Spock said nothing, but nodded slightly.

Overcome with the sight of this one he was growing to love to distraction, Kirk launched forward and grasped him by his elbows. “It is the bond, isn’t it? Spock!” He wrapped his arms around the Vulcan and hugged him tightly.

For a moment Spock didn’t respond. And then, like butter melting, he gently closed his hands around Kirk’s back and breathed deeply.

“You’ve got no idea how much I’ve wanted to touch you, just...” Kirk’s voice was muffled by Spock’s robes.

“And I you, Jim. Yes, the bond is drawing us together,” Spock said quietly.

Of course Spock had known when the Captain came to his doorstep. Of course he knew: until the bond settled and until he could teach Kirk to shield his thoughts, the bond acted like a radar and magnet. He knew the restless pacing of his mate in the bowels of the engineering hull. He knew when he got into a turbolift and returned to Deck 5 – he could sense him rising, coming towards him. Not being as familiar with mental work, Kirk wouldn’t be as aware of Spock at this stage – at least, not consciously. And Spock knew the bond would be drawing Kirk to him because it was still in its early stages.

That didn’t mitigate his anxiety, his barely suppressed and controlled nerves when he opened the door this evening. He’d finally reached a point of fragile stability in his processing of what had happened on the planet. Enough, he thought, to be able

to converse with the Captain about it.

Now, with his mate's arms around him, his warm, human scent and own peculiar musk suffusing the space, Spock couldn't help the knowledge of contentment. And he knew that their conversation would find a satisfactory conclusion.

Kirk for his part breathed in Spock's spice, that mix of incense and Vulcan tea and sharp Vulcan male – and it was better, he deemed, than any floral perfume of his previous lovers. He couldn't get enough of it.

Kirk released Spock and stepped back a bit, still holding his biceps, Spock's hands on his hips. He looked critically at Spock's face.

"How are you, Spock?"

Spock took in the worried gaze. "I am... fine."

"Fine has variable definitions, mister," Kirk quipped, his lips quirking.

"Indeed." Spock nodded, acknowledging the teasing; it was a line he'd often used himself. Spock searched the human's face, noting with a poignant fondness the contours of lip and brow.

Silence lapsed. Kirk wasn't sure, now that he was here in Spock's presence, what it was that he wanted to do. For now, he settled on simply reveling in the joy of being together again.

"Can we... talk?"

Spock gestured to the other side of his desk. "Would you care for something to drink? I have prepared some tea," he offered as Kirk sat down.

"Yes, please." Kirk wondered abstractedly whether Spock had deliberately prepared the tea in anticipation of his arrival.

He handed a mug to Kirk, poured tea for himself and sat down opposite his mate.

"So," Kirk began, wrapping his hands around his mug self-consciously.

Time lapsed between them again.

"You wished to talk, Captain." Spock appeared to startle Kirk out of his thoughts.

"I was just thinking... About how beautiful you are."

Spock raised both eyebrows in surprise. It was not a word he would use for himself, and the observation was random.

“I’m not sure...”

“Oh, I know that sounds odd,” Kirk cut in. “I’ve hardly seen you since we got back to duty, and I’m realizing now how much I’ve missed you... at the science station, at my side, our downtime. I know it’s the bond drawing us together, but I think we should work on making sure we always have time for one another, time to be together, on our own.”

“I too would welcome that.”

“Then I take it you’ve decided we should keep the bond.”

There was a long silence.

“I do not believe it can be severed, and... nor do I wish for such,” Spock said quietly, not looking at his bondmate. Jim could have no idea what wrestling it had taken, what inner struggles had been involved in that realization. In the end it had been a case of surrendering his fears to the hope of what may yet be.

Kirk sipped his tea, warmth and triumph tingling right down to his toes. Knowing that Spock wanted the bond, wanted him... it was a heady thing. His joy clouded somewhat, his brow furrowing.

“Then we probably should talk about what happened on the planet, and about where we go from here.”

“You have read my report, Captain.”

“True. But we haven’t named it between us.”

“Very well.” Spock took a breath.

“We were captured by Orion slave traders while on a diplomatic mission to Meriksos Magna...”

“No, no. That bit was all straightforward. You know what I’m talking about – those things that we couldn’t put in the report but still need to be acknowledged. Why don’t I begin?” Kirk offered.

“Right from the time we landed on the surface, I thought there was weird stuff going on: an energy, a presence which called to primitive urges within me. Did you have the same?”

“I dismissed those experiences as products of meditation, but in retrospect...”

“Yes, I know. In retrospect, they all add up. Why couldn’t we see it at the time?” Kirk rose and began pacing. “While we were incarcerated, you weakened. That was related to the energy or whatever it was on the planet. It had to be. And then... when you were...”

“What happened in the clearing,” Spock said, clearing his throat and sitting a

little straighter; it was still difficult to admit, “was out of my control. Something, possibly the energy of the planet, possibly the combined spirit of the people, possibly the drugged wine, immobilized me, made me vulnerable, gave them the opportunity...”

Kirk stopped pacing and sat down, reaching a hand across the table towards Spock. Spock withdrew his own hands from the table to his lap.

“Spock,” Kirk said gently, “I watched what they did to you. I saw it all. Forgive me for not leaping in earlier. I am so sorry.”

Spock shook his head. “No, Captain. I do not blame you, and nor should you take blame for what they did. Your safety was paramount.”

“I’m still sorry. I would have stopped it if I could.”

“And you did,” Spock countered.

Another silence and both men drank their tea.

“Spock, I have to ask this because I’m still trying to understand. There was a moment... and then I had to let go of my inhibitions and restrictions I usually place on myself, and there was this surge up through the soles of my feet, and I was myself – but not myself. And I saw you – I saw you, and...”

“As I saw you, Jim. I believe in those moments, perhaps for some time, whatever energy entities the inhabitants of the planet worship possessed us. We were for that time their gods in mortal form.”

“Does that make us deities now? Are we gods, Spock?”

Spock swallowed. “To each other, perhaps. To others? I would hate to disabuse you of your aspirations or delusions, Captain,” Spock said, quirking an eyebrow.

“...But we’re still us, still human and Vulcan.”

“Essentially. If we are gods, even to each other, then we vacate the meaning of deity. No mortal as mortal can be divine. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that divinity exists, if anywhere, between us.”

“You mean, the bond.” Kirk added two and two. “And that’s why you don’t want to get rid of it anymore – even if you were able to.”

“It is that which is between us which has the potential to make us divine.”

Kirk pondered this. “I’m not sure what I think about that. I’ve never believed in any religion.”

“It is not necessary, and our personal beliefs do not alter the reality.”

“If the bond gives the potential for divinity, then it logically follows, doesn’t it,

that it also has the potential to be hell, to kill us both,” Kirk reasoned.

“To the extent that we deny it, yes. To the extent that we deny one another, yes.”

“That’s a big risk, Spock.”

Spock nodded. “It is. And it is also the reason why it was necessary for me to cease denying the bond. It no longer matters how it was formed, whether it is our *t’hy’la* link which has been expanded, or whether it is a mating bond. It is what it is.”

“But what about that... that erotic surge which possessed us with such unbridled power?”

“It was made dangerous, and we inflicted the damage on each other we did, because we had fought it and sought to suppress it.”

“On the planet?”

“Yes, on the planet. But also before that. Think about it, Jim. I was trained, in the way of my father’s people, to sublimate all erotic urges and transfer that energy in other ways – in my case, into my scientific work, into being your First Officer, into... serving you. No doubt you have had your ways to achieve something similar.”

“I don’t think so, Spock,” Kirk denied.

“Really?” Spock raised an eyebrow.

“Well, not to the extent you’ve had to. I mean, there’s the ship. And my command. And when I’ve needed the physical outlet and have had the opportunity while on shore leave or various missions, there were always willing partners.”

“Nevertheless, you have rechanneled that power, that driving energy, life-force, erotic power... in productive ways.”

“I guess so, when you put it in those terms,” Kirk conceded.

“So what you’re saying,” he continued after a pause, “is that when the entities, energy, whatever it was overthrew us, our coming together was violent because he had sublimated the energy rather than channeling it between us. Spock, for that to be the case, we have to admit we were erotically drawn to each other before we arrived on the planet.”

“And is that not the truth, Jim?”

“Yes,” Kirk agreed quietly.

“Erotic energy is not merely the biological drive to procreate, but that which gives life within us, that which is creative and generative. Now that energy, that creative, erotic, life-force energy, is channeled appropriately between us, into the bond. We are not gods, but that which is between us, as long as we mutually give to each other, transcends our limitations and could be called ‘god’. If I were asked to

speculate, I would say that perhaps it was not even that entities possessed us as such, but rather that the raw energy of that world, its natural rhythms, connected with and unleashed our own. It could be said that in our coming together, through our sharing of erotic energy and its tapping into the energies of that world, we made deity itself – the gods of those people – exist.”

“But that’s problematic,” Kirk argued, “for several reasons. Quite aside from the issue of violation of the Prime Directive, inadvertent though it was, if we embodied ‘god’, we encountered each other as Other. I mean, what I saw in you was something... I can’t even put it into words... In some way you were not you, and I was not myself; we were more than that, or other than that.” He shook his head confusedly. “I don’t know what I’m saying. We’ve already established that we’re ordinary mortals and not gods as a result of this experience – whatever the natives saw. But what are we to each other now? What does the whole experience mean?”

“For Vulcans, the goal of life is union with the All, the divinization of all that lives, the discovery and endless unity with the energy by which all things came into being. Human theology calls this process variously *theosis*, nirvana, and so on, but it is essentially the same thing. As for our experience, and our bond, does it matter the manner in which it came about? Is there any reason why so blessed an estate could not proleptically arrive in our time and space? In the eternal now, there is no before or after but only what is. Have we not already determined that where there is eternity, all times are as one?”

Kirk was silent before the mystery Spock named. “And you’re saying that this is what our bond does?”

“Vulcans were quite incorrect to speak of *t’hy’la* bonds as ‘lasting beyond death’. Such a phrase is meaningless in speaking of that which is transformative of life itself.”

“So what we experienced on the planet was the first fruits, the seeds, of what we will become together?”

“In and through the bond, Jim. Yes,” Spock affirmed. And now he felt a great weight leave his shoulders.

“I saw you as you most truly are,” Jim said with wonder. “Or what you will be.”

“As I saw you, brilliant and shining and vibrant, my friend.”

They allowed that shimmering reality to hover on the edge of their awareness for long minutes too holy, too sacred to break.

“I have been meditating on a further irony, Jim.”

“Oh?” Jim looked at his bondmate.

“According to the planet’s inhabitants, I was the virginal Chosen one. Perhaps when it comes to sexual intercourse I was... uninitiated. But it was you who was the virginal one in this encounter.”

“What?” The well-experienced Kirk was disbelieving.

“While we have often melded, it has always been in the line of duty. The link formed because of our close working relationship, our friendship, and our infrequent duty-melds. But your mind as such was virgin to my intimate mental touch, virgin to the exchange of psychic energy and the sharing of minds at a deep level. It was your loss of innocence which was truly required. That was why I was initially so opposed to keeping the bond: because it was a violation of your mind.”

A memory flittered across the shared space of their bond, which had leapt to life as they had contemplated its reality with acceptance. *Kirk, crying until he was hoarse with ecstasy, their beings woven tougher and fused into one in the brilliant heat of joining, fierce joy and pleasure they could never had anticipated creating a golden aura around them which burned as brightly as a sun.*

It burned in them now, the memory. And then it faded gently into mellow shadows.

“It wasn’t a violation – as I’ve been telling you all along, Spock. It was willing, because of the surge of creative, erotic energy, because I – we? – finally let go of any preconceptions and allowed the energy to flow through us.”

Spock nodded once.

“You were still violated by those people, Spock.”

“Indeed. However, we cannot allow their actions to overshadow the bond.”

“No. But it may have bearing on where we go from here,” Kirk suggested.

“I have considered the possibilities.” Spock was about to go on, but Kirk interjected.

“Well, we can rule out one possibility: severing the bond.”

“It is not possible, except by our refusal to contribute our energy to its continuance. That is not a viable option as it would lead to both our deaths. No. The choices from here have to do with how we live with the bond.”

Kirk decided he didn’t like the sound of that. “Care to specify?”

“Jim, as far as I am aware, Vulcans mate only at that Time,” Spock said carefully.

“But the fact this happened...”

“Does not necessarily disprove the reality.”

“Seven years? We’d have to wait seven years to...” Kirk ran a hand through his hair, his innards cold at the prospect. He breathed deeply and exhaled. “Well, it

seems I don't have much choice. And in any case," his resolution firmed, "you I can wait for, Spock. If we have to, I'll do it somehow, even though you must understand that as a human..."

"It may not come to that, Jim. Another option is that we continue much as we have been, in friendship and camaraderie. We would come together as necessary."

"You may be Vulcan and able to do that, Spock, but I'm not," Kirk scoffed. "And I'm certainly not going to use you or take advantage of you like that, as if you were a shoe polishing bar and I needed to be serviced."

"No, indeed. The only other way is for us to navigate together. Understand, Jim, that as a Vulcan I... there are certain things that will not be easy for me. Or for you, I'll warrant."

"But it's the only way. I know you need me, Spock, and I know I need you too – in any and all capacities. The question is whether we can be open and risk ourselves with the other. Perhaps... What you were saying before about allowing our creative energies to join and make whatever transcendence there is between us real and tangible. Which leads to another thing. I mean, we could just jump into bed. But I imagine that as much as we are drawn to each other, under the circumstances, that's not going to work out too well."

"I believe, Jim, that if we focus on rebuilding what we had, we may begin to explore the new depths of our bond."

Kirk smiled broadly at Spock, a grin of joy and affection. He reached across the table again, and this time Spock tentatively took his hand. "I look forward to it, Spock."

VI.

As it turned out, making the commitment to walk together and actually doing so were two different things. The relationship between the Captain and First Officer was almost painfully sweet as well as awkward as they both tested each other's boundaries. There were the tentative touches: Kirk reaching out to touch the Vulcan's hand when they sat together in private whether playing chess and recreating or engaging in ship's business; Spock, almost in spite of himself, unable to resist the urge to run fingers over the back of the Captain's hand in the turbolift. There were the sultry, longing looks (mostly on the part of the Captain, although Spock threw in a number of speculative pondering gazes). Quiet meals talking about everything and nothing... All this was little different to what passed before for friendship, with one exception: everything they did or said was charged with sparks of energy. They felt each other's awareness, like an energy field – and it was magnetic. It was courtship in the old-fashioned sense, and they both relished it at the same time as finding it frustrating. Kirk occasionally castigated himself when he looked in the mirror and saw the stars in his own eyes, feeling every bit like a teenager in the blush of first

love. The tension (and energy) mounted, and both knew it, and knew it was coming to a head.

On this particular day the *Enterprise* was star mapping in a sector on the edge of Federation space, but which had been deemed to be uninhabited. The Captain's rejuvenated hormones were getting the better of him: every time he glanced over to the science station he caught sight of the perfectly proportioned Vulcan, his sleek hair, the points of his ears, knew the feel of him as they embraced, knew his scent, knew the warm security of his presence. Right now, the presence bubbled with scientific interest, and Kirk found that endearing.

These last three weeks, since they'd had the conversation about erotic energy, Kirk felt they'd been dancing around each other like partners in an intricate dance. It was terribly exciting. But he'd had enough. He desperately wanted to take it to the next level – to tango with his bondmate, and to explore... Mmmmm.

When on star-mapping duty there is little for a Captain to do. The bulk of his work done for the day, he passed the time by allowing his imagination to take over. What would it be like? What would he and Spock... do to each other? They'd had sex – quite violent sex – on the planet, but neither remembered anything except the most tantalizing snatches of what had transpired. He couldn't even remember what Spock looked like, close up and naked.

Spock, naked. Mmmmm. He could feel the sensation of the velvet as his hands shifted to his mate's shirt's opening; imagined the slide of skin and prickle of hair as he rubbed his hands under the velour and across Spock's chest. He'd shift behind him, and take a breast in each hand – so unlike a woman's soft mounds, would they be muscular, powerful, but not the less massage-able or erogenous? He heard the Vulcan's soft exhale which signified his arousal as his own fingers clutched and clenched the man's pectoral muscles. He'd strip off the shirt and its undershirt, and then wrap his arms around his beloved friend, resting his head on the back of his neck and relishing the closeness of skin and breath, a deep treasuring and cherishing. He'd place a hand on his side, over his heart, and feel it beating – slightly elevated with excitement, but reassuring in its relentless life-giving pulse. And he'd know that there would never be anyone other than himself for Spock.

"Captain?" A yeoman interrupted his daydream, and he started, opening eyes he hadn't realized had closed.

When he looked up from signing the proffered PADD it was to meet the inscrutable gaze of his First Officer. He blushed, even though his fantasy had been largely innocent, shifted in his seat, and trained his own eyes to the viewscreen. For ages he fancied he could feel the Vulcan's eyes on him until they were all distracted with the work of the day.

At the conclusion of the shift, Spock trailed him to his quarters. They had crew evaluation reports to examine; a round of promotions and commendations was due.

The moment they stepped through the door, Kirk found himself pressed up against a bulkhead, trapped by a Vulcan body. Spock's face was centimetres from his own, and they breathed the same increasingly ragged air. Spock inhaled deeply,

closing his eyes. When they opened again, Kirk noted the blown pupils and the sparking desire. He twined his arms around Spock's back and drew him against his own body so that he could feel Kirk's hardness pressing against his thigh. Spock groaned.

"You were thinking about me on the bridge today," Spock almost growled. He moved his head around Kirk's scenting him, breathing him in, avoiding the inevitable destination of mouths and lips connecting as though he didn't know how to what to do with them. Kirk shuddered. Spock was gloriously uncoordinated, unsure of himself, unsure how to act on the life-force energy driving him.

"How could I not?" He reached up both hands to cup Spock's face, and gently touched his lips with his own, a mere brush at first, and then a chaste kiss before drawing back to see how the Vulcan would respond. Spock followed him tentatively with almost too much desire, trembling. Now Spock pressed his lips, slightly parted, against Kirk's own, and he couldn't help but open to the prayer. There was a shock as tongues connected. And then Spock stole his breath, unable to get enough, as though he could crawl inside his human mate orally. Kirk shuddered again as he caught that thought, his mind leaping to possibilities. Spock sent another image through their connection, a tidal wave of lust which, when it hit, had Kirk breaking their lip-lock to cry out as he climaxed and came, his body jerking against Spock's.

"Fascinating," the Vulcan panted into the shell of a human ear, holding his collapsed and trembling mate against himself.

"Wow," Kirk breathed when he could fit sounds together to make words again. "We should have done this weeks ago."

"Mmmm," Spock agreed noncommittally, enjoying the new experience of pheromones emitting from a satisfied bondmate.

"Did you...?" Kirk could feel Spock's arousal undimmed through the bond, and against his leg.

Spock murmured, preoccupied. It was clear that he hadn't come when Kirk had, but it didn't seem to bother the Vulcan. Either that, Kirk reasoned, or he was reluctant or was unsure of how to continue. He reached a hand down to stroke his mate's genitals through his pants – and Spock leapt backwards, completely awry.

"Hey! Hey. Are you alright, Spock?" Kirk moved closer to him, reaching out. Spock moved away, shivering. "I'm sorry. I felt that you didn't... achieve climax, and thought that..."

Spock collected himself, the atmosphere frigid. Deep breaths, focus. Find the calm centre, still the heart-rate.

Kirk watched sadly as Spock's equilibrium reestablished itself, he fixed his hands behind his back, and turned to face the Captain.

"We have crew performance reviews to examine. Perhaps it would be better..." Spock began, with an intention to leave.

"No, Spock. It's alright. We can still do that," his mate said hurriedly. "Just give me a few moments to clean up and change, and I'll be right with you."

Perplexed at Spock's reaction to intimacy he himself had initiated, Kirk showered and changed into lounge-wear. He recognized that the tension between them had boiled over, and that there was new territory to explore. Territory of which Spock had little experience. It would probably fall to Kirk to lead the way. He sighed and went through to the work area to spend yet another hour, two hours, enduring the détente between them.

At the conclusion of the evaluation, Spock rose to go.

"Wait a minute, Spock. I want to talk about what happened earlier, when we first came back here."

Spock stiffened, but sat down, refusing to look at Kirk. He steeped his fingers.

"Forgive me, Jim. I do not..."

"Don't. Don't apologise. I've been wanting to make love to you for what feels like forever. Hell, Spock, I've not come in my pants just from kissing since I was fifteen. You have that effect on me."

"You wish to engage in intercourse," a measured observation, underneath which quavered uncertainty, thrill, and fear.

"Yes, of course I do. But I said we'd do this together. The thing is, I think it's time we... charted a way forward. Because if I have to sit one more shift on the bridge with this tension indulging only my fantasies, I think I'll go mad."

"And if those images continue to be projected across the bond while I am attempting to concentrate, I will not be held responsible for my actions," Spock countered, raising an eyebrow.

Kirk laughed. "Ah! So that's why I was pinned to the bulkhead the moment we came in here."

"Affirmative," Spock said tersely, discomfited.

Kirk laughed again. "Oh, Spock," he said, his mirth abating as he looked with great fondness on this precious Vulcan. "You really are uncomfortable with sexuality, aren't you?"

Spock said nothing, but looked down at his lap and nodded slightly, once. Vulcans were largely pragmatic people who cultivated a logic of acceptance of what is – with the exception of the procreative drive. The two of them had been here before, at a crossroads, when Spock had been forced to break the code of silence his father's people maintained around the mystery of *pon farr*, and the fires of the Time's *plak tow*. He burned remembering the humiliation of having to reveal that information, even to the one he'd long called *t'hy'la*. And he knew Kirk remembered his promise of

forgetfulness of what he'd heard. Now Jim was drawn into the arcane, shameful truth that was the Vulcan mating drive; as Spock's bondmate he would be the one to slake his need and cool the fire in his blood, and who would burn with him. Spock knew they needed to broach the subject of intimate contact now. He also suspected, but attempted to avoid thinking about the fact that at some point Jim would wish to initiate intimate contact.

While he was not ashamed of his body as such, Spock feared the loss of emotional control. It was difficult to separate the sexual act from the shame of unleashing powerful emotions – without knowing the potential outcome. The two had been so closely related through his childhood training that distinguishing them proved challenging. His only hopes were that Jim would be patient with him, and that somehow their bond would provide the necessary stability in order that he could face the loss of mental discipline on which he so prided himself. It was not for nothing that Vulcans had a saying: all is silence within the bond. He knew Jim could be trusted to hold all that he was – knew it as an intellectual reality. But it had not yet been tested in practice. And at the moment? He lacked the words with which to name his fears and uncertainties.

“Right.” Jim looked at Spock, considering how to say what needed to be said. “Look, I know you're terrified of... biological drives and such. And in the wake of what happened on the planet, I've got no intention of pushing you. I also think we should make a start on exploring our... biological drives together.”

Spock felt a curious sensation as of lead sinking in his abdomen. *Cast out fear*, he reminded himself. *Cast out fear*. He took a deep breath to still his trepidation, and nodded.

“It would be... logical to do so,” he breathed.

“Given that we're both new to this, I've been wondering whether it a possible way forward would be for us to recreate some of the conditions on the planet. Not what the elders did to you,” he added quickly, “but the rest of it. Eventually we're going to have to move past it, but perhaps it would help now as a starting point if we could go back in a sense and be consciously aware of what we're doing. Does that strike you as reasonable?”

It would perhaps be better than foolishly fumbling, and it might function as a way of overlaying positive memories over the horror of what happened.

“Affirmative, Jim,” Spock murmured.

“In the meantime, there's a whole spectrum things we can do which constitutes intimate contact. Would you like to try? What we did when we came in here was a good start.”

Jim stood and came around the table, reaching out a hand to Spock, who took it and stood.

“The only rule about this is whatever feels good: if it feels good, or makes the other person feel good, then it is good. Why don't I start? I'll do something, and you

can try doing that something to me, alright?"

Swallowing around his suddenly dry throat, Spock nodded. He reminded himself that the man before him was his bondmate, for whom he was willing to risk everything, and whose wellbeing was his primary concern. His bondmate, for whose mind his own had thirsted, and whom he truthfully longed to touch in all ways. Perhaps there was something to be said for raw instinct taking over and removing some of the awkwardness. However, *kaiidth*. It was what it was.

Jim led him over to sit facing each other side by side on his bunk. "It's alright: we won't go that far tonight," he said, seeing Spock's hesitation to be in his intimate space. "We'll be more comfortable here. Now..."

He reached up a hand and did what he'd wanted to do for ages: he traced the curve of Spock's eyebrow and then drew his fingers down his cheek, feeling the beginning of the day's stubble. Spock mirrored his action, delighting in the tingle of his mate's thoughts beneath his fingertips. Jim gently ran a finger around Spock's earlobe, up to the pointed pinna and down again. Seeing Spock's hitched breath, he took the ear between thumb and forefinger and massaged gently as Spock's breathing became ragged.

"An erogenous zone, then?" Jim quirked.

Spock quickly reciprocated, disappointed when it didn't elicit quite the same reaction from Jim.

"Don't worry. Seems that humans and Vulcan might have different zones. That's ok. But I'll bet..." He turned Spock's face to the side and placed a kiss on the area just behind and below his ear, softly nibbling and sucking. Spock clenched and unclenched his hands, panting. Jim sat back, chuckling. Eager, Spock took Jim's head, and began to do exactly as his friend had done, so efficiently (if unpracticed) that Jim's heart raced and he moaned. That incited the Vulcan, and he retraced a path around to Jim's jaw, taking his head in his hands as he came to the human's lips. There, he stopped.

Jim opened his eyes. "Don't stop, Spock. That's good. Very good." There was doubt in the obsidian orbs. "Ok," Jim said, "you did a good job before when you kissed the living daylight out of me. But if you need to know," he reached up to take Spock's face in his palms, "this is the first level, a butterfly, teasing kiss. We'd usually use it to drive the other person wild." He brushed his lips over Spock's. "The next level is a chaste kiss with just the lips." He demonstrated. "Then open-mouthed but no tongues," he applied the example, "open mouthed with tongues," again – and this time Spock felt a jolt of energy, prolonging the kiss as their tongues dueled and rubbed along each other. "And you can always throw in other things, like this." From an open-mouthed kiss, Kirk ran his tongue around Spock's teeth, and nibbled his lower lip, making the Vulcan groan and clutch Jim's body closer.

Jim drew back a little and they separated. Spock took Jim's hand, arranging his fingers so that all but his index and middle finger were curled into his palm. He formed his own fingers similarly, and then began to rub them up and over Jim's hand in intricate patterns. It was a pleasant sensation to Jim, but he could see that for

Spock it had other effects.

“What does that do for you, Spock?” he asked.

“Vulcan hands have a greater number of nerve endings than human hands. As we use our hands to communicate telepathically, the nerve endings are extraordinarily sensitive. This gives me... great pleasure, which is mental as much as it is physical. When we... engage fully, you also shall experience it through the bond.”

Jim’s ears pricked up. “I guess that connection would make things... different, take things to a different level. Oh well, I suppose that’s something that will come in time.”

“Indeed.” Spock’s hand traced a human ear, and cradled the warm cheek. They kissed again, this time mixing it up. Kirk fell backward onto the bed, and Spock followed him, covering his mate with his body. In this position they could both feel the other’s arousal, enjoyed the rubbing sensation of bodies pressed together around it.

It was everything Jim had fantasied about, and more: the heavier, Vulcan form all planes of muscle, hard and lean where he’d known only curves and soft padding before. It was entirely different, necking with a male, a Vulcan male, than with women. He knew he shouldn’t make comparisons, but as a new experience to him, it was unavoidable. He also knew what he preferred; he could come to crave this...

Jim pushed Spock up and off him. “Mmmm. Spock, I think we’d better stop there for the night.” He was suddenly exhausted, and didn’t feel up to guiding a virtual virgin through the intimacies of further sexual encounter.

At his request, Spock desisted. But he did something unexpected: he drew Jim into his arms, intertwining their legs. It was most pleasant to simply lie here breathing with the Vulcan. Jim felt a sense of safety, of togetherness, of mutual protection. He didn’t want to move.

But move they must. Jim stirred and sat up. “I hate to end this, Spock, but I need sleep.”

Spock sat up slowly, reluctantly. “I confess... during our confinement on the planet, we slept together. I would... like to remain here. With you.”

Jim smiled broadly. “Sure! I’d like that too. Why don’t you go get ready for bed, and I’ll do the same?”

Spock nodded. “Very well. I shall return shortly.”

Jim smiled again to himself in delight. They’d made progress tonight. He could only hope it was the herald of things to come.

Spock meandered the mostly deserted corridors of Deck 9; as the waste reclamation area of the ship there were few personnel here to see him as he wandered. He was unable to focus on anything, the conversation he'd had with the Captain that morning causing him a mixture of thrilling anticipation, the stirrings of arousal, and uncertainty. It was time. Time to explore melding during intimacy. Time to... test Jim's theory about taking the next step in conditions simulating the planet. Today had been Jim's rostered day off. It was obvious he'd been making preparations: Spock had been catching his slightly guilty looks, the hastily hidden PADD when Spock entered a room, the mysterious grins Jim threw him for the past week and a half. And in 43.56 minutes whatever he had prepared for Spock was to come to fruition. He was to report to the arboretum in the engineering hull at 1900.

It was time.

Spock made his way down to Deck 18 where the ship's arboretum hosted a variety of plant life over two decks. He stepped into the decontamination chamber, the door sliding to and locking behind him automatically. There on the bench was a plain white robe. Beside it was a command gold uniform and boots – Jim's, Spock guessed. It wasn't strictly necessary to remove one's clothing in entering or leaving the arboretum, but obviously that was Jim's desire this evening. He removed his own tunic, neatly folding it next to its mate, and stood naked and exposed beneath the sonic jets. They stopped after the specified time, and he took up the white robe. It was made of a silky, sensuous fabric which caressed his skin as it slinked into place about his frame. He tied the tie (a crossover arrangement) and straightened, his heart beating wildly in his side.

It was time.

Spock stepped through the doors. Avoiding the path which wound around the interior of the room, he stepped onto the grassed area where Jim was kneeling on a blue rug shot with gold, and stopped, taking in the scene. His mate looked up at his entrance and grinned, the simulated sunlight glinting in his gold-brown hair, making a halo or corona to frame his face. Divinity, indeed. The rug on which Jim knelt was elevated on a stone platform which resembled the altar from the clearing on the planet.

"Hey, Spock. Come on over," he beckoned.

Feeling himself drawn, Spock paced the grass, every sensation heightened: the crunch beneath his feet, the cool green scent of grass and humus and foliage decaying amongst the trees, the speckling of light through branches. He could hear the tinkle of water plashing in the water-feature/pond which lay off through the trees to his right. But his eyes were on the bright human on the platform, who seemed to glow with an otherworldly light, for he was dazzled.

He noted the ring of rose-quartz chunks placed several metres away from the platform: a sacred circle of love to overwrite the circle of violence. He shivered. Coming to the platform, he mounted the stone steps and knelt on the mat opposite Jim.

There was a shimmer, and a low table with an array of foods materialized between them.

In a charged silence they ate, sharing from the same dishes, and drinking from the same cup, a large chalice. The first time he tasted the drink, Spock started: it was similar to the drugged fruit-wine the elders had forced on him during his ordeal. He quirked an eyebrow.

“There were still large quantities in your bloodstream of whatever that substance was, Spock. Bones was able to reconstruct the drink chemically – at least, the alcoholic-drug part of it. I hope you don’t mind I’ve used some Vulcan wine I’d put away for a special occasion. I think today fits the bill.” Jim smiled at him.

In this safe space, Spock allowed himself to relax under the influence of the wine and its contents. Interesting: it was obviously not the drug which had immobilized him, but something else... An energy perhaps, similar to that which even now began to take form and hover just out of sight around them. It was a fascinating experience.

The food finished and the wine drunk, the table and its contents disintegrated in another transporter beam at the touch of a button on its surface. This left the two kneeling facing one another.

For long minutes they sat, simply drinking in the sight of each other. Spock felt the throb of life-force energy pulsing through his body, and he observed the same phenomenon in Jim. The bond, not yet having been explored properly in their encounters, gave little information apart from his mate’s rising desire, but that knowledge fuelled his own.

Somehow, in this mutual space, the energy rising within both of them touched the energy of plants and grass, water and light, as it swirled around them as though in a vortex of which they were the centre. The light seemed to grow – not physically, but in other senses – until the two vibrated with what begged to be unleashed, let forth; that which yearned towards each other.

They rose and stepped to the centre of the mat. Spock felt his heart beating a tattoo in his side, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end with the charge of energy.

It was time.

Spock reached for the closure of Jim’s robe, parting the fabric. Jim gasped as the silken fabric brushed his skin, leaving him gloriously naked to Spock’s gaze. Spock took in the smooth chest with its rosy nipples, the heave of pectoral muscles as the man breathed, the curves of abdomen and hip and thigh, the curling brush around a firm column of flesh which rose proudly, weeping the first drops of excitement. He worshipped his god, hands roaming slowly over shoulder and scapulae, cataloguing the golden flesh which glowed under his hands, the thoughts and feelings and experience of this touching reflecting back to Spock as sensitive fingers brushed psionic nodes. He couldn’t resist the aroma of his mate’s arousal, falling to his knees to kiss and suck paths up this deity’s thighs until he was panting

his need and crooning his name.

“Spock! Spock!” he begged, and Spock was not deaf to his cries. He licked the rosy column, enjoying the shudder of desire this produced in Jim. He’d get used to the salty taste. For now, he experimented, taking the head of the organ into his mouth and sucking lightly while flicking his tongue against its underside.

“Stop!” Jim panted, tapping Spock’s shoulders with both hands. “Stop, Spock!” he cried, and Spock pulled off, the penis bumping against his cheek as he leaned back slightly.

“It was good, very good. But if we keep going, I’ll come, and I don’t want to do that yet.” Jim drew Spock to his feet, and Spock stepped back, turning away.

“Wait! Where are you going?” The energy was still building around them, between them.

Spock stopped, his back to Jim. Slowly he turned around to face him, reaching for the tie of his robe as he did so. *The body is just the body*, he repeated to himself. There was no reason to be nervous before this one. Carefully, he shifted the slippery fabric from his shoulders, allowing it to drop gracefully, until at last it fell away completely, exposing the Vulcan’s nude body to the hungry sight of his mate, his head ducked a little in his vulnerability.

Spock saw the organ on which he had so lately lavished attention leap towards the man’s belly. Jim came forward, radiant, and grasped his biceps, running his hands down Spock’s arms until their hands connected.

“I am no stranger to sex. And you and I have been together once before, though we did not know what we were doing. Today, Spock, today we are virgin for one another, and will learn what it is to love with all that we are.”

He reached up and kissed Spock gently.

“Jim, we already share a bond. But I ask you, do you willingly join with me? Will you speak the words with me?”

Jim nodded eagerly, and Spock settled his hand in the meld position on Jim’s face, caressing the beloved cheek on the way.

“Parted from me, and never parted,” he began. And somehow from the depths of memory, Jim responded, “never and always touching and touched,” as they slipped together into mindscape.

The energy here was dancing wildly in erotic, creative surges, the bond licking with delight like flames at the rumour of two who had been robbed of this experience of unity finally engaging.

Here in this space, Spock was like a Hercules, regal and strong, his reality flapping about him like a cloak caught in a breeze. And this demigod was his. Jim felt dwarfed, lost before the magnitude of all that was *Spock*. It was all around him, He

was all around him, warm, protective, devoted... And the depth of love – there were no words. Jim was overwhelmed by the current of Vulcan emotion and human feeling which pulsed in and through him, directed to him. Turning his view at the urging of the Vulcan, he also saw himself as Spock perceived him, and what he saw stole his breath away.

Let me in, ashayam, the Spock-energy urged. Let me in where only I have been once before, where no one but I shall go again. Let me see you, all of you.

Reaching instinctively for Spock mentally, Jim drew him deep, deep, deeper still into the depths of his being, willing him to pass every boundary so that there was nothing secret, nothing hidden in shameful pockets, nothing which could not be joined to all that Spock was and represented. Down into the beating centre of himself – and then when he reached as far as he'd been before, Spock pressed deeper, like a probe parting veils. There in the core, Spock's disciplined mind implanted no less than all of himself, taking the threads that had been begun in their last encounter and completing it. His work finished, he held out his hands over the connection, and bright energy-light pulsed, and Jim felt his whole being convulse in joyous pleasure and delight at being joined with another, larger consciousness.

He abruptly found himself being drawn hurriedly through myriad depths and levels, all supremely ordered, down corridors of half-forgotten knowledge and through chambers active and bright. But through it all, the driving force which yearned for his presence, and sparked in excitement as Spock drew him deeper until there were in the central place of the Vulcan's being. Jim beheld it as a glowing multi-coloured orb, all colours of light in the spectrum beaming forth in an endless dance of life and light. Unable to resist, he reached out a mental hand to touch – and found it giving away until it surrounded him, took all he had to give and gave enough to ask for more. It was delight, it was... it was... love, cherishing, compassion, humour, fierce loyalty, it was human and Vulcan, and it was... it was... Spock. He found he didn't want to let go of this precious one, never wanted to leave this cocoon of being treasured. And knew he didn't want to leave it alone to languish in lonely sorrow. So he took the light and set it in his bosom, took out his heart, and gave it into the waiting hands of the light: an offering of love.

No barriers could hold the energy back now. It surged wildly, and carried this new dual-being in its waves, crashing through them, washing them, uniting their innermost essence.

Spock's hand dropped from Jim's face, which was wet with tears. He looked in wonder at the Vulcan and saw himself reflected in the dear face, knowing Spock saw himself in Jim's eyes.

There was no longer virginal awkwardness; they knew as they were known, and what they were flowed together effortlessly. Sensing the spark of an urge, Spock kissed Jim softly, then rested their foreheads together.

"No longer virgin to me, Jim," Spock murmured, something like... accomplishment in the tone of his voice. "We are one." He drew Jim's head to rest on his shoulder. Jim wrapped his arms around the Vulcan, their arousal still present and pressed between them, but not dominating this moment of rest.

And then the energy surged again, carrying them to the mat. This time, the kiss was one of passion and fire, their bodies writhing to find the greatest friction, the greatest connection possible. Jim rolled Spock onto his back, reaching down to take their members in his hand. At that first touch, Spock cried out into his mate's mouth from the pleasure, yearning to give more beneath his hands.

The energy danced around their bodies, between them, along their skin, until they both were hard again.

"Please, let me Spock. Let me in?"

"Yes."

Jim fumbled for a small tube he'd left under a corner of the mat, coated his hands with a generous portion of its contents, and ran them over his aching rod. He gently pushed Spock's legs up and back.

Spock couldn't help the vulnerability he knew in this position, defenceless against an onslaught he craved, yet which, in spite of the energy dance, and the bond, was still new to his conscious experience. Jim's fingers were cool with the viscous substance, and Spock jumped when he applied them to the tight entrance ring to his body.

"Shhh, it's ok," Jim soothed as he began to massage that area. It swiftly warmed beneath his touch, up the tender perineum, around the ring, until Spock moaned at the teasing. A digit slipped inside, and then another, and he relished the stretch as they scissored. And then the pair touched a bundle of nerves. Spock dug his heels into the mat, raising his pelvis reflexively, clenching around Jim's fingers as he cried out. Jim used the opportunity to add a finger, two, and Spock's desire had him groaning with need.

It was time.

Jim shifted, angling Spock's hips on his knees and lining himself up. Spock felt the first stretch as Jim's penis breached him, taking his conscious virginity. Panting in an effort to control – Spock was tighter than any woman, and Jim was ready, so ready – Jim pressed deeper, and Spock keened as that bundle of nerves was pressed again, and as the feeling of fullness took over any other awareness. Finally Jim was in right to the hilt. Spock reached up a trembling hand to Jim's psi-points and joined their minds as the human began to thrust slowly, powerfully, into his body. Spock lifted his legs, joining them around Jim's back, willing him to plunge deeper and take him, even as he thrust himself mentally through the bond into Jim's centre. The pace increased as the creative energy between them rose again in increasing waves until they pounded, pounded relentlessly – and Jim's orgasm whited everything out in a fountain of stars.

Spock was still hard as Jim withdrew, and the energy still was moving. Jim collapsed on his back, and the same urgency made him pull Spock to him in a bruising kiss.

“Take me, Spock.”

Spock reciprocated, coating shaking fingers (he almost dropped the lube in his haste), touching the human in ways and places he barely dared imagine. There was pleasure here in his touch, pleasure which made stars and moons dance before Spock’s eyes, and suns go supernova between them. Jim’s organ began to perk up once more at Spock’s ministrations, the human’s genitals sensitive and writhing beneath Spock’s hands.

Carefully, Spock pressed himself into the human’s body with a great sigh. He was home, sheathed in the body of this one he loved, possessed (he could still feel the human’s seed slipping down his thighs) and possessing.

“Move! Spock, move! Please!” Jim begged.

But suddenly at this moment, Spock’s resolution wavered.

Jim reached up a hand to his cheek, reaching through the bond (how the human knew how to do this without training was beyond Spock; perhaps it was instinct) as he did so to say authoritatively:

Let go. Do not fear. I will hold you. Spock, you must let go of your control. It’s not to be feared, but enjoyed. Let the energy carry you. Come with me, bondmate.

Jim gently directed all the energy at his disposal towards Spock, demonstrating.

Some inhibiting barrier disintegrated in Spock’s mind, and he opened his eyes, seeing pinioned beneath him the one he desired more than anything in the universe. He allowed the primal *needwantlustpossession* to surface and surge through him. Carried on its pulses, he thrust into the welcoming body with powerful thrusts, as though to split the man like a log.

That’s it! Yes! More, Spock. Give me all of yourself, his mate’s mind-voice urged.

And he complied, although he gentled his thrusts somewhat, aiming for that spot which had galaxies forming and exploding in his mate’s body. He directed all his energy consciously to the bond, and in short order, surrendered willingly to its call.

With a great primal cry he poured his throbbing essence into the depths of his mate, whose own semen spattered between them: the appropriate offering to the god their energies made together.

The energy began to quiet as they lay panting. Spock didn’t want to separate from Jim’s body (his mate!), and Jim would have been content to remain physically joined forever, the symbol and sign, the sacrament pointing to the internal reality of who they were, transformed and transfigured through the mutual gift of their energies. They were one in this moment, with each other, with themselves, with all that was.

Eventually, Spock’s organ softened and slipped out of Jim of its own accord.

Jim shifted legs and feet to a more comfortable position so that they lay pressed together, limbs wrapped around each other.

Long after Jim's breathing had evened into sleep, Spock lay, looking up between the branches of the trees to the simulated sky which was slipping now towards evening. As the first stars came out and twinkled, his own fatigue caught him.

Just as his eyes were closing, did he catch something just out of sight, on the edge of vision? And if it he did, did he see two energies, one gold, the other silver, bow to each other before spiraling together and ascending into the realms of space and time? And if he saw the twinned energies departing back to their world, what of it?

He breathed his gratitude, and slept, all at unity and rest.



spockshair

Rare Vintage

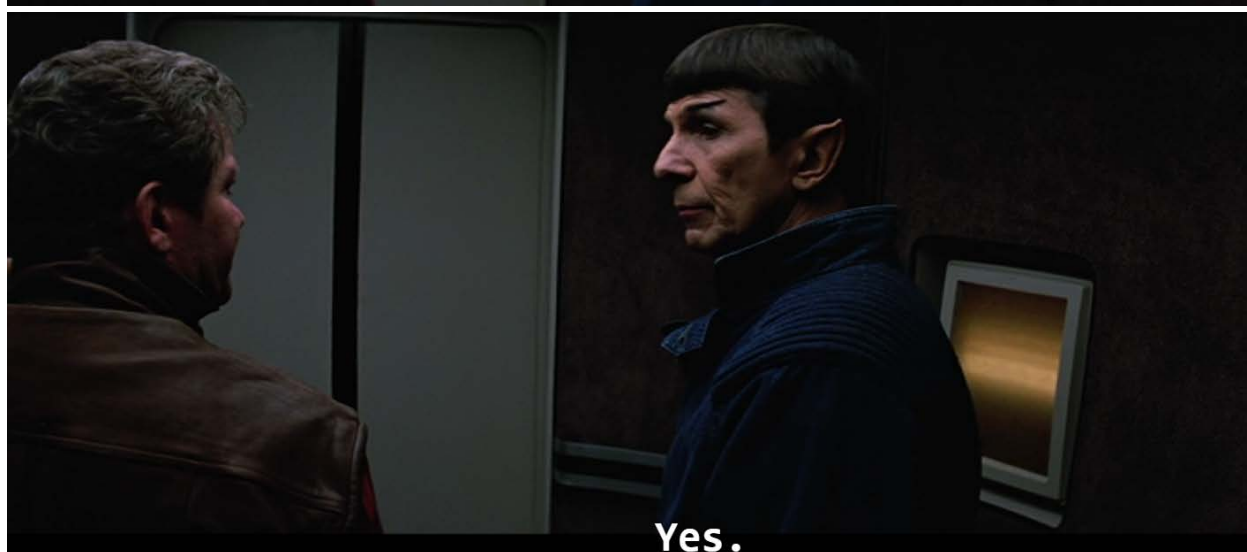
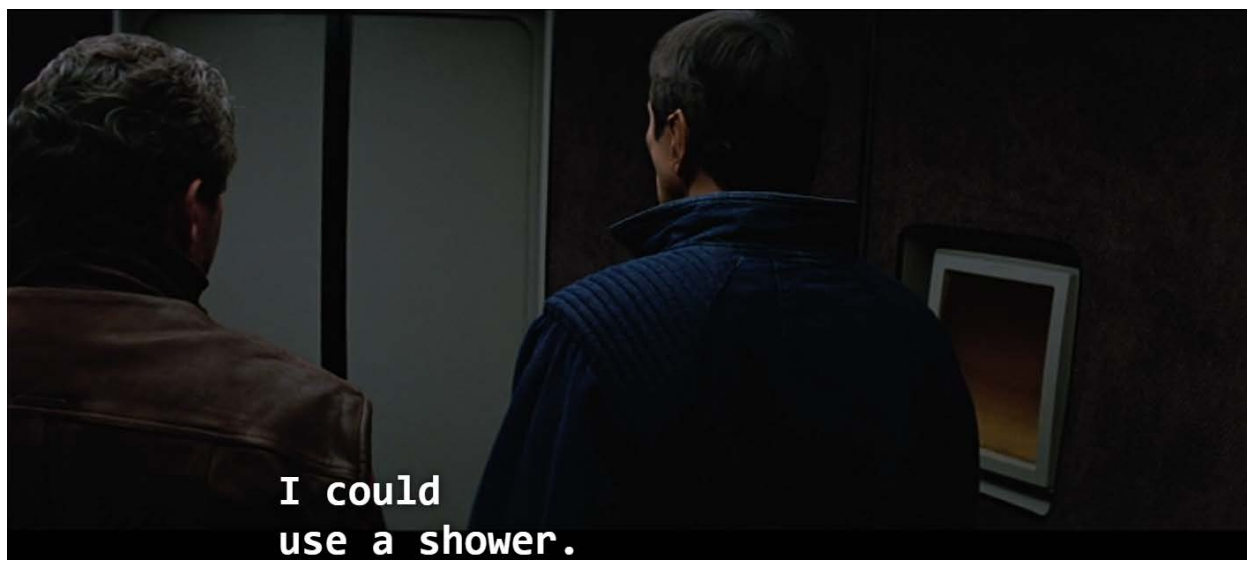
Carolyn Spencer

I watch my captain from across the crowded room.
Fine Saurian brandy
in a crystal goblet in the palm of his hand.
Slowly blunt fingers swirl the liquid
around and again,
warming gently with his heat.
I watch the spinning liquid stream,
colored golden like his eyes.
He lifts the glass,
a toast to me to span the distance,
a slow smile and his eyes glitter like the brandy,
then close in concentration.
He sips, a mere wetting of the lips,
a deeper draught with closed eyes as the liquid swirls through his mouth.
Concentrating, absorbing the flavor, collecting all the pleasure there is contained
in one perfect taste.
Swallowing.
His eyes open, lock with mine as he tips back his head,
and downs the rest in one long hearty draft of pure pleasure.

Later that night we share his bed.
Blunt fingers warm my body, swirling gently on my chest.
A taste—a sip at ear, nipple, navel.
A longer savoring of my lips and teeth and tongue.
Eyes close with deliberation, he takes my hardness in his mouth,
swirls his tongue around me.
Tasting, licking, absorbing all flavor.
Swallowing.
Draining me completely in one lusty mouthful.

His eyes tell me he finds my vintage eminently satisfactory.

With thanks for the inspiration to "Forbidden Colors" by Jenny Starr



Not So Gently

plaidshirtjimkirk

A huff was forced out from Spock as his shoulder blades were shoved back against the cool porcelain tiles of the shower stall. In the heat of the moment, his parted lips managed one half-drawn breath of hot, steam-filled air, before they were immediately assaulted and covered by Jim's own again. There was no resistance. With the falling of his wet eyelashes, he accepted the aggressive human tongue into his mouth and tilted his head to the side, his hands sliding up to entangle with Jim's dark brown hair.

Spock emitted the faintest sound into the kiss, feeling Jim grasping even tighter to his shoulders before releasing them. His hands wandered in different directions; most notable was the left one traveling the small distance upward to cup his jaw. Jim's thumb slipped across Spock's cheek, the other digits splitting to splay out beneath his ear and chin. It was a clear act of dominance, to keep Spock's face exactly where it was as Jim withdrew from the intense kiss.

Both heaving for air, Jim's lips quickly claimed Spock's once more before he leaned away just far enough to look at him. His thumb dragged back down across his cheek until the pad was pressing square against the center of Spock's barely parted mouth. Besides Jim's heavy breathing, the only other relevant motion Spock could detect at the moment was in those hazel eyes blown wide with lust; they flickered very slightly back and forth as they scrutinized and drank in the sight before them, observing every bit of feedback his actions inspired.

Spock's lips opened a little wider and his tongue poked out, prodding and flicking at Jim's thumb before taking it into his mouth. His dark eyes fell closed again as the green blush staining his cheeks grew deeper at the overtly lewd act. He cocked his head to the side and curled his tongue around the digit, paying special attention to the rough texture of Jim's skin before sucking hard. He focused on that action for several moments, and then took the thumb firmly between his front teeth, opening his lips just enough to breathe around it—as if he were wordlessly declaring some sort of claim to Jim.

The atmosphere surrounding them had become increasingly electrified—raw and irrepressible, as if each sensation carried a charge that needled at the nerves with the thrumming of eroticism. Spock's reception to touch had magnified so greatly in his

heightened state of arousal that even the droplets of water escaping from his short black hair and sliding slowly down his face felt dangerously titillating.

Now, however, Spock's attention was piqued by Jim's other hand, which was leisurely trailing down the length of his long torso. Those beloved fingertips only grazed over his sensitive Vulcan flesh in the lightest of touches, sometimes even breaking contact before reestablishing the connection a little further down. Though Jim barely ghosted over his skin, Spock was still fully capable of reading the utter prurience Jim radiated—pent up, uncontrollable human sexual desire, aimed entirely at him.

And Spock wanted it no other way.

Spock leaned his head back against the tile as the hand wandering down his frame paused for a moment at his gaunt hip. His mouth opened and he finally released Jim's finger that had been held captive, only to feel it stroke across his lips softly once more. As the caress continued, Jim leaned in closer, his hardened cock brushing by Spock's own, and pressed a kiss to the nearest cheekbone.

With his hand still gently cupping the other side of the angular Vulcan face, Jim carefully coaxed Spock's head to the side, so that his breaths fell but millimeters from the pointed ear.

"Spock," Jim drawled, his voice just above a whisper. His hand left the hip it had docked at and began a slow trail to where that green cock stood trapped between their bodies; it paused just before making contact.

Exhaling a breath, Spock's nimble digits released from Jim's hair and went in separate ways. One clutched the wrist of the hand cradling the side of his face as the other took a stiff hold of Jim's opposite bicep. Bracing himself, Spock found he was holding his breath in anticipation for the touch he longed for this entire time, and very slightly pushed his hips forward to convey that desire.

He didn't have to wait any further; his thrust was an invitation Jim clearly didn't need twice.

Jim's hand wrapped around the tumid shaft, abandoning the feather-light gentleness he had employed on his journey down and traded it for a strong, commanding grasp. He slipped his fist up and down Spock's rod several times before his fingers reached to the side and pulled his own cock into his clutches.

“*Perfect*,” Jim whispered into his ear, as he started massaging both shafts together between the heat of their bodies, their precum intermingling. “You’re perfect. You know that?”

Spock merely shook his head twice in reply, his eyes never reopening as he allowed the feeling of Jim slowly jerking them both off to carry him away.

“Why? You’re so *hot*,” Jim growled into that ear. “God, I couldn’t wait to put my hands on you like this.”

His lips broke contact from their current position, trailing down Spock’s jaw and to the long, exposed stretch of neck. Opening his mouth, Jim laved at the delicate flesh with his tongue before closing his lips and sucking.

Spock was aware his chest had begun rising and falling more visibly now, entirely claimed by every movement Jim made and wholly captivated by each word he spoke. The soft sultriness of that voice sent shivers running down his tall spine—directly into the tight knot that was building even further in his groin with every passing moment, until he found himself desperate for more.

It was ridiculous. They’d hardly even done anything and the situation was *already* unbearable. Though shore leave had been cancelled on the first night, the very thought of not being able to engage in sexual activity with Jim over a period of five days had only made Spock want it even more. It was illogical to assume that this willful denial would have inspired such aching need within him, but that, he decided, was the consequence of being bonded to a man who had addicted him to pleasure.

Spock had lain in his sleeping bag once they all bade each other good night, imagining Jim’s hands all over him, and then quelling the stirring of his cock with an informal meditation session. He eventually triumphed (“Mind over matter,” once said Surak) and drifted off, but not before making a mental note to avoid inviting anyone else to join them on future shore leaves. McCoy had snored loudly at that particular moment, as if he’d known Spock’s thoughts.

However, the trip and the mission, the undesirable thought of being unable to touch Jim...they were all so very far away from him now.

Jim released Spock’s neck with a particularly strong suck that was sure to leave a blemish, and planted a trail of kisses as his mouth traveled up again. He trailed along the narrow jaw and finally returned to his ear. With a shudder as he continued working both of their dicks in controlled strokes, Jim’s other hand finally abandoned Spock’s

cheek. It moved across the small space between their chests and to the Vulcan digits still pressed tightly to his bicep. Pulling them free with a tug of the wrist, Jim proceeded to guide them down and then released their cocks into Spock's grasp.

With both of his hands available, Jim grabbed tightly to Spock's hips for a half-hearted moment, before letting them slide around and cup the cheeks of his ass. He offered one rough squeeze, and then pulled Spock's body forward so that it was flush with his own.

"You looked so good in the soft light from that fire, Spock," Jim murmured into that ear. "So good. You have no idea how much I wanted to rip your clothes off then and there."

A choppy breath exhaled from Spock's lips and his toes curled against the water pooling on the tiled floor by the drain. His eyes finally opened half-lidded, head still leaned back against the wall. Though his hand was trapped between the closeness of their bodies, he was able to maintain the same pleasurable slow pace of jerking them both off.

The feeling of Jim's rod against his in his hand had an unspeakable effect on him—but not as much as the words that came next.

"That's right. Right in front of McCoy. Can you imagine it?"

Spock swallowed hard before his lips opened again. His voice was small and airy, full of defeat, as he slightly raised both eyebrows and choked out, "No."

Jim hummed a low growl and tightly squeezed Spock's asscheeks again, but didn't release them. Instead, he kept Spock spread wide and bucked his hips, sending his cock spearing up into the fist surrounding it.

"Let me tell you then," he spoke with sudden roughness, causing Spock to noticeably shudder. "Let me tell you," Jim repeated and pulled even wider on his cheeks, "what would happen."

Spock had begun rolling his hips in small motions, milking their cocks, and finding himself clinging to every last word Jim graced him with. His lower lip curled in very minimally, just enough to be trapped by a flash of white from his upper front teeth.

"McCoy would be sleeping," Jim whispered, as his right hand let go of the mound of flesh it clung to. "I'd slowly—very slowly, very quietly make my way over to you." As

he spoke, he trailed over to the top of Spock's crack, where he started to massage in small circles with his middle finger.

"I'd carefully undo your trousers—pull them and your briefs down only enough to barely expose you." The finger massaging Spock's skin pressed in a little harder then, and slowly slipped into the cleft, traveling downward at an agonizing pace. "Then I'd turn you over."

Spock's tongue came out to lick his lips. He stared at the glass door that had long ago become opaque from the heat of the water pouring from the shower head. When Jim paused his descent and Spock didn't hear anything further, all reason contained within him was torn away. Shakily, he asked, "In—indeed?"

"Yeah," Jim breathed, as his left hand began kneading the cheek it held—as if to threaten that he'd let go of it and retreat, deny Spock of the touch his body language begged for. "I'd stuff my fingers in your mouth to get them nice and wet..."

A pause.

"Then...?" Spock's voice was nearly inaudible as he hung on the edge, unsure if Jim would continue to tease him or finally relieve the burning tension in his loins.

The moment continued to hang, heavy with uncertainty and terribly aching need. Spock kept his attention glued to the same place and his parted lips closed long enough for him to swallow.

Just as it began to seem hopeless and that Jim would forever have him dangling there, it happened. Spock's eyes slightly squinted and he sucked in a quick breath through gritted teeth at the feeling of Jim beginning to gently prod against his hole.

"I'd start fingering you." It was spoken so nonchalantly at first, as if Jim didn't care that he was teasing Spock—like he didn't recognize the agony he was causing. But his voice took on a more sensual tone when he quietly added, "Just like this."

The pad of Jim's middle finger circled the rim of his opening and stroked over it twice, before lining up with the tiny entrance and pushing gently—just until the tip of it was accepted.

A broken exhale fell from Spock's mouth and he unconsciously squeezed on the digit that barely entered him. His grasp on their rods tightened; they were both hard as rocks now, veiny columns of flesh straining at full salute and made slippery by delicate

pearls of jizz that had escaped in pre-orgasmic excitement. Spock thought about Jim's cock pushing against his entrance instead and had to swallow anew as he felt his face grow even hotter.

"Imagine what would happen, Spock," Jim continued, hoarsely now as he very gently began moving the tip of his finger in a tiny circular motion. "Imagine McCoy waking up at that moment with my fingers buried deep inside of you."

A tiny gasp forced its way through Spock's lips without his even meaning for it to happen. Jim's left hand abandoned the cheek it had been pulling to the side and immediately came up to the back of Spock's head. He had only a moment to appreciate the dark flush of green that had spread clear across his bondmate's face before forcefully drawing their foreheads together.

"Imagine it," he repeated, in a louder voice, the fingers buried in that black hair gently massaging against Spock's scalp. The tugging on his cock was obviously beginning to reach a critical stage, making him aggressively fight to finish his story. "Because I would start eating you out anyway, no matter who was looking at us. I'd have you moaning and begging for more. Isn't that what you want, Spock?" Jim pulled tightly on the back of Spock's head again and demanded roughly, "Isn't it?"

"*Jim!*" Spock choked out and suddenly released the hold he had on their cocks. Immediately, both hands were grasping to Jim's shoulders and shoving him back in utter desperation. And then Spock was turning around to face the shower wall, one side of his hot face against the cold tile. He closed his eyes and pushed his hips backward towards Jim, offering himself. His lips hung open as he took labored breaths and waited while a familiar flame engulfed him.

Desire blazed within Spock—a wild inferno that could only be quenched by the touch of Jim's hands and mind. The vastness of the universe was temporarily lost to him, and all that mattered suddenly was being able to feel the grace of Jim's presence, soothing the torrent of dire need that raged and churned violently within him.

Jim's ministrations, coupled by the stimulating way in which he spoke that mortifying imaginary scenario, had effectively brought Spock the closest he had ever been to experiencing physical symptoms of *pon farr*, without actually being consumed by the time. His blood wouldn't burn again for another four years, but when it did, the bodily sensations he would experience would bring back memories of this ship's night, when he stood desperate and panting in a shower cubicle, presenting himself to Jim.

A shudder wracked Spock's body as he felt the tip of Jim's cock tease his entrance by very deliberately rubbing against it over and over. Distracted by that, the pair of lips suddenly pushing against his shoulder, accompanied by a large hand appearing flat against the wall near his face, almost caught Spock off guard as Jim pressed into him.

Jim's mouth opened and he gently nipped at the supple skin, pulling away with a loud kiss. "Like this, Spock?" he drawled again just above a whisper, his voice somehow dropping even deeper as his cock continued to rub against the tiny hole. "This is how you want me to fuck you?"

Those words were utterly incendiary—each carrying with it a gallon of extra fuel that doused and fed the wildfire rampaging within Spock to the point he actually shivered. Such lascivious language was beyond improper; no Vulcan would ever speak in that way, even while engulfed in their time of madness. This manner of talk was beyond vulgar and entirely rife with raw emotion; it stood a stark contrast to everything logic-embracing Vulcan society stood for...and yet, despite all that, it plunged Spock into an even heightened state of arousal.

What would his fellow colleagues *think* if they knew he was a trembling mess from hearing such vile words as he was pinned against a shower wall, grinding dry against Jim in response with reckless abandon? Such shame! But he was too far gone, too past the point of stopping to collect himself.

Jim's teeth gently scraped against the same shoulder, and brought Spock's attention back to that dire question. His half-lidded eyes closed, and his mouth fell open for just a moment to rasp out a nearly desperate, "Yes." It closed immediately after, and he swallowed hard. Keeping his temple pressed to the wall, he slid down more, pushing himself even further into Jim's hips. His spine now formed an eloquent curve, and as beautiful as it may have looked, it was also extremely uncomfortable.

Spock found himself uncaring of that at the moment, however.

"Oh, Spock," Jim groaned as his lips ceased the barrage of kissing and sucking, and his hand on the wall turned into a tight fist. His cock became trapped between both cheeks of flushed green from the change in Spock's position, and the head now pointed angrily toward the ceiling, colored a deep pink.

The desire soaring within Jim was urging him to quickly retrieve the bottle of slick from the sink cabinet and start fucking Spock until their throats were sore from screaming. However, it was too soon—too quick. Like Spock, Jim had readied himself for a dry spell and mentally prepared for the denial of this company. But now that the

ambrosia was laid before him much earlier than expected, he was going to make damn sure that they would both enjoy it for as long as they could.

Every single touch, taste, and feeling was going to count. That meant they would both be comfortable, and after letting his hazel eyes drift down the awkward arc of Spock's spine, Jim decided the first step to achieving that was getting out of this tight shower so they could actually move.

"What if I told you I had a better idea? Come with me."

'No,' Spock thought, his eyes squeezing shut. His backside followed Jim's retreating hips in protest, but it wasn't long until Jim's cock was gone...ripped away from him like it was the very air in his lungs. There was a flash of madness that sparked its way across Spock's mind, leaving him two moments away from verbally begging. His mouth opened and—

Jim spoke before that happened. "Come on," he urged quietly, latching onto one of Spock's wrists and pulling gently. His next sentence applied the balm to Spock's desperation. "Let me take care of you."

Spock's cheek finally pulled free from the wall and he stood, a blushing green mess. Jim felt his breath hitch at the sight of that glistening body and the black hair in total disarray. Spock appeared astoundingly debauched already, and he hadn't even been fucked.

Yet.

With that thought, Jim loudly commanded, "Shower off." The stream of water was immediately cut and the glass door began retracting to the inside of one wall, freeing them from the confines which had trapped them.

Immediately, the colder air rushed in—a welcome change to a space that had quickly become too small and heated. Jim took in a deep, refreshing breath and led Spock out into the open space of their bathroom.

The size of the room wasn't particularly impressive; while the Enterprise itself was huge, luxury suites weren't exactly necessary on exploratory vessels. However, it was big enough for two people to comfortably move around and get ready in, and built with pleasing aesthetic in mind. The walls were gray with mint green highlights, complemented by the silver of the no-smudge steel hardware. A large, fogless

rectangular mirror hung above the dual sinks, and Spock's reflection was the first thing he saw directly across from him.

Spock quickly averted his eyes, not caring much to see his own body in either its present state of nudity or arousal, and instead focused on Jim. Jim's hand lifted, but rather than reaching for the linens neatly folded on a nearby shelf, he motioned in the direction of the lengthy sink countertop.

"Go arrange yourself in a way that makes you comfortable," he spoke, and released Spock's wrist.

Licking his lips, Spock immediately did as he was told. He stalked up to the counter and paused for a mere second before he leaned forward, bending over and making his chest parallel with the surface. He supported himself on his elbows and stayed low, curving his back slightly so that his ass raised into the air a little higher.

His feet slipped apart across the light gray floor, just enough to grant Jim an utterly flawless view of not only his impossibly tight hole but the heavy ballsack and dark green cock that hung helplessly between his legs. With perfect timing, a tiny drop of precum oozed out and fell to the tiles below him.

Being in such a provocative and compromising position by his own doing sent Spock's head into an even deeper lust-addled haze. His abdominal muscles constricted against the knot in his groin, and his hole squeezed tight in reaction before relaxing again. The cheeks on his face stained verdant, he peered over his shoulder.

"...Is this adequate?"

Gone was that clinical, collected tone he had often wrapped his words in; it had no hope of survival in this situation that compelled his voice into a sultry, deep baritone.

Their eyes met and in the instant when Jim saw that unreserved look dripping with dual lust and mortification, he knew neither of them could wait another second. The thought of any further delay was suddenly unthinkable as his breaths fell heavy at the beautiful sight laid before him.

"*Perfect*," Jim rasped out, closing the space that separated them. His mouth fell open as he lowered to his knees, his eyes drinking in as much detail as they possibly could being this close to paradise. He suddenly spoke, clearly issuing a command and not a request. "Spread yourself for me."

A slender hand slipped over skin still wet from the shower and latched onto one cheek, pulling it aside and stretching the taut hole open. Jim scraped his front teeth on his lower lip and slapped his palm down on the other neglected mound, pushing it aside and spreading Spock as far as he would comfortably go. His pointer finger extended and lightly stroked over the dark olive orifice until he could simply just observe no longer.

The digit returned to where it had come from, and driven by a fresh surge of pure lust, Jim dove right in to replace it. He crushed his lips against Spock, tongue coming out and pressing right against the impossibly tiny opening, dragging the tip over it and back down before drawing a full circle around the rim. The gasp and deep inhale he could hear in response only inspired him more, and Jim's eyes fell closed, his jaw moving up and down as he began eating Spock out fervidly.

He knew exactly what to do with his tongue, unpredictably alternating between quickly flicking over the entrance or flattening against it in a slower, more sensual lapping motion. His face moved from side-to-side, eyes shut as he lost himself in the total bliss of this act, which was, admittedly, ridiculously stimulating for him. Jim invariably took special pride in the fact that no one had ever done this to Spock before he had—that *he* had been the one to not only introduce Spock to what it felt like to be pleased by an eager tongue, but to also convince him into loving it.

Spock would never willingly admit that out loud, but his own body betrayed his silence as it always did: by pushing back harder against Jim's face, and eliciting the soft moans he fought to repress. They both knew it was forever hopeless to resist.

After some time, the same impassioned ministrations directed at that enticing verdant orifice in the most lewd kiss he knew caused Jim's jaw to tire. He wasn't done; far from it, in fact, but he *did* need a quick break. Instead of immediately withdrawing however, he deliberately dragged his lower lip across the opening and then back down one final time before sitting back on his heels, panting and admiring his work.

The cold air rushed in, prickling at Jim's mouth and cheeks now covered in his own saliva—the very same that made Spock's hole and the space around it glisten in the hazy overhead lighting. He licked his lips as he attempted to catch his breath, satisfied in seeing the way the tiny orifice squeezed and released when the chill apparently made itself known to it as well.

Jim kneaded both fleshy mounds and ran his thumbs between them half-heartedly before leaning back in. His lips opened and pressed in firmly, sucking hard before his tongue poked back out. It lapped at the meaty rim, and then pushed through the muscle, beginning to fuck it open. Some broken, muffled sound came from above the counter

after the breach and Jim hummed in response, feeling his voice vibrating against the flesh he was ardently worshipping.

His hands finally released the cheeks they'd been holding and pushed Spock's own away as he buried his face between them, continuing to spear in and out with his tongue. Jim's palms fell upon the curve of slender Vulcan calves, his digits splaying out as he took hold of them tightly to balance himself from the way Spock was now moving in tiny back and forth motions, riding him.

The small sounds—those quick exhales and tiny muted exclamations of, “ah!”—only heightened the titillation in Jim's mind to an immeasurable, astronomical level. Reserved and reticent, Spock was no loud moaner but the fact that he couldn't remain silent during these times was more telling than anything.

Jim's awareness that he was capable of doing this to Spock was indescribably arousing—even today, decades after they'd begun sharing a bed. He knew without even looking, that stiff, logical, proper *Spock* was now blushing greener than an Orion and hiding his face in his shoulder. As he rolled his hips in desperation for more of the feeling only Jim could give him, it became too much to take.

It was enough, all of this—the outright salacious act, the filthy thoughts flashing across his mind, the sounds he could hear in response to his ministrations—to make Jim lightheaded.

With his jaw and tongue aching and a sudden frantic need to breathe starting to overwhelm him, Jim finally broke away from the quivering hole he had so attentively pleased—dragging a final lick around it before letting his forehead fall against one asscheek and heaving for air.

“Holy shit,” he whispered to himself, his eyes fluttering open and mouth hanging for a moment. When Jim felt Spock stir, one of his hands released the calf it had latched to and lifted to take the jade cock— wet again with fresh precum and as painfully hard as his own. He felt the leg his other hand still grasped go rigid in response as Spock's body tensed.

“Jim, *please*,” Spock rasped out, finally unable to keep the words at bay any longer. It was too much. He was already so aroused and near release after what he had just experienced, and Jim's touch was now pushing him dangerously close to the point of no return.

Attempting to take matters into his own hands to prevent that, Spock began pushing himself up but the hand that had been on his leg let go and reappeared dead center on his back, stopping him in place.

A choppy exhale escaped Jim's lips as he abandoned the tumid shaft.

"I know, I know," Jim offered breathlessly in sympathy as he slowly stood, running his knuckles and the back of his digits against Spock's heavy, swollen sack. "I can't wait either." His fingertips trailed up the light green perineum until the pad of his thumb pressed against the opening and stroked across it.

When he was finally completely on his feet, their eyes met. Spock's jaw was pressed against his shoulder as he peered over it, his hands balled into tight fists upon the countertop. There was a hint of raw desperation in the look he was giving Jim, the space between his lashes full of need and blown so wide that his eyes were nearly entirely black.

"Look at you," Jim whispered as he leaned over and pressed a kiss deliberately to Spock's uppermost psi point. "You're doing so well." Spock's eyes squinted a little and quickly averted from Jim's, the blush stained across his face and ears deepening even further from such praise.

Jim straightened then, reaching into the nearby cabinet beside the mirror and procuring a bottle of clear fluid. He continued stroking the entrance still wet from his tongue, and brought the item to his lips. The rim of the cap caught against his bottom teeth and he pulled the bottle down, flipping it open.

"Soon, Spock," Jim muttered softly, flipping the small container upside down to drizzle a generous amount of slick right over the tiny hole he was massaging and then his hand. "Really, really soon. Just hang in there for me."

With a copious amount of lubrication now at his disposal, Jim pressed the pad of his middle finger against Spock and slowly pushed—watched with pure desire and remarkable patience as the first and then second muscles relaxed and expanded around it, allowing him entry. He pushed out another broken exhale as Spock's body eventually pulled the length inside, and then remained still so that he could adjust to the invasion. Jim leaned in, his tongue flicking at the rim clenching to his digit, and was rewarded with another gasp.

He began to retract his finger slowly, drawing back until it slipped completely out. Pausing to stroke over the opening again, Jim added even more slick before pushing

back in and finding less resistance this time. Carefully reading the signs from Spock's body, he began fingering him, starting with gentle strokes and steadily building up to quicker, more intense movements.

His digit curved and brushed against that hypersensitive bundle of nerves buried deep within, earning him more delightful muffled feedback and another squeeze.

Jim hummed in appreciation, taking in this magnificent view before him. He licked his lips and let his pointer finger press against the opening. "Ready for more?"

The response came in another small, barely audible whisper. "Yes."

As he began gently inserting the second digit, Jim bent forward so that his upper body was beside Spock's on the countertop. His lips slightly parted at the view of stiff shoulders, hands still in fists, closed eyes, a taut mouth... Tension from needing to maintain self-control and blatant desire were written across the Vulcan features and clearly telling of how overwhelming it all was—so much that Spock's cheek was still pressed into that one shoulder; he made no move to look at Jim.

"Spock," Jim rasped out, reaching with his free hand and gently placing the pads of his fingertips on the far side of his chin. He carefully coaxed Spock's face in his direction.

When Spock's lashes fluttered open and their eyes met, Jim could stand only one moment longer of drowning in the desire welled between them before he crushed their mouths together. His hand slipped up to cup the narrow cheek and he opened his lips, his tongue plunging forward against Spock's.

Upon meeting, Spock undoubtedly tasted himself as their tongues danced together fervently, small hums and large exhales through the nose falling from them both as Jim's fingers continued their skilled work. A third digit joined the other two then and their kiss broke, leaving them both panting. Jim's lips fell upon Spock's forehead and he kept them there, his eyes remaining closed while he waited with unshakable patience for the entrance to adjust to the addition of even more.

"So tight," he whispered, his nose buried in Spock's damp black hair and hand still protectively cupping his cheek. Jim scissored experimentally and when he received a favorable response, he began twisting his hand while comfortably sliding all three fingers in and out together. "I can't wait..." Jim began nuzzling against him and dragging his lips along the smooth skin in small motions. "...can't wait to get inside of you."

Spock nodded against him quickly twice, his response coming out with a heavy breath. "Yes."

Jim pressed a long kiss unto Spock's forehead, and then finally righted himself. He licked his lips as he deliberately stroked against the place that made Spock buck against him, and then watched—watched as his large digits slipped out of what had started as a too-small entrance.

"Here, come up for a second," Jim instructed with a soft tap on Spock's hip, and then quickly turned to reach for another pair of towels hanging on a hook. When he faced Spock again, he found him picking up the bottle of slick and sinking to his knees on the floor before him.

"Planning to—ahh!" Jim shuddered when he felt the base of his cock taken in one hand and a hot tongue come out to lap up the pearls of precum which had begun slowly moving down his shaft. He tossed the towels on the countertop and made quick work of arranging them, giving extra padding to the surface so Spock would be comfortable leaning on it.

Jim's hands fisted the soft material as he felt lips close around his dick. His eyes shut tightly and mouth fell open with a groan. "Spock... *Spock!*" A throaty protest erupted from deep within him when he felt himself falter toward the edge, jerking backward and placing a palm lovingly into the sleek hair.

Their eyes met and a shiver wracked Jim once more. "You're gonna make me come already," he softly said, the corners of his lips twitching upward. "You're too good at this."

"I have learned from the best," Spock replied plainly, but the heated look he wore spoke much louder than any words could.

Jim watched as Spock flipped the bottle of lubricant over and poured plenty into his palm. He closed the cap and placed it to the side before taking the painfully hard human cock in his fist. A pleased sound escaped Jim as he felt his shaft massaged slowly, but only enough to be generously anointed.

And then Spock was standing again—turning and leaning back over the soft linens now laid out on the counter, presenting himself once more...the fruits of their laborious foreplay finally on perfect display and ready to be claimed in the form of one well-prepared hole.

With a firm grasp on his cock, Jim immediately stepped between Spock's spread legs. His other hand took the nearest cheek and pushed it aside, giving him perfectly clear access to rub the head of his dick against the opening.

"Ready?" he asked.

Spock's hands clenched onto the far edges of the fluffy white towels supporting his chest and he simply nodded, closing his eyes and then pressing back against Jim for good measure.

And with that, Jim drew in a deep breath and began to push forward. His advance was slow and steady, careful and gentle—mindful as ever to allow Spock's body to take him in, instead of forcing him to take it. After several moments of both tense patience and cautious progress, the tiny opening expanded enough and his head sunk in.

Finally. The breath Jim had started holding at some point expelled with a groan, and though he wanted nothing more than to fall deeper into the paradise only his bondmate could provide, he remained completely still. He let go of his cock and the cheek he had pulled to the side, relocating both hands to Spock's thin waist. They docked to it momentarily, and then began giving tender rubs to the smooth skin, wandering down to his narrow hips and back up.

Spock's fists tightly gripping the linens didn't go unnoticed. His face was low, chin against the material with his eyes still closed. The reflection in the mirror showed only part of his expression as steady but significant breaths were being taken between his teeth.

"Easy," Jim assured softly, sending a pulse of love over their bond as he continued to massage him. "It's all you."

It certainly wasn't that Spock needed the reminder that Jim wanted him to have control and set the pace to his comfort now, because it had always happened this way. Jim had constantly been tolerant and long-suffering for as much time that was needed for the adjustment. He continued running his hands over Spock's back, the slick left on them from earlier making his long strokes more soothing.

He felt Spock clench on him and then slowly push backward. Jim wet his lips and looked down, observing his cock disappearing little-by-little into the blissful heat, until he was completely taken inside. They both exhaled at the moment Spock was fully impaled, his blushing green asscheeks flush against Jim's hips.

A heavy groan was pulled from somewhere deep within Jim. “You feel so *good*, ugh...”

Resisting the overwhelming urge to begin bucking, Jim moaned again and savored the feeling of Spock slowly moving on him, adjusting to being spread by his thick shaft. It was worth it; Jim knew his endurance would be rewarded very soon.

He closed his eyes, latched onto that waist, and just lost himself in the sensations of the rhythm steadily picking up—of the small sounds Spock was beginning to make. And when the first slap of flesh hitting flesh rang out, he knew it was finally time to take over and really get things started.

Jim’s grasp tightened on Spock as he began rolling his hips forward. He started slowly, paying attention to how Spock reacted and when he found him meeting his thrusts, he quickly rose to a fast pace. Heavy breaths began falling from his lips as he speared his cock into the hot recesses of that perfect body in front of him. Before long, Jim was vocally expressing his heightening pleasure, and giving Spock a pounding that was sending him straight into a dimension which existed somewhere between reality and paradise.

Spock felt so fucking *amazing*. He was so tight, so hot, so utterly perfect. The way his body reacted to Jim’s cock inside of him coupled with the feeling of his presence and the pleasure reverberating across their bond was indescribable. There were literally no combination of words in any language that could do justice to what this did to Jim—and the only thing his mind could manage now was one demand: *more*.

At that moment, Jim pulled back so far that he completely dislodged himself—and took Spock with him. The soft material he had been leaning on slipped along the surface, causing Spock to lose both his balance and positioning. With a gasp, he was yanked back and away from the counter while still bending forward. The sides of his torso were quickly caught by Jim’s hands, steadying and preventing him from smacking his face on the edge.

“Sorry, sorry, it’s so good,” Jim chanted breathlessly, and then guided Spock back toward the surface, taking a quick moment to adjust the towels that were half off the ledge. “Here, like this...” His hand cupped the back of Spock’s left leg and coaxed it into lifting.

Spread wide open now, with one knee resting on the flat top along with his hands for better control, the side of Spock’s face touched the mirror and his mouth fell open at

the deeper level of penetration this position offered him. Jim grabbed onto his ankle and opposite hip, making quick work of returning to the punishing pace he had set earlier.

“God, Spock!” he exclaimed, fucking him so hard that he felt himself go lightheaded with pleasure once more. One of Spock’s hands was thrown against the glass, his digits flexing as if trying to dig his nails into the surface before straightening again. He took the pounding with no resistance, pain, or protest—the small moans leaving his mouth and the pleasure throbbing across their link both indicating just how much he actually loved the roughness.

It was no surprise, though. Jim had known he could handle it since a long, long time ago. He released Spock’s ankle and grabbed tightly to an asscheek, pulling it far aside again and watching at how that dark verdant hole stretched perfectly taut around his cock. The rim moved with his motions, and thinking about how he managed to shove his dick inside of what was once much too tiny sent him to an entirely different level of bliss.

Jim’s rhythm slowed, opting instead to send his hips forward at a slower pace but with harder thrusts, sinking deeper and deeper into the overwhelming heat until he decided it was time for a change. With a final hard drive forward, he withdrew and took hold of Spock’s arm, gently pulling him to stand.

When Spock turned to him, their lips met and Jim gently backed him against the counter. He slid Spock upon it until he had him sitting on the surface, and then Jim pulled both of his legs up, docking them at his hips. Finally face-to-face when his cock reentered, Jim kissed him once more.

“This okay?” he murmured over a heavy breath, their mouths still touching.

Spock’s body was at a curve, his head and shoulder blades now against the glass with his hips hanging off the padded edge, relying on Jim to keep him from falling. He panted and nodded, fisting the linens below him firmly.

“Touch yourself,” Jim whispered as he began rocking into him again. Spock’s eyes closed and he pushed back against the glass, unraveling his grasp from the material. Complying with the suggestion, he took his aching hard shaft in hand and started pumping it. His mouth opened and he tossed his face to the side for a moment before turning it back to Jim and letting his lashes part.

Their eyes met.

Jim licked his lips, taking in the look of pure ecstasy that had transformed the features across Spock's face, which were nearly always stoic and serious...but no longer.

And while seeing part of this beautiful reaction in the reflection had certainly been exciting, it was so much better, so much more *meaningful* head-on. After all, only Jim had the luxury and privilege of observing Spock this way, debauched and blushing...had the satisfaction of hearing the delightful small sounds leaving Spock's thin lips as he was roughly fucked against their bathroom mirror.

No one else in the universe had such entitlement. No one else could see the way Spock's mouth sometimes parted as he heaved for air, how his eyes—black with total lust—would flutter open for a moment and close again, how his upper teeth would barely bite down on his lower lip. No one else could know the intense fucking his body was capable of taking and how much he actually enjoyed it—how absolutely incredible and tight and perfect he felt. *No one.*

And those were secrets Jim would take with him until the very end. It was all for him, and he would indulge for the rest of his life.

Spock's brows had knitted down and furrowed, a harsh whisper suddenly leaving his lips. "*Jim!*"

Moaning with each thrust, Jim continued smashing into Spock, his hands cupping the cheeks hanging off the surface. He watched those dark eyes snap shut, the fist working quicker and quicker and the pleasure they shared over the bond increasing as Spock was on a crash course straight to utter ecstasy.

The quiet, staccato sound of "ah!" repeated itself over and over until Jim felt Spock's body beginning to tense. He immediately pulled out without any warning, the totally unpredictable action causing his bondmate's eyes to snap open. Jim lifted his ass to the surface, still cradling it in his palms and lowered his mouth on Spock's dick.

That was the thing that did it—earned him another stripe to decorate his pride with. He felt Spock's hand shoot out and latch to his dark brown hair, digits entwining and pulling hard on the short locks with a groan. He bucked frantically, sending his cock into Jim's mouth again and again and again until a strangled sound escaped his lips.

Jim remained still as Spock came in his mouth, waited while the orgasm violently tore through him and made every muscle in his body lock up. After feeling Spock spend himself, Jim slowly removed his lips, swallowing all of it and then lapping at the

softening cock again to ensure he cleaned off every last drop. Above him, Spock shuddered and at last, released the grasp he had on his hair as his body went boneless.

Jim slipped his hands from underneath the cheeks he'd been cupping and ran his palm over Spock's bangs, then down the side of his head. He kissed him, leaving Spock to taste himself once more.

With half-lidded eyes, Spock regarded him for a moment, basking in the afterglow. As he breathed heavily, he studied Jim and then began to shift around in attempt to remove himself from the countertop—assumedly to bring Jim to release in the same manner he had been.

"Meld us," Jim offered breathlessly, stopping Spock's movements and pressing their lips together again. He closed his eyes and bumped their noses together.

"Now?" Spock's voice was soft, his chest still rising and falling rapidly.

Jim simply nodded and then drew back, opening his eyes. He took Spock's hand and kissed it before bringing it to the side of his face and covering it with his own. His brows lifted and he nodded, quietly insisting, "Now."

Spock's eyes went half-lidded and his lips barely trembled for a moment while the warm palm cupping his knuckles slowly traveled down, deliberately brushing his sensitive skin. He positively soaked up the staggering amounts of adoration and lust that radiated through Jim's touch, aware that these things would only be amplified when their minds became one—aware that that, in itself, had certain consequences which could very well leave himself incapacitated in a most pleasant way for the rest of the ship's night.

There was nothing that Spock could deny Jim—not now, not ever. He would never ask for more than Spock could offer, and yet, time after time, Jim had given up so much that was dear to him in the blink of an eye.

Out of the goodness in his heart, Jim had taken Spock's tightly clenched, calloused hands all those years ago and gingerly opened them...somehow managed to place an entire universe of love and acceptance between them. For reasons Spock could never ascertain, Jim had freely given his affection, his trust, his body, his ship, his son—risked and lost *everything*, only to offer him somewhere to finally belong.

And in that place, Spock was no longer too human or too Vulcan...no longer too logical or too different. Here, Spock was simply Spock. Despite his total nakedness, with

no shields or veils to conceal his real identity, Jim still loved him. He was never troubled by Spock's dual heritage, never asked him to choose one side or the other, and never desired him any other way than how he really was.

Even if there was no additional place in the galaxy where Spock could belong, knowing that he fit perfectly in Jim's arms would always, *always* be enough. For some faulty logic, James Kirk had decided that he, a half-breed with very little to offer in return, was worthy of all this. And for that, for all the things Jim had needlessly suffered for him, Spock adored him with every fiber of his being.

When Jim tenderly latched to his wrist, Spock's fingertips slipped into a familiar pattern, claiming their rightful places over his bondmate's meld points. He paused for a brief time, swallowing as the intensity of Jim's emotions thrumming through the touch.

"Kashkau..." he spoke in a breathy whisper, the sound of his heart pounding in his ears. "...wuhkuh eh..." Spock's eyes closed. "...teretuhr."

A tidal wave of emotion crashed into Spock's consciousness, silver rivers overflowing into deep wells and chasms—filling them and drowning him in the fathomless ocean of Jim's affection. It consumed him entirely, and he sunk in total surrender, wrapped in the comfort of Jim's keen mind until Spock could no longer tell his own thoughts apart.

The feeling of oneness, of Jim's mounting pleasure coupled with the warmth Spock was still experiencing from his climax, augmented into unbearable need that reignited them both from the lull in activity. Spock felt himself pulled from where he was placed, turned around, and bent back over the counter...felt Jim take his hand and wrap his fingers tightly around the faucet.

'Hang on.'

Spock complied with the order, his grasp tightening on the fixture. A lengthy groan that was both his own and not his own escaped his mouth as the sensation of penetrating and being penetrated overtook him. And then Jim was moving. Fast. Hard. His hands were firmly on Spock's hips again, pushing and pulling with his motions—every single loud clap of flesh against flesh sending them both closer and closer and closer to the precipice.

Their hearts hammered to one rhythm of mutual ecstasy, their lips uttering sounds that neither would dare on their own. And somewhere, was the resounding echo of the thoughts that pulsated and intensified over their bond.

'Oh, God, Oh, God, Spock!'

'Jim!'

The thrusting became erratic, the euphoria growing insufferable, the grip on the faucet constricting until the knuckles went white, the hands grasping forcefully into the curves of boney hips with desperation...

And with a collective sob, they both went careening over the edge of the known universe, splash landing somewhere rife with nothing except an all-encompassing sense of euphoria.

Starlight exploded behind their eyes, blinding them both to anything other than the totality of orgasm as Jim began coming. The meld swept Spock with it, his rim clenching and unclenching rapidly with Jim's seed spilling in several hefty shots, both riding the wave of the massive climax they equally shared.

They were each heaving for air and shuddering, deeply blushing their individual complementary hues. Jim's forehead hit between Spock's shoulders as he continued tossing his hips forward until his body trembled and a huge, broken breath pushed its way out of his lungs. His motions ceased and he released Spock's hips, instead sliding his arms around the thin torso and embracing tightly. While the intense feeling of overstimulation washed over him, Jim's eyes squeezed together and then relaxed with another better-controlled exhale.

Spock's hand finally unclamped from around the fixture, loosely clinging to it as reality eased its way back into their minds and slowly returned their senses. The meld kept them tightly entwined, ribbons of affection, loyalty, and gratitude enveloping their one self until the blurred line of individuality began taking on better clarity. Spock's mind gingerly slipped from Jim and Jim's from Spock, their combined thoughts gradually becoming singular again.

Jim nuzzled against the soft skin, pursing his lips against it and planting a kiss before he unraveled his arms and righted himself with a groan. He reached down to push one cheek aside, observing his softening cock leaving the orifice he had loved so emphatically. A small trail of white come followed.

"We need another shower," Jim declared amusedly, lifting his forearm and wiping the sweat from his brow.

Spock braced himself on the counter, pushing up slowly. As he did, the seed buried within him began the slow and uncomfortable process of making its way out of him. He resisted the urge to squirm from the feeling and agreed. "Indeed."

When Spock faced him and their eyes met, Jim gave him a mischievous grin. Mission accomplished. Spock looked so well-fucked with his bangs askew and skin glowing a healthy shade of green. Reaching up to the black hair, Jim brushed through it to straighten it out and then took Spock's hand.

"Let's make this quick."

He led Spock back across the space and into the cubicle; with a verbal command, the glass door slid closed and the water kicked on. They stood chest-to-chest beneath the stream from the shower head, the heat spilling down on them only increasing their mutual state of relaxation. Spock's eyes were shut, his breaths calm.

A smile pulled at the corners of Jim's lips and he reached for the soap, beginning to lather his palms up when Spock's lashes parted. He raised his hand to mirror Jim's action, but was stopped.

"Allow me," Jim offered, beginning to massage the soap into Spock's pliant body.

"It is—"

"—unnecessary," Jim finished for him with a small laugh. He nodded. "Yes, Mister Spock, I know. But I enjoy it, so just let it happen."

It would be illogical to offer dispute, especially when Jim's touch was so soothing and he would only insist on continuing the action anyway. Spock's eyes fell closed and he leaned back into the tiles, soaking in the pleasantries of Jim's caresses and the gentle kisses bestowed upon his neck and jaw.

Once the soap was washed off Spock's body and he was thoroughly clean, Jim quickly did the same for himself with not even a fraction of the tenderness.

"Shower off. Engage drier."

Comfortably warm air blew down from the ceiling to remove excess water from them and the stall. The cycle finished and the door retracted again. This time, the colder air rushing in wasn't so pleasant and Jim was fast with grabbing a folded towel, handing it to Spock.

He took his own and then they dried themselves off completely. The linens, including the two that had been left between the sinks, were deposited in the laundry and they finally exited the bathroom. The light dimmed to darkness and the door slid shut behind them.

The design of the Enterprise-A's living quarters was even more extravagant than the original ship's refit. Their bedroom had been sectioned off from the rest of the space, giving them a small, cozy retreat in which to retire. Spock led the way, walking briskly through the sliding door that revealed their double bed that was surrounded by storage compartments painted chocolate brown. A massive window running from wall to wall and nearly the entire length from the headboard to the ceiling made for an impressive backdrop of distant glittering stars.

Just as he was about to order the closet door opened, Jim stepped up behind him and laid his hands on Spock's arms, rubbing them vigorously to generate warmth.

"Can I bribe you into sleeping naked, Science Officer?"

"Bribery, Captain?" Spock questioned, a brow raising. His chin touched his shoulder when he turned his face to the side. "Most unethical."

A laugh huffed its way out of Jim's mouth and he slipped away from Spock, moving toward their bed and activating the heat control that would warm the mattress. "I could make that an order. *That* would be unethical." He climbed into bed and slipped beneath the plushy covers, eliciting a deep sigh when his head hit the pillow. "But, as always, I leave it up to your good judgement, Mister Spock."

Spock's mouth twitched and he made his way to his side of the mattress. Jim immediately reached over with a warm smile, and pulled back the blankets to make it easier for him to slide in. On his side, Spock shifted right up to the heat of his bondmate's body while Jim covered him, fussing to make sure he was tightly tucked to prevent cold air from entering once they slept. He finally placed the back of his fingers into the hair above a pointed ear and stroked gently.

Jim continued to caress him lovingly, his eyes softening as he gazed into Spock's, before commanding, "Lights off."

The room dimmed until the only illumination was the soft glowing of lights from the Enterprise's exterior. He adjusted himself so their foreheads touched.

“No more friends on shore leave, Spock,” he said with a smile, bumping their noses together and running his fingers through the soft black hair.

“That would, indeed, be most amenable, Jim.”

Jim’s hand crept down beneath the covers surrounding them and he pulled Spock closer. They had nine hours before the mission debriefing conference with Starfleet Command was scheduled to commence, and if he had it his way, he would be spending the majority of them right here.



Simple Holiday

Tracionn

This is their simple holiday and they want to keep it as 'old school' as it gets.

Kirk and Spock want to discover more of Seattle, want to discover where Amanda's family came from and why she always spoke of this town and its environs with such a warm tone.

And slowly, they understand.

They enter each bakery they pass, tasting their way through muffin after muffin, and Kirk smiles fondly every time Spock denies his sweet tooth even while he reaches for Kirk's muffin crumbs and talks about texture and ingredients and baking procedures.

It makes Kirk happy to see Spock at ease – it's been a long, long journey for him.

They explore Seattle's gardens and famous sights, and neither can resist taking a picture together to always remind them of their time here.

Then it's Spock's turn to not-smile fondly when Kirk spots a classic motorcycle to rent, his hazel eyes lighting up with interest and excitement, and of course Spock agrees to the rides, eager as they both are to see more of the autumn-flavoured scenery around Seattle.

Some days they're just riding for hours, other days they find secluded places and have lazy picnics, afterwards sharing chaste kisses in the golden sunlight that mirrors the warmth of their bond.

It's simple, it's good and true, and they've never been more content.

Our Dearest Blood

Carleen

In loving memory of Leonard Nimoy, who brought Mr. Spock to life and created not just a fascinating character, but also a legend. "He's not really dead, as long as we remember him." —Doctor Leonard McCoy

“And death shall have no dominion.
Dead man naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.”

Oblivious to the rain battering him like a hail of bullets, Captain James T. Kirk held himself at rigid attention, outside the Trauma Center of a remote Star Base. He watched a team of paramedics remove a stretcher from a dark unmarked shuttlecraft. Handsome usually mobile features reveal nothing of the turmoil churning within. He is the captain of a starship, and it wouldn't do for him to break down.

After all, death and loss are his constant companions. He's lost crew, friends, loves and family. But this, this is different. This is a line he cannot cross, a loss he could not endure. The preternatural fear of it rises in him, threatening to take him by the throat. They've hurt his friend. They've hurt Spock.

The medics nod as they pass. He manages a curt thank you for their efforts at rescuing his first officer from the terrorist prison camp. Forcing himself to remain motionless, he manages to ignore the instinct to lift his friend from the stretcher and carry him into the ER himself. Their movements slow as they reach the rain-slicked loading ramp.

“Precious cargo, gentlemen. Let’s get him inside, please.”

The medics know exactly who’s speaking to them, so they take a fresh grip on the handles and quicken their pace. Jim Kirk feels his composure slipping when he sees the pale, quiet face of his friend and first officer under layers of thermal blankets. Blood seeps through the field dressing around his head.

Intellectually he knows exactly what happened. The reports were quite thorough. That knowledge does not prepare him for the sight of Spock lying so helplessly restrained to the antigrav stretcher. The rain and the wind pull the blankets, and they slip enough for Kirk to see with his own eyes that Spock is lying on a gel mat to ease the pain of the bloody stripes on his back. Their presence is revealed only by the red curving marks around Spock’s arms and shoulders where the whip wrapped around his torso when it struck. He forces himself not to look away as bile splashes into his throat.

Mental torture, beatings, and starvation. Sleep deprivation and they’d kept him from meditating by spraying him with water from a high-pressure hose. A smashed right knee and a broken arm from the torture sessions. He’s missing two teeth. They’d tried to make him give away classified Intel. Kirk knew they had the wrong man. Spock would die before revealing Starfleet secrets. He’d almost succeeded.

The medics pause and Kirk takes the moment to smooth the dark bangs.

“Sorry,” Kirk says quickly retrieving his hand.

“It’s alright, sir. We have him stabilized. Captain, if he could hear your voice, it might help remind him he’s safe and no longer alone. I’m not the doc, but don’t miss this moment, it may not come again.”

Kirk reminds himself these people are professionals and bends over the stretcher to whisper into Spock’s ear.

“It’s Jim. I’m here, and you’re safe.” Then his voice betrays him; by stumbling over unexpressed emotion, so he lets his lips linger over Spock’s cheek while his hand cups the only part of the Vulcan’s face that isn’t injured. Driven to touch Spock and let him know he isn’t alone; did he just kiss his first officer?

Kirk pulls away almost apologetically. One of the medics squeezes his forearm as they pass.

A man in a dark uniform redirects Kirk from his vigil. “Captain Kirk? Captain James T. Kirk?”

“Yes?”

“An honor to meet you, sir. The debrief is scheduled for tomorrow morning, but I thought you’d want to know. Commander Spock wasn’t the only prisoner we liberated. The camp is destroyed, the Spooks are going over it and should have some information to share with us by morning. I’m sorry sir. This just makes it... I’m sorry. Apparently they weren’t searching for Spock specifically, they simply grabbed the easiest marks they could get their hands on. Your first officer, was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Inside the trauma center, that moment may truly be over and quite possibly forever when the team surrounds the gurney. Captain Kirk swallows hard and forces himself to take the time to thank the medics and shake their hands. They nod and one of them attempts a salute, but Kirk waves it away.

Tearful thanks come with their job. For them, it’s all in a day’s work. They know how close these two are. The exploits of Enterprise and her crew are legendary, and this is the team who make it happen. He feels their eyes on him. Are they impressed by his control and professionalism? What they cannot see is his heart breaking or the rage he badly needs to unleash.

He’s grateful for the information the agent shared. The location of the planet where they found Spock is still classified. But he will find it, and he will destroy it, and he doesn’t care if they are Klingons, Romulans or fucking Tellarites, he will destroy them all.

With chest heaving and his control slipping from his grasp, Kirk lingers by the door because he has nowhere else to go. Nowhere else he can be, but here by Spock’s side.

One of the doctors finally notices him and gestures to Kirk. “Sir, if you stand right here.”

Gratefully, Kirk enters the room, and they clear a spot for him to stand close to Spock’s head. A hand on his shoulder and concerned eyes above surgical mask reassure him they are doing everything they can.

The medics were very concise in their report. Sleep and meditation deprivation weakened both his mind and his body. Yes, Vulcans go longer without food and water than the average human. But not this long, not six months of continuous deprivation and torture. For Jim Kirk it was six months of searching, while one lead after another went cold. Kirk bent double over the exam bed, as emotion washed over him like a wave of phaser fire.

The doctor is quick to act. "Captain Kirk, trauma injuries are often terrifying, especially when it's someone close. Pararescue did a fine job of stabilizing him and we'll do the rest. We'll have him cleaned up and comfortable very soon. Sir, I wonder if you could take hold of the Commander's arm and hold it still while I set the bone."

Kirk drags in a breath. Yes, he can do that.

"Thank you. You're a big help -- we only have so many hands around here. First thing, you'll carefully remove the temporary splint. Hold his wrist with one hand and pull open the Velcro straps with the other. That's it. Just let it fall away. Perfect. Okay, one hand on his shoulder and the other on his wrist."

Kirk stays perfectly still while the technicians moved the machine that will knit the fractured bones over Spock's right arm. Why didn't they have one of these on the Enterprise?

A groan from the bed turns Kirk's attention back to Spock. If the Vulcan is regaining consciousness, that is a good sign. "It's okay, Spock. They're fixing your arm. Lay still. I've got you."

Another sound forces itself from Spock's throat, dark eyes flash-open and with the last of the Vulcan's strength, he calls out.

"Jim!"

Monitors shriek.

Spock collapses back to the bed while Kirk watches the last of the color drain from his face. Jim doesn't need to move his hand to Spock's side to confirm what the alarms tell him. The shine of the Vulcan's bright intellect fades during his last look into the hooded eyes. Light and air go out of the room as Kirk's mind zeroes down to the now silent Vulcan. The flesh under his hand is cold and thin, stretched too tight over sharp-edged bones. He wills the heart under his hand to start up again.

Spock.

The medical team responds with quick and purposeful movements. The doctor gives orders in a calm and clear voice.

"Emergency life-saving measures. Get to it."

One of the technicians takes his arm from behind and pushes him out of the room. "Sorry, sir. Let us work."

The once clear window turns opaque and sounds diminish when the pneumatic doors hiss shut. Jim Kirk begins to wonder, for the first time, how he might manage without Commander Spock at his side. Stumbling backward, Kirk searches for a chair while his hands and feet turn to ice, and his heart beats frantically. There is no air to breathe, while the edges of his vision blacken. His calves hit the edge of something, he falls into a chair and buries his head in his hands.

That may be the last time he will ever see into those reflective brown eyes or hear Spock say his name. Jim attempts to imprint the memory. Other memories crowd in and stream through his mind, distracting him until he wants to shout for them to stop.

Miri, the children, and the sickness that kills them hour by hour. Spock's eyes smiling only at him, 'And I do want to get back to the ship.'

Spock hanging from a tree, laughing and smiling, 'What is it that you want, Jim?'

'I shall do neither, for I have killed my Captain and my friend.' That day Spock grabbed him by the arms and grinned... actually grinned and called him by name. 'Jim!'

With his head still resting in his hands, Kirk allows himself to sink into that memory. The day Spock could have died, the day Kirk appeared to die at Spock's hands. And the ruse had worked for the hour or two it took them to get back to the ship. That day was the pivotal point in their relationship. A relationship neither of them could accurately define. It all changed the moment Spock saw that Kirk was alive, grabbed him by the arms, and shouted his name.

That was a year ago and today a different touch draws him back from his memories. The cold walls and shiny hospital floors focus and an arm around his shoulders that tugs him close. A familiar voice soothes him, not with words of hope, he notices, words meant merely to comfort.

"Bones, please." Kirk raises his head, tears shining on golden lashes.

"They're doing all they can."

"I can't lose him."

"I'm here for you. But, Jim, I think you must prepare yourself."

“No!” Kirk broke free and began to pace. He’s surprised that his control has finally snapped and scared of the fear bubbling up in him. He’s not afraid of a damn thing. Nothing rattles him and nothing intimidates the Captain of the USS Enterprise. It’s his heart that cannot accept losing Mister Spock. His voice raw, hazel eyes wide and brimming, Kirk takes a few steps away and then turns on Doctor McCoy. “I won’t give up on him. I know he’s stretched too thin. I know what they did to him. I’ll stay with him. I’ll help him!”

“He’s my friend, too.” McCoy stops Kirk’s frantic pacing. “Jim, on advice from the doctor, I contacted his parents.” Then softly, knowing this might be a truth the Captain could not face. “Sarek and Amanda are on their way.”

Captain Kirk shoves his fist into the wall. “No!”

It all began innocently enough, on a perfectly normal day, when Spock began acting strangely. For Nurse Chapel to venture into the intensely private man’s quarters was proof enough something was going on. Helpless, to turn away from the scene unfolding before them, Kirk and McCoy stood outside the Vulcan’s quarters. Then with his own eyes, he watched the screeching and scrambling form of the Chief Nurse running from Spock’s room followed by a tray and a bowl of soup. There was no denying it something was going on.

Once the door to Spock’s quarters slid shut — had he ever heard Spock shout with such anger? — Kirk shoved the doctor into his own quarters. The doctor poured himself a glass of Kirk’s good scotch and made himself comfortable. Kirk waited for the explanation, but the doctor seemed more content with enjoying his whiskey.

“Bones?”

“He won’t tell me, Jim. But I will tell you this, his vital signs are all over the place, his body is pumping hormones like a teenage boy on prom night... Jim, he can’t go on like this. The biological pressures are killing him. If it were you or I? A stroke or heart attack,” the doctor inclined his head, “yesterday.”

Kirk knocked back a glass of whiskey. “I’d better go talk to him.”

“You’re the only one who can. I won’t even repeat what he said to me.”

Kirk looked at his friend with a fond smile, “Something about breaking your neck?”

The Doctor shrugged and took a deep sip. "So you knew about this."

"Not all of it. I hoped he'd come to me or you."

"That's our Spock, isn't it?"

Kirk tugged his uniform shirt into place, took a breath, and headed full charge out the door of his quarters. Behind him, McCoy raised his glass.

What he found in Spock's quarters startled him. The Vulcan's hands were shaking, his face pale and drawn. As if he were lost and didn't know which way to turn. The sight of his immutable friend in this condition tore at his heart. His hand reached out to the trembling blue-clad shoulder.

"Don't touch me," the Vulcan hissed through clenched teeth.

He had to get through to him, "Spock, you've been called the best first officer in the fleet. If I have to lose that first officer, I'd like to know why."

Kirk waited, minutes, hours; it may have been days later when the Vulcan finally spoke. "It is a thing Vulcans do not speak of. Even among ourselves." Spock slipped out from under the captain's hand and put his back to him. "It has to do with biology."

"Vulcan biology?" Kirk asked suddenly not liking the sound of this at all. With his hands locked behind his back Kirk forced himself to stillness and listened.

If an embarrassed Vulcan was a physiological possibility, then Kirk was standing next to one. How could he make this easier for him? He'd listen and then he'd act, but while Kirk thought of the positive actions he would do for his friend he wasn't actually hearing him until he said the words, take a wife or die.

What?

Raw adrenaline pumped into his system, flooding his blood and raced along his nerves. The force of it twisted his hands into fists and raising him up on his toes into a fighting stance. A wife...? they had... they had each other... didn't they? And this ship. This ship was his wife, but Spock could take a wife? A woman. Soft and warm. Comforting.

Jealousy? He was jealous. No, that wasn't right. He had to get out of here and away from this tortured man, so he said the first thing he could think of, "I haven't heard a word you said. I'll get you to Vulcan somehow."

The Captain fled the Vulcan's quarters like a coward and never heard Spock's plaintive, "Jim?"

T'Pring, Spock's betrothed. The bridge crew watches the view screen to much in shock with the news and to curious as to the identity of the beautiful woman.

She's as beautiful, untouchable, and cold as a marble statue. His fists clenched, he will not allow Spock to join with that woman. His friend was warmth, kindness, and subtle humor. Kirk reminded himself this was not his business. He knew next to nothing about the cultural pressure and expectations of Spock's family. The friendship they'd forged between them was genuine. In their world, whether they were playing chess, fighting, or an unbeatable diplomatic team, he knew Spock's every mood. The ice queen on his viewscreen knew nothing of the heart of his friend.

With his feelings stuffed safely away, Kirk and McCoy accompanied Spock down to Vulcan for the ceremony. In a confusing spectacle of confrontation, anger, and political correctness, Kirk found himself dying at the hands of his friend. The hot sand burned his skin and blinded his eyes. Spock, stop. Please stop... then everything faded away.

Until he opened his eyes in Sickbay to the grinning face of Dr. McCoy.

Spock! Where was Spock? Kirk heard the door to Sickbay open, but McCoy stopped him from going to Spock. Instead, he listened to his First Officer turn himself over to McCoy and give orders for Commander Scott to take command.

He couldn't get his uniform on over his head fast enough. Then he walked quietly behind Spock. "Don't you think you should check with me first?"

Once they made their escape from Sickbay, and the nosy Doctor McCoy and Nurse Chapel, Kirk pulled him into the first conference room he came too. After ordering Scotty to the bridge, he retrieved them each something to drink from the replicator.

Kirk made Spock sit down with him. They talked about simple things and then about the ship and crew until finally Spock relaxed back in his chair and began to express his fears and concerns. They talked for hours. Spock had answered his questions about T'Pring and shared what he could. Finally, when they had to return to duty, Kirk held out his hand to his first officer.

They rarely touched, or rather, Kirk often touched him, but this was the first time he made a deliberate request. When the Vulcan's warm hand slipped into his Kirk stopped breathing. Skin to skin, it burned like a phaser set on stun, but he couldn't let go. It became a tug of war as to who would let go first.

While Kirk stared down at their clasped hands, Spock used his other hand to tilt the Captain's chin. What the captain saw in the dark hooded eyes, was better than a smile, better than a grin, better than one of their take-no-prisoners chess games. What he saw there mirrored what he felt in his own heart. At least, he thought it did. But he needed more because *Jesus fucking Christ* he'd almost lost this man today. So he tugged on the hand and pulled his first officer into an embrace and to his delighted and terrified surprise the Vulcan hugged him back.

"I thought I'd lost you to her." Realizing that nothing felt so warm and sure as blue velour against his cheek and long aristocratic fingers spreading over his back.

"Jim, I killed you with my own hands. How can you ever forgive me?"

Hesitant at first, then long arms slid around Kirk's shoulders, and he felt the Vulcan's breath on his cheek. They'd stayed that way, silent and still, just holding on to each other until a summons from the bridge forced them apart.

Stark hospital walls solidify around Kirk when the sound of footsteps on the highly polished hospital floor rouse him. It is the doctor heading their way. Kirk shakes himself from his musing. As he draws nearer, Kirk notices the sweat--soaked surgical gown and the blood-streaked marks where he must have wiped his hands. It is the sight of those green colored streaks, which takes Jim Kirk to a place of panic and sadness where he'd never been before. He searches the doctor's eyes for clues, but he cannot move his feet. Fortunately, Doctor McCoy intercepts the surgeon.

They speak quietly, and the surgeon places a hand on McCoy's shoulder. Then he walks away with his shoulders rounded and his step an exhausted shuffle. Stripped of every defense and barrier he's ever learned, nothing prepares him for this moment. Not command school, the academy, or his diplomatic training.

Doctor McCoy is walking toward him, yet Kirk cannot look into his eyes.

"They got him through surgery, Jim. He's breathing on his own. They're just trying to build him back up."

"I'll go see him."

Kirk turns on his heel and heads down the corridor. McCoy's hand on his arm-stops him like a tractor beam.

"They won't let you in. He's sequestered. They want to create an environment to help him go into a healing trance. And before you ask, Ambassador Sarek is bringing a Vulcan healer with them."

“No, he needs me. I know him. I know how to help him.”

“Jim!” McCoy takes him by the arm to stop him. “Leave him alone. He needs time. He’s been ripped open body and mind. Let him be.”

He slaps McCoy’s hands away in frustration and leaves one of his closest friends standing alone in the corridor.

“You just don’t understand, Bones!” Kirk shouts over his shoulder as he hurries away.

“No, Jim. I understand all too well.” The man will never understand there are just some things he can never bend to his will. But that’s what made him a great starship captain wasn’t it?

The hospital corpsman didn’t dare stop him. The nurse, a handsome young lieutenant with a shock of blond hair and dark blue eyes completely taken in by the golden-eyed smile Kirk tosses his way simply nods. Then two doctors meet him at the entrance to Spock’s room. Kirk isn’t above pulling rank when it suits his needs. However, he notices as he pulls his headlong rush to a halt that the two doctors’ outrank him by a couple of rates each, and one of them is a Vulcan.

Shit.

“Good evening, Admirals.” Another golden smile, the Vulcan is having none of it.

“Captain Kirk, your first officer is stable and receiving the best care we can provide. A Vulcan healer is on his way here with Spock’s parents. I suggest you rest. You may visit him in the morning.”

Why does Captain Kirk sound so much better on board his ship but groundside it might as well be Ensign Kirk?

While Kirk takes a breath and tries to figure out a different strategy, he notices Spock through the ICU window. Spock, so still and pale. A long-fingered hand rises, they lock eyes across the space between them. It could have been a galaxy or just the ten or twelve yards that separate them, but Kirk feels the pull of his first officer’s fear, hears the sound of his name as Spock-calls him.

“Aye, sir. I can see he’s resting comfortably. I’ll head to the VOQ and get some sleep. Thank you, sirs.”

Just after midnight when the night crew has settled in for their shift, dressed in civilian clothes Captain Kirk enters the ICU suite from a side entrance. The medical staff are gathered around the desk discussing the previous night's basketball game. Good. Although, he never figured out the attraction to that particular sport.

Silent feet take him to Spock's side. A quick assessment indicates he should sit on the far side of the bed near Spock's head so he can't be seen from the nurse's station.

With firm hands, he reaches for the Vulcan. Spock doesn't need his emotional turmoil or his fear to add to the Vulcan's suffering. He's seen Spock perform this many times, he can do it. Without a doubt in his mind that he can reach his friend, Kirk stills himself, breathes in and when he let the breath out places his fingers on the psi points of Spock's face.

All his hard fought control melts away when his mind bumps against Spock's. The man's cry of agony completely undoes him. He does the only thing he can think of, what he's been trained for, by compartmentalizing the emotions of rage and grief, and stands firm against the onslaught.

It's okay, Spock. I'm here. I'm here. You're safe.

Jim! Hide me. Let me die. I'm lost without refuge.

Not true, my friend, my heart... you have me.

The agony in Kirk's psyche grows with each breath. In moments, his head feels as if it is imploding. His flesh burns with the pain of torn flesh and exposed nerves.

"Oh, God, Spock! Spock!" Kirk buries his face in Spock's pillow to quiet the sounds of his weeping. It is the double agony of Spock's pain and shame bleeding into Kirk's mind, washing him in the Vulcan's blood.

Hush, Jim or they will make you leave. I-I am thankful you've come to say goodbye. You must let me go now. You cannot endure... I cannot endure.

We can do this! We can do this together.

Kirk moves onto the bed to lie alongside the Vulcan and wraps his free arm around the Vulcan's chest.

I cannot sustain this meld. You were foolish to try. It's too dangerous, Jim. You will die with me. You are dying now. For the sake of what makes us the entity of Jim and Spock, please let me go.

And that is why I will not allow you to go. I will not... cannot... allow the one who holds my heart to leave me alone in this world. This is not the time, Spock. I know someday we will grieve, but not today. This cannot be the day.

Always so impetuous. Jim... I am broken...

Not broken. Together we will heal you. Trust me to help you. There is nothing we cannot do together.

Jim. My Jim, you hold my heart. But I am dying now. Can't you hear the alarms? My heart is fibrillating. Jim, do not. Please do not...

I can be nowhere else, Spock. I gladly follow your lead. Take us into the darkness, where I will tell you what's in my heart. There's so much I want to say.

Jim, no...

But Kirk can sense via the meld that Spock lacks the strength to push him away. The Vulcan is lifted into strong arms. Kirk loses his sense of identity in the meld. He is Spock, looking into warm hazel eyes, the place where the Vulcan has always found his anchor, his solace from the world and the love he could never have anywhere else... with anyone else. In the arms of his Captain a vortex of warmth and acceptance buoy him, sweeping away the pain. Each moment strips the shame from him, until a golden void of acceptance embraces his battered body. When he lifts his head from the golden chest a mouth touches his. Firm and gentle, the lips move over Spock's cracked lips, gentling him, loving him.

Jim, no. This is...

The medical staff find them lying side by side on the narrow hospital bed. Kirk lies peacefully with his head under Spock's chin and a protective arm over the Vulcan's chest. Their hands are clasped between them in a two fingered touch. No one knows what it means, except perhaps for the Vulcan doctor who abruptly excuses himself from the room.

The machines which monitored the Vulcan's life signs so faithfully are silent.

The handsome blond nurse weeps silently.

Doctor McCoy stumbles from the room, tears blurring his vision, and straight into the startled arms of Spock's parents.

Jim?

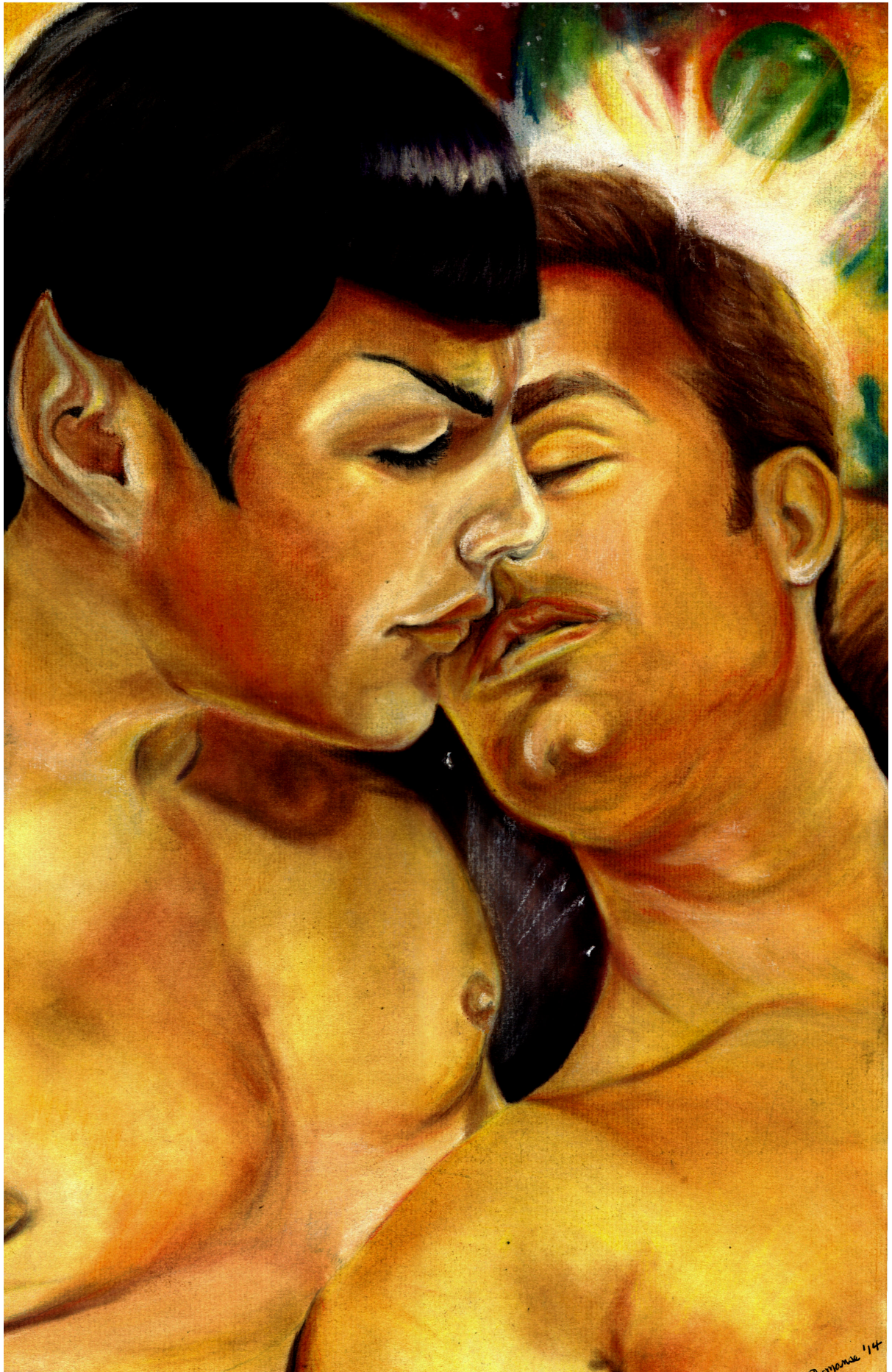
I'm here, Spock. Always.

“And death shall have no dominion.
Dead man naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.
Under the windings of the sea
They lying long shall not die windily;
Twisting on racks when sinews give way,
Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;
Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
And the unicorn evils run them through;
Split all ends up they shan't crack;
And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.
No more may gulls cry at their ears
Or waves break loud on the seashores;
Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
Though they be mad and dead as nails,
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion.”

—Dylan Thomas: *Death Shall Have No Dominion*. 1993



Tearing at the Threads

llostone

A/N: There is a lot that went into this fic, and please forgive a quick note of thanks. First, as always, to my friend Jen, who first encouraged me to write for a zine... and a K/S zine at that. I'm still about 98% terrified, but we're going to ride with it and see what happens. Second, to my beta, FoxyK who is simply amazing. She makes me look like I can write. And lastly, [kaylennz](#), from whom I found the [prompt on the lj kink meme](#). :) THANK YOU <3.

Warnings: This is Reboot, with various TOS elements thrown in. Slightly atypical descriptions of violence, Probably all the Trek tropes in this and any connecting galaxy, possessive, jealous Vulcans, inadvertent voyeurism (is it still voyeurism if the person seeing is not turned on by what they see?), slight bit of angst, and Snarky Vulcans.

Notes: Vulcan taken from the [VLD](#).

Part One

“Spock?”

The whimper of sound was the barest whisper of breath. Hearing it set Spock's heartbeat thudding crazily in his side. He glanced quickly down at the burden in his arms, eyes skating over Jim's prone form with practiced skill.

Jim's forehead had a star-shaped wound where a piece of shrapnel had struck him. The planetary oxygen levels prevented the blood from clotting at the human-normal rate, so the cuts and bruises that Spock had not been able to heal before the dermal regenerator died bled somewhat sluggishly. Jim's lips were exceedingly dry. He had bitten through the bottom lip during the crash, and it appeared as though his lower jaw had fractured. Spock had used his own shirts as bandages to attempt to slow down the bleeding from the wound in his chest where part of the steering apparatus had punctured Jim's shoulder. The emergency kit had included a small medical regenerator, but it had only healed the perforation of his lung. Hearing the gurgling, whistling sound of Jim fighting for each breath had caused Spock's hands to tremble as he quickly applied the regenerator and used it to its fullest capacity. There were several lacerations on Jim's torso, and Spock strongly suspected that there was quite a bit of internal bleeding in Jim's abdominal cavity.

It had been very fortunate that Jim had passed out from pain, yet during the four hours that Spock had been walking towards the outpost, he had not so much as twitched. It had been rather disconcerting, and the joy that shot through Spock at the small, pain-filled whisper was almost frightening in its intensity.

“Yes, Captain?”

“kay?”

Had Spock truly had a desire to emulate human over-emotionalism, he would have embraced their propensity for eye-rolling. The simple gesture related a bevy of information, full of such emotional nuances that Spock did not always understand. Suddenly, he could empathize greatly with those that used it in response to something he said.

“If you are attempting to gauge my well-being, I assure you that compared to-” Spock stopped, his lips twitching in a minute frown. “Compared to your injuries, Captain, I am fine.”

“F’ne has var’ble defin’shuns.”

Spock found himself ignoring the sudden tightness in his throat, and tightened his grip on his burden in response to the small tell of emotional compromise. All at once, Spock could not ignore the guilt he’d been suppressing. He allowed himself two brief moments to accept his complacency in Jim’s injuries before breathing slowly and forcing himself to act logically.

“An’ it’s, Jim, Spock.”

If Jim’s words were gaining more clarity, then the pain was not going to be as ephemeral as Spock had hoped. “*Ponfo’mirann*,” Spock muttered under his breath, somewhat viciously. Vulcans, as a whole, had no use for swearing, but Sybok had taught the young Spock that one a year before he left, and Spock still found himself thinking it when the more common Terran vocabulary was simply not enough to express his--

Spock began to move more quickly, ignoring the sun beating down on his naked shoulders. He found himself arching slightly over Jim’s form, as though trying to protect him from the sun.

The planet they were on had been what Jim had called ‘damn near forgotten by everyone’. It was remote.

Spock began worrying, and that in of itself was frustrating. He'd long ago given up the cool detachment one needed when serving on board a starship with a mostly Human crew. Spock knew that to his crewmates he was often cold, or uncaring. To the Bridge crew and senior staff, slightly less so. Yet all that was needed to observe his lapse of Vulcan resolve was to look to one Captain James T. Kirk, and any Vulcan with any doubts would immediately understand the... *regard* Spock felt towards his Captain. Spock couldn't honestly say only Vulcans noticed. Nyota, whose empathy was unsurpassed in all others that Spock called either friend or acquaintance, called him 'goosey', a descriptor that Spock found both horrendously descriptive and poignantly apt.

Spock stopped after a few miles, noting that Jim had curled into Spock's heat, as though he were cold. This was doubly concerning given the desert-like climate of the planet's surface. They would reach the outpost in three hours at his current pace. Spock moved so that Jim was sheltered from the wind by an outcropping of rock and quickly checked the makeshift bandages.

"Hurts, Sp'k."

Jim attempted to open his eyes, but ended up squinting at the sun. Spock moved his left hand quickly to block him from the direct rays and Jim attempted it again, stubborn as always. One pupil was bloody, and the other was so dilated that there was only a small ring of blue visible. Concussion, possible head trauma. Spock cursed again and sat back on his heels, thinking. Absently, Spock found himself stroking back Jim's hair and wiping some of the blood gently from his face.

"You must be still, Jim. I will get you to safety."

"I know--you will. Bones'll kick my ass if you don't."

Spock raised one brow, attempting to untangle the illogical thought. Not at the threat of violence towards Jim's person from the good Doctor- Spock had been there while McCoy had worked tirelessly to find a way to bring Jim's irradiated corpse back to life and Spock understood that the man felt much as Spock did when it came to Jim's safety - but the idea that McCoy would kick Jim when he was so injured made Spock frown deeply. Normally Spock had no issues with understanding colloquialisms; however, his distress made him revert to what Jim would call 'bad habits.' Fortunately, Jim's eyes were closed and there were no sentient beings around to observe his lack of control.

It was a poor use of his or Jim's time to waste in pointless introspection. Spock stretched his neck muscles and carefully picked Jim back up, wincing slightly when Jim made another small, pained whimper of protest. Spock looked towards the west. They were too far to see the details of the structure, but Spock could easily get Jim

there if he moved quickly. Spock ignored the flutter in his stomach when Jim once again curled protectively towards Spock's torso, and set off once more, this time moving as efficiently as he could without risking jostling the unconscious Captain. He estimated the outpost would be 2.33 hours away at this rate if he could keep the pace.

Spock noticed that the terrain changed, the environment becoming more humid and less arid as he ran. He ignored the pain in his own body, forcing his lungs to take in the planet's oxygen. While this was a Class M Planet, the levels of carbon monoxide relative to the planetary oxygen levels barely designated it as such. It was the reason that he and Jim now found themselves here: classifying and studying the effects of minerals on the surface. The dilithium deposits were of special interest to Starfleet's Geology department.

The sun seemed to grow more intense with every step. Spock stopped for a moment to adjust his slippery grip on Jim's body and to suck in an exhausted breath before continuing. The way he held Jim reminded Spock of Dr. McCoy's care of their Captain. McCoy would never be so obviously emotional. Spock frowned, pushing away the dark swirl of shame that he felt for forcing Jim into this situation in the first place.

There was a pre-eugenics philosopher of whom Spock's mother had been rather fond: Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli, known for his essays on human behavior. At the time, Spock had not seen the appeal. Yet, when McCoy had proposed his plan to Spock, the predominant phrase in his mind was one of his mother's: 'the end justifies the means.' Of course, Amanda had often repeated that phrase to Sarek when justifying projects the Vulcan Counsel would have initially brushed off as 'too emotional' or 'falsely logical', but Spock could admit that the end justifying the means had been what had convinced him to go along with Leonard McCoy's 'plan'. Certainly, in the future, Spock would not leave any strategic planning to the over-emotional human if situations such as these were to be the result.

Spock shook his head and forced himself to concentrate. He was so focused on getting Jim to safety, that he failed to notice the small hovercraft until it was a mere three meters away. Spock was appalled at the purely possessive adrenaline he felt when one being got out and started running towards them. If they had *any* intention of harming....

"Commander? Commander Spock?"

Spock blinked. Of course. Dressed in the casual uniform of a scientist corps hired by something other than the Federation, the human woman was obviously Cynthia Cross, his contact on this planet. He recognized her immediately from their

many communications. She stood aside, and made a beckoning motion with her hand.

Spock needed no further encouragement. He quickly moved Jim onto the backseat of the small craft. A blanket had been thrown hastily over the seat, and Spock saw two large containers of water.

“Good lord, I wasn’t quite sure if I believed my eyes! Rick had me shoved out the door and into the ‘craft almost before we realized what we were seeing on the scanners. Is the Captain okay?”

“His condition is suboptimal.” Spock tilted Jim’s head up so that he could drink from the water receptacle. Jim moaned a little, but he seemed to be unconscious. “Please return with all haste.”

“Oh! Of-of course.” The woman turned and Spock felt her brush by him, the skin on her arm coming in contact with his hand as he cupped the back of Jim’s head. Spock acknowledged that he would need to meditate at the earliest opportunity, as his shields were already shredded from getting both he and Jim to this point of relative safety. Her mental signature made his skin crawl. Spock was much too polite to jerk back; besides, he could not have done with supporting Jim’s head as he currently was, but it was a close thing.

“Sorry about that, sir. We’ll get him back to the ‘post in a jiffy.”

As she was not Starfleet, sir was not the correct form of address, but Spock ignored it, crouching awkwardly over Jim, being careful not to brush his body. Jim was still unresponsive, and Spock felt adrenaline accelerate his heartbeat as worry washed over him once again.

The girl was babbling nervously, and Spock tuned her out, until her question caught his attention.

“-- heroes of the Federation. So, we kept them away. I hope that’s okay?”

Spock blinked. “Repeat your query.”

“Oh! Of course, sir. I said that we, uh, Rick and myself decided to um, tell the press corps that we didn’t know where you were. They were like bloodhounds. You said that you and Captain Kirk were coming here to catalogue our recent mining samples? And I told Rick... I said, ‘we don’t need them bugging the Heroes of the Federation.’ They probably checked up on us ten different times since we’re kind of out of the way. So we kept them.. uh. away. Uh. Sir.”

“I appreciate your forethought.”

The woman turned an alarming shade of red. Spock raised an eyebrow, but before he could address the issue, she piloted the hovercraft to a hangar where a tall man stood with his hand cupped over his eyes to shade them from the sun.

They landed, and between the three of them got Jim inside the building with very little fuss.

“Holy shit! I still can’t believe you guys crashed. Here, put him here.” The man, Rick, had obviously been in the process of setting up a triage station. There were several different medical implements, and what looked like two small-scale medical-grade replicators. “I uh. I contacted the *Enterprise* and there’s a really mad guy that wants you to contact him ‘immediately’, uh, Mister Spock, sir.”

Spock set Jim down extremely carefully onto the surface. He was crossing to the small padd, and typing in the codes to reach Dr. McCoy almost before the human finished his repeated orders. There was no time for the worry he felt - Spock did not have the medical knowledge necessary to help Jim with his many wounds.

Dr. McCoy answered the comm so quickly that Spock knew he had been waiting. Spock adjusted the camera on the padd, and heard Cross murmuring something about projecting it so that they could better see. The connection was extremely spotty, and the screen would occasionally go black due to the planet’s interference. Still, Dr. McCoy was not yelling, or swearing - both of which Spock certainly expected. The doctor was coolly professional as he stared at Jim, tapping at the screen quickly to zoom in on certain parts of Jim’s injuries.

“Alright, Spock. Take the tricorder and scan him. Start at the crown of his head and move slowly down. I want to know what the hell the kid did to himself, and I’m not gonna just trust my eyes to this ‘specially given that I’m on the other side of the goddamn galaxy.”

Spock did so, noting that the two humans had stepped respectfully back, although they were both watching with nervous anticipation.

“Right. Shit, kid.” McCoy tapped a few things on his screen, sorting through the information the tricorder recorded. “Know what happened yet?”

“I do not.” Spock noticed that his hand was shaking and controlled himself immediately.

“Hmhn. Shrapnel. Contusions on left lower lobe, recent scarring from-- Spock, did you already do some healing?”

“Yes, Doctor. Before the shipboard regenerator ceased performing.”

“Damn good thing you did, Hobgoblin, or Jim’d be beyond either my help or yours. Hm. Severe tearing of pectoralis major muscle, left. Damn, damn *damn*. Broken jaw, contusions from neck strain, probable cervical acceleration-deceleration, concussion even with that damn hard head of his... right. Well, Spock, wait. Shit, that’s shrapnel. That’s gonna have to come out.”

Spock heard each word as an accusation, further proof that he had been unable to keep his Captain safe.

“Spock, bring the tricorder back over his thigh, yeah, right there. Near his groin. That’s in there, damn close to the femoral.” McCoy winced with a worried frown. “Okay, Spock, looks like you’re gonna have to be my hands here. Now that’s not a medbed, so we’re gonna have to improvise. First though...” McCoy paused and appeared to be looking at Spock for the first time. “You look like you’re gonna fall on your ass. I need you ready to go, and able to do what I tell you. Run the tricorder over yourself, now.”

“Our focus should be on the Captain.”

“Don’t tell me how to do m’damn job, Spock. Now. Jim’s fine. ‘Bout the only damn thing that megalomaniacal popsicle was good for - Jimmy’s new snazzy blood’ll give him some time for you to do as I say.”

Spock had often heard Jim bemoan ‘Bones’ crazyman eyebrows’, and now could put a visual with the disturbing imagery. “As you wish, Doctor.”

Dr. McCoy rolled his eyes and called up more information on his screen, muttering under his breath. Spock obediently scanned himself, the guilt from before swimming sickly in his stomach. He had very small injuries when compared with the Captain’s, and he found to his disgruntlement that he resented this delay when Jim was clearly the more injured of the two of them.

“Hunnh. Looks like you cracked that skull of yours a good one. I don’t see any bleeding though. Okay go wash up, and drink at least a litre of water before coming back. You there! Don’t touch him.”

Spock hadn’t even noticed that the woman was reaching out for him, he stepped back out of her way and turned to the dining area, knowing that was the most likely place to meet his needs. He scrubbed diligently, knowing that there were small sonics that would remove all the germs and bacteria on his skin. Spock did not have time to look for a shirt to cover his chest, having used both of his on bandages for Jim’s

wounds. The environmental controls were kept quite low, and Spock suppressed a shiver. He ignored it and walked back to where Jim lay. The man had pulled the woman to the other end of the large living area. It gave the illusion of privacy, but Spock appreciated the effort.

“Alright, Spock. Now you know the basics, but first take a second to familiarize yourself with the equipment. Y’all are damn lucky they’re kitted up so well. Here. I’m sending something for you to use to knock his ass out if he comes to. Be sure you set the hypo up exactly like I say. Jim’s still got a damn metric fuckton of allergies.”

Spock agreed and complied. It was easy enough to synch the replicator to McCoy’s signal and wait for the medicine to appear. He loaded it into a hypospray and waited for instruction. McCoy did not seem to be worried, but Spock did not trust the man’s apparent composure. It seemed much more likely that the human had stifled his obvious over-emotionalism so as to attempt to not, as Jim would say, ‘freak anyone out’. Otherwise, Spock did not understand how so much of Jim’s bright red blood could be dripping onto the floor and the man not be absolutely terrif---

“S’ck?” Jim licked at his lips, and Spock almost dropped the small laser he had been examining. He placed his hand on Jim’s shoulder and pressed to keep Jim from attempting to sit up.

“Do not attempt to move, Captain.” Spock reached out for the hypospray and applied it gently to Jim’s neck. This endeavor would be difficult enough without Jim awake and moving around.

“Spock, where-?” Jim’s mumble turned indistinct as the ‘spray went through his system, sending him relaxing back onto the surface.

“Okay - we’re going to clean and suture the chest wound first. Take the tricorder and hold it carefully. We need to look for any shrapnel or debris from the entry point.”

Spock did so, working carefully. Only when the tricorder sent the resulting scans to McCoy, and he approved did Spock clean the area and use one of the small regenerators to begin the healing process. It hummed softly to itself as a small force-field bubbled out over the wound, muscle, tendon, and skin already slowly starting to form back together.

“Okay, the lungs are gonna be a little trickier. Same process, but you’ll have to remove the fluid. Don’t worry if the wound from before opens. If it doesn’t that’s great, but if it does we can clean and re-set it.”

It took what felt like several hours. Spock's internal sense of time seemed to jump around as he and McCoy worked together. It wasn't seamless, but McCoy calmly explained when Spock had a question. Spock was fervently grateful for the field medical training he'd gotten while stationed on Earth during the *Enterprise's* last set of repairs. They were only three years into their five-year mission, but there had been a disturbing number of incidents on planets that ranged everywhere from the destruction of Jim's uniform shirts to the deaths of crew members, and McCoy had insisted that all away teams have slightly more than basic first-aid knowledge.

They worked slowly and efficiently in tandem. Spock grew more and more calm as he could see Jim's horrendous injuries slowly healing. Spock had just finished removing the shrapnel from Jim's leg, and healing the resultant wounds when McCoy sighed.

"Okay, Spock. You're goin' great, man. Well. Uh. Vul-- you know what? Never mind. Just need to get to the superficial stuff on his hand, then slap a regenerator on his jaw and double check the concussion and blood levels and we're good."

They ran into only one issue: the small regenerators needed to be frequently charged and there were only two. They did have a regenerating blanket, but that would take longer to charge and use.

Spock finished up, following McCoy's directives. It had been five hours of careful surgery, until McCoy seemed satisfied.

"Right. Oxygen levels are good, that jaw is gonna be tender when he wakes up, and he's gonna be sore for a day or two. I'll send you the pain hypos. You know he's too damn stubborn to take them so you'll have to use my... ah. Method."

"I see no issue with your methods, doctor. They are necessary when the patient is being obstinate."

McCoy actually grinned tiredly. "Don't compliment me, Spock. Makes me nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs when y'do that sorta thing."

Spock understood the thank you for what it was and allowed himself a miniscule nod of acknowledgement.

"Right. Well, you look like you're about to fall on your face, but Scotty's been hailing me every ten goddamn minutes to fill you in on what's been happenin' so I'll let you get to that. Mind you eat, and get some rest tonight. McCoy out."

"Uh. Mister Spock? Sir?"

“As you are not members of Starfleet, that form of address is not necessary.” Spock spoke absently, barely acknowledging the woman. He heard the padd chirp with the expected incoming message from Lieutenant Commander Scott and forced himself not to sigh. Vulcans processed adrenalin differently than humans, but Spock still felt its effects, and was suddenly quite tired.

“Oh. Of course. Sorry about that Su--uh. Mister Spock. I just wanted to let you know that we have four sleeping areas. They’re small rooms, but private. You can give the Captain one, so we can clean up here. Sure was lucky we were scanning and saw you guys needed help! While you were busy, I went and fetched the shuttlecraft. Used the tractor beam we use for our equipment?”

Spock raised an eyebrow at the question, aware that his behavior was crossing the line into rudeness. “It was most fortuitous. The Captain and I thank you for your hospitality.”

“Oh, no. “ The man, who Spock just remembered Cross had referred to as ‘Rick’ interrupted. “No need for that. I just wanted you to know that it’s sitting under a ‘field. Radiation leak. It’s parked well away from us, but nothing in it was able to be salvaged. You can replicate anything you need though. ‘Fraid the outpost isn’t much. Labs are over there. Dining area you’ve, uh, found. We’ve got all the standard equipment you guys will need when you’re feelin’ better.”

Spock nodded and carefully lifted Jim into his arms again. The woman grabbed the replicators and the blanket and Spock followed her to one of the sleeping areas.

“We weren’t sure if you and Captain Kirk wanted to uh, share...”

Spock stared blankly at her. She was flushed red again, and Spock tilted his head slightly to the left. When he understood to what she referred it took the last dregs of his control to not react. “The Captain and I do not share sleeping quarters.” He refused to acknowledge that both the tips of his ears were turning green and the way his heart gave a funny sort of arrhythmic thump in his side at the thought of sharing such an intimacy with his Captain.

Spock allowed the woman to pull back the sheet and duvet, and gently set Jim down in the center of the bed. It was rather large, given the small room. It was clearly the nicest and roomiest of the quarters, decorated enough that it was clear that one of the scientists resided here. There was plenty of room for the medical equipment, and it was easy enough to reprogram the wall unit to monitor Jim’s responses. Spock created a feed that went directly to his padd. It was more difficult to ignore the vertigo he felt. McCoy had said he was concussed, and Spock acknowledged it was as though he was just now allowing himself to feel the effects.

“Here, Mr. Spock. You can just kind of relax tonight, and we can talk later. I took the liberty of programming your room to something more comfortable for your ah.. type. I hope that’s okay? I know you must be exhausted. Have a good night, okay?”

Spock nodded. “Your kindness is appreciated Ms. Cross.” He waited until she left before turning back to observe Jim one more time. Jim had been stripped naked and had several bandages over the sutures. It was a little archaic, given the state-of-the-art medbay they were used to on the *Enterprise*, but Spock was not willing to trust Jim’s safety, or his allergies to the open air. Even filtered as it was to the outpost, there could still be planetary imperfections that could be detrimental to Jim’s recovery. The two smaller, portable regenerators were attached over Jim’s cracked jaw, one on each side. It gave him a rather monstrous appearance, especially given the bruises and other contusions on his pale skin. The blanket was not a full-length one. It fit over Jim’s torso- the areas that needed the most medical attention - and that left his lower half covered only with a thin duvet.

“Lights. Ten percent,” Spock spoke quietly not wanting to disturb him. He shut the door and made his way to his own bedroom, next door, glancing twice at the padd that recorded his captain’s respiratory rates.

Spock replicated Starfleet regulation sleepwear and stepped into the one-person sonic shower. Sonics did nothing for the aching, sore muscles, but he would be clean before he rested. Spock knew that he desperately needed time to meditate before he slept. He replicated some tea, ignoring the slightly bland flavor it left in his mouth and let the warmth from the liquid spread through his body. Before he allowed himself rest, Spock knew that he must return Scott’s message. Even though he and Jim were not technically on duty, he knew that what happened to them must be logged on the Acting Captain’s duty roster. The dull thud of a headache could not be suppressed.

Spock signed in and waited for Nyota to patch him through.

“Spock! Good t’see ya, mate. You’re lookin’ a wee bit under the weather if y’dinne mind my saying so.”

“I am under an adequate structural covering, Mister Scott. The environmental controls are consistent.” Indeed, Coss had raised the temperature to something akin to Vulcan-comfortable and he quite appreciated her thoughtfulness.

“Ah. Right. Well, suppose you’d better report. Len’s clucking around trying to find out what happened. Last I heard you were on--” Scott lowered his voice, adopting a conspiratorial air, “--shore leave.”

Spock nodded. "Please have your Acting Captain's log show the following: I willfully, and with complete disregard for the Captain's wishes, misled him into, to use the vernacular, a 'working vacation'. Given his refusal to take leave, and Dr. McCoy's increasing---

"Whoa, Spock. Hold on a second." Scott pinched the top of his nose, near his eyes. "Y'did *what* now?"

"I told the damnfool kid to take a friggin' break!" McCoy's disgruntled frown appeared over Scott's shoulder. "Oh, keep your pants on. I'm in the Captain's ready-room. No one can hear us. You keep trying to fall on that sword, Spock. It was an unlucky thing that the shuttle crashed, but it's not the end of the world. You're fine. Jim will be fine." McCoy shrugged.

"I am wearing the specified Starfleet regulation uniform, and there are no weapons in my vicinity." Spock could hear both McCoy and Scott sigh through the comm link. The way they managed it in unison was strangely satisfying. Spock raised an eyebrow, dissembling confusion. Why none of the crew had yet realized that he understood human colloquialisms perfectly well he did not know; Spock had grown up with a human mother, after all. Spock had, almost without realizing it, adopted the same reactions towards the crew of the *Enterprise* as his father had done with his mother: feigning a misunderstanding. Of course, Amanda had caught on rather quickly and it became a contest (his mother had called it a game while his father an 'intellectual exercise') between the two of them. Spock would continue to emulate this reaction; after all, it gave Spock many nuances of the intricacies of human behavior to study.

Scott frowned. "So let me get this straight. The Captain... dinne *know* he was on leave?"

"Yeah. Captain Dumbass kept refusing to leave this great tin can. Wonder where he got an idea like that from, eh?"

Scott's facial expression turned faintly injured as he looked over towards Dr. McCoy.

"Oh, nevermind," McCoy huffed. "But between you and Spock over there, the kid had all the reason he needed to avoid taking a break. I told him he needed some sun, and a beach with little frufu drinks. Lots of frufu drinks. He needed some company and to get lai-- er. To meet some new people."

Spock rather doubted the veracity of McCoy's claim given the slight stutter in his vocal patterns.

“But he wouldn’t hear of it. Said it didn’t matter if he hadn’t had shore leave, that he didn’t need it. Stubborn ass.” McCoy huffed again, as though Jim was the only stubborn being any of them knew. “So I went to Spock. He was supposed to go to planet--- what planet is that now, Spock?”

“Drema V.”

“Right. Drema V. The one with all the dilithium. Some kind of geekfest with the science crew.”

Spock feared that he would not have ample time for rest if he did not take over the telling of McCoy’s story. “The science crew had been hired by two different civilian companies to study both the geological aspects of Drema V, and the high deposits of dilithium on both the surface and in the atmosphere. You are aware that it is that issue which keeps a transporter from working at peak efficiency. I convinced the Captain to join me on this study. Two of the civilian scientists left to pursue other research projects and I am assured that there is ample time for relaxation, with the moderate workload needed for the study of the crystallized dilithium.”

“Y’know, that’s actually kind of smart.” Scott paused. “I take it something interfered with the shuttle’s integrity?” Scott tilted his head, intrigued.

“Unknown at this juncture.”

“Right. Well, bad luck all around. We were called away for a supply run but I can either swing back and pick you two up, send another starship, or we can give you the... well, roughly six days if we push the warp drive.” Scott and McCoy shared a significant look, and Spock had a brief moment of frustration that he was clearly missing something between the two of them.

He nodded. Spock already knew that the *Enterprise* had been called away. It was the last communication he’d received before the shuttle crashed.

“My vote is for you to stay. Jim took a hit but he’s a tough one. You did a damn fine job takin’ care of him, Spock. He’ll be a little sore, but like I said. Probably up and at ‘em later tomorrow. There’s nothing involved with soil samples that would tax him overmuch. But, I understand if...”

“My preference is to stay here.” *With Jim.* Spock cut off the words before he said them, but it was a close thing.

“Yeah. Figured. New access to dilithium probably’s got your blood up.”

Spock said nothing, raising an eyebrow.

“Okay, Just know that the *Reliant* is in the neighborhood if you change your mind. Contact us again if you need anything. Scott out.”

Spock allowed himself a small sigh. His two human crew members’ actions were often perplexing. In fact, Spock was at fault here - had he not been less than absolutely truthful in his reasons, Jim would not have been in the shuttle on this planet, and then not so gravely injured.

Spock sat up, tugging down the new shirt, then knelt in the middle of the room. He needed to meditate.

Since the destruction of his planet, Spock had taught himself to meditate without all the accoutrements he had used while centering his *Katra*. He very rarely used incense. Many sympathetic members of the Federation had synthesized many of the same plants and herbs used in traditional Vulcan incense, but Spock noted a marked difference between the natural form from his planet and that of a replicator. When he meditated, he wished to absent any extraneous thought, and found the subconscious reminder of his planet and the loss of his people to be detrimental. Traditionally, the mat used was also made from Vulcan materials, but his meditation mat on the *Enterprise* had been a gift from Nyota after they had returned to Earth after destroying the criminal Nero. She had fashioned it herself, and Spock thought of her each time he touched it.

Nyota.

Spock entered a light trance and let his mind go as it will, sorting, classifying, and dismissing the influx of disorganized information as necessary. The pounding in his head faded to a dull throb.

Nyota had often been the subject of Spock’s troubled thoughts, but seventeen days after the beginning of their mission she had terminated their intimate relationship. When Spock had posed a query as to why she had done so, she responded with an enigmatic smile and said, “Because your heart is so big, Spock. And as much as I wish it were so, I don’t think I am the one filling it up.”

Spock often found that humans could be baffling, but found that the human with which one had embarked on a sexual and emotionally satisfying relationship could be doubly so. Spock had done his best to understand her words and respect her wishes. However, he often found himself wishing to speak with her to take advantage of her empathy and wisdom, yet was not certain of the particular nuances of remaining friends with a former lover. Nyota was professional on the bridge, and as kind as always when they were off duty, but she had taken pains to keep herself removed from Spock’s presence, and he did not wish to cause her discomfort. Spock

did not have someone with which he could go to with this particular issue, and he missed the forthright advice he had once taken for granted.

Even Spock knew that it would likely be inappropriate to speak to her of his muddled ... feelings for their Captain.

His Captain.

Jim.

The guilt was not logical. Spock knew that he should not feel such a tangled web of unVulcan emotionalism, but could not keep it from his thoughts. Here, if nowhere else, Spock must acknowledge and understand what he was feeling, so that he could react accordingly. Dimly, Spock registered that his physical self drew in a deep breath. He began to mentally name each emotion so that he could better understand it.

Admiration.

Frustration.

Bewilderment.

Friendship.

Lust.

Torment.

Gratitude.

Adoration-Devotion--

Love.

Long familiarity within the scope of his own *Katra* had Spock searching for the multi-faceted strands of his emotions in the jet blackness of his mind. Here inside himself, Spock had no hands with which to actually pluck the colorful strands that represented the scope of his emotions, yet he did so with ease; outwardly smirking a bit at the memory of his own father's bafflement when a prepubescent Spock had first attempted to share his thoughts. Spock's mind was not a Vulcan's, and it was not a Human's. It was his own, and (as assured by his mother) as fiercely unique as he was.

Spock waited patiently for the first strand, noting that it was the same jewel-like blue of Jim's eyes. How could Spock *not* admire the man that had given so much for him? Jim had absolutely refused to give up on the Nibiruian people. He had not known that Spock had no plan for an exit strategy from the volcano, having already accounted for the interference before Sulu had spoken. The chance that Spock would come back to the *Enterprise* had been small, and Spock knew the needs of the many had far outweighed the needs of his own self. Yet, Jim had refused to give up on him,

an action that had resulted in losing the one thing Jim had taken such pride in; Captaincy of the *Enterprise*. The jewel-toned blue was the first and strongest of the strands Spock anchored to his Self.

Slinking through the darkness of Spock's mind, the next strand slithered into place, wrapping around the base of the blue strand. The dull, washed-out brown made Spock feel faintly nauseous once he realized how strong it was. Spock often felt frustration with the smaller minds with which he was forced to interact. It was only natural, and little different than the Vulcans on his home planet when the half-blood had arrived at the answer before they did. He felt frustration with the cocky blond cadet who had the audacity to hack the *Kobayashi Maru*, frustration with the realization that he had been maneuvered into a battle of wits with the same cocky cadet, and something much closer to angry astonishment when Spock realized that Jim's mind could not only keep up with his own, but surpass it enough that Spock was never bored.

Spock searched for the next strand of emotion, frowning a little in concentration. Much like its counterpart, the strand was hard to see, and even harder to define. The inky iridescent shimmer of its links seemed to appear and disappear on their own. In one way it looked lavender, but tilted another way it was obviously blue, and just as obviously jade when tilted into a different light. This was much more difficult to acknowledge; this constant feeling of bewilderment. Spock just didn't understand how one was meant to go on with the daily minutiae of their lives with this constant *presence* in the back of his mind. While he had no firsthand experience, Spock was not unversed in the understanding sexual intimacy between two males. While not common on his home planet, it certainly never carried the stigma it appeared to have on Earth. Spock found himself living for the unabashed touching that Jim favored: a back slap. A light punch on the shoulder. Once after engaging in a game of the human sport of baseball, a slap on Spock's posterior that had sent Spock's ears flushing bright green and had caused him to return to his room in some confusion. The strand joined the other two, twining slowly together.

Jim was his friend. Spock found that he shared a closeness with many of the crew, but with Jim there was something extra that Spock could not replicate with someone else. Discussion amongst endless ship's business where Spock's opinion was sought after and utilized, chess games where Spock found to his mild shock that he lost approximately half the time. In his mind the several different shades of yellow strands were twined and braided together in a strong chain that Spock could immediately recognize as comforting. Spock found that Jim told him of his personal life. He knew of Jim's nephew Peter, and the fear of having his own children and 'fucking them up as spectacularly as was done to him'. Spock found himself assuring Jim that he would do no such thing to any child, for any reason. Spock told him of his mother. Jim told Spock of Tarsus IV. Even McCoy had seemed shocked at that, giving Spock a cocked eyebrow and a long stare once he found out that Jim had

shared the details of his childhood, his demeanor thawing noticeably as though Spock had passed some assessment of which he knew nothing about. Spock had felt a sharp stab of pleasure at the realization that such intimate details were those commonly shared with *friends*. The yellow wove itself around the now slightly thicker strand attached to Spock's *Katra* almost obscuring the nearly faded brown of frustration.

Lust was not something that Spock felt comfortable with; no. Spock saw the red strand shining brightly in his mind and frowned. It was the *intensity* of his lust for Captain Kirk that made him uncomfortable. Spock often found that he could not always suppress, nor control it. Spock had ruthlessly subdued his fantasies once he found himself distracted enough that Jim felt it necessary to ask him what was wrong. It had been humiliating enough that Spock had kept his lustful thoughts to himself, confined only to the moments before sleep, furtive and shamefully in the dark. The red strand almost seemed to pulse as though carrying its own life force. It mocked him as it slid effortlessly in with the others.

Torment was the bright white of a flash of lightning. No matter how much Spock attempted to suppress it, an imprint of his desire left an almost palpable outline behind his eyelids, like looking from a bright sun to a dark room in the span of a few blinks. Spock knew this was wrong, that it would not be appreciated. Jim had not been shy in his sexual conquests, and while they might have varied in species, they all shared the same sex... and that sex was most definitely *not* male. Spock attempted to manipulate the white strand towards the others, only to hiss in pain as it burned him. Outwardly, Spock could feel the sharp spike of pain his mind produced as he attempted to brush aside this uncomfortable realization and frowned in deeper concentration. If Spock wished for his *Katra* to truly sing with health, then he must confront everything within himself. Torment kept Spock up during the Gamma shift, tense when he realized that the optimal amount of rest would not be reached while his mind fractured and rebuilt itself with tension. Torment kept Spock ignoring the flirty smiles Jim would exchange with both visiting dignitaries and their aides. Torment had Spock making sure to have a padd ready during off-ship missions where Jim returned to their usually shared quarters stinking of smell of sex. Torment kept Spock from admitting any of the confusing jumble of emotions from fear that he would lose that sought-after and much sought-after friendship that kept Spock sane. The white strand stood off to the side before slowly merging into the others, overwhelmed in particular by the red of lust.

Spock was faintly surprised to see that gratitude was a thick rope of forest green, looking almost like a living thing as it slid sensuously around the now multi-faceted strands hanging from Spock's sense of Self. Gratitude for his life. Gratitude for the life of his father, and his elders. Gratitude that Jim accepted him as his friend. Gratitude that Jim had not withdrawn his friendship as Nyota did. Gratitude that Jim had thought so highly of him in his last few living breaths. Spock became aware

then of an uncomfortable blockage in his throat, as though the emotion was keeping him from the most optimal breathing. He was so incredibly grateful to have Jim Kirk in his life that Spock was not entirely certain that he would manage to go on if Jim Kirk *wasn't* in his life. Outwardly, Spock shifted on his meditation mat, uncomfortable with that realization, yet acknowledging its truth.

The sound of his comm, set to a frequency Spock didn't immediately recognize, jarred Spock out of his light meditation. He could almost see the remaining pinkish, purplish, and garnet strands scatter like sand in the wind as he opened his eyes.

The comm whistled again and Spock shook his head, taking a quick stock of his mental faculties even as he rose and tapped the screen for his message. Rick looked faintly worried.

"Sorry, Sir, but I think there's something wrong with Captain Ki--"

Spock turned and was striding towards the doors before Rick had finished uttering the syllable. He ignored Cross' startled gasp as he strode into Jim's room.

Jim was still sedated, but was obviously trapped in a nightmare. It was one of the truths Jim had shared with him on one of their many late-night conversations; he still dreamed of dying, of feeling the agony of his irradiated cells shrivel and die. Spock noted that both regenerators blinked that they needed charged, and removed them, checking the status of the regen blanket as he pressed his hand onto Jim's shoulder.

"Jim. I am here."

Jim moaned and arched *away* from Spock's hand which startled him enough that he allowed it, blinking twice as rapidly down at Jim before firming his shields and lightly stroking the back of Jim's hand. It was a gesture Spock had seen Nyota employ after Jim had been knocked unconscious after saving her life. At the time Spock had felt such possessiveness and jealousy that the stale hint of shame had flooded his senses, yet Jim had calmed immediately at her touch. Nyota had smiled enigmatically at Spock and indicated he should come into the sickbay cubicle with a slight jerk of her head. Spock had instead found some other task with which to occupy himself, but the memory remained.

Now Spock touched the back of Jim's hand, his heart fluttering in his side when Jim turned back towards his touch with a sleepy murmur, still struggling to come up out of the nightmare. Flipping Jim's hand over, and Spock found himself feeling Jim's steady pulse under the fragile skin on his inner wrist. Spock felt it slow, and perhaps foolishly attributed it to his touch.

“Spock?”

“Yes.” Spock found a bizarre blockage in his throat and coughed softly. His mind ran through a number of different statements, all of equal importance yet found him not saying any of them, instead staring down at Jim and watching him awaken fully.

Jim’s eyes were soft as he blinked a little blearily. “Report?”

Spock snapped to attention as though a switch had been flipped, a small part of his mind horrified at his previous unprofessionalism. “We are temporarily stranded on Drema V. The shuttle malfunctioned and we crashed. The *Enterprise* has been called to duty elsewhere, and you were grievously harmed during the crash. I informed both Doctor McCoy and Acting Captain Sco--”

“Wait. Hold up, Spock.” Jim tried to sit up, waving off Spock’s instinctual move to help him sit more comfortably. He winced, pulling the regen blanket off from where it had fallen onto his legs and inspecting the damage. Spock caught a flash of well-muscled, tanned skin and the pinkish tinge of newly-healed scars. “I feel like I fell out of the goddamn sky.”

“In essence, that is not inaccurate.”

Jim’s lips quirked in a smile that did perplexing things to Spock’s heart-rate. “I remember a lot of that, actually. You got me here in a .. hovercraft? And we’re with the scientists, right? Kind of a working shore leave?”

Guilt squirmed like knives in Spock’s gut.

He opened his mouth to launch into an explanation of the crystallized dilithium but found himself stopping short when Jim raised both of his arms up, in a scapulohumeral rhythm, the deltoid, pectoralis major, serratus anterior and latissimus muscles all flexing as he stretched.

“Well, I don’t mind a little relaxation, to be honest. And to tell the truth, I *really* don’t mind taking a break from the ship for a bit. I’m glad you’re here with me.” Jim’s bright smile made Spock relax his own shoulders slightly.

“I am appreciative of your presence also, Jim.” Spock blinked, inwardly panicking at the awkwardness of his statement, heavy with truth. In some confusion, he shut his mouth with a snap, momentarily confused as to why he could not seem to *cease talking*.

“I think I might get a little more sleep, if that’s okay. Are you set up in your own quarters?”

“Affirmative. They are adequate for my needs.”

Jim yawned, climbing out of his bed and walking towards the small en suite. “See you in the morning, Spock. You can fill me in then.”

Spock nodded to an empty room, turned on his heel and left. The two scientists were eating near the kitchen area, obviously staring and trying not to be caught doing so. Spock nodded at them somewhat absently and walked back to his own quarters, satisfied that Jim appeared to be feeling much better.

He felt that his meditation was unfinished, but his headache was gone and he was quite hungry. Spock made his way to the replicator and ordered tea that he knew Jim preferred. It was, perhaps, appalling sentimental, but Spock had no plans at this time to share any of the nuances of his illogical behavior.

He did not go back to meditating, instead staring up at the slightly cracked ceiling for several hours. His thoughts swirled from the eidetic memory of both Jim’s sleepy smile and the flex of his wiry musculature. Spock understood that Jim had lost some of his muscle tone since his ... death from radiation poisoning. While his body was still strong, it was somehow just the slightest bit *off*, a fact that McCoy bemoaned on a regular basis.

The flash of Jim stretching, his lean muscles arching into comfort caused Spock to shift uneasily in his bed. Incredibly, Jim did not seem to mind the enforced vacation, and indeed appeared to actually look forward to spending time with Spock away from the normal business of the ship. There was enough of a scientific abnormality that it had intrigued both Jim *and* Spock, and he found himself looking forward to the next few days.

(Spock’s mind quickly supplied several instances where he and Jim could work together, possibly with Jim’s shirt off. Spock would be able to touch the skin, slick with sweat. It would be so cool against his own as their hands accidentally---)

“*Mi’rann*” Spock corralled his wayward thoughts with a muttered curse. From his meditation, Spock had the new understanding of what his emotions meant to his well-being. The human side of his psyche was demanding equal attention from the Vulcan side. He would struggle with adapting to this new paradigm. There would be confusion while Spock struggled to suppress some of the more rampant of his newly-acknowledged emotions. This time away from the *Enterprise* should give him more than ample time to acclimate to this *regard* for Jim Kirk.

Normally his control over his mind and thoughts was absolute; however, he found much to his dismay that it was a long time before Spock could fall into a fitful sleep.

Part Two

Spock felt his hand curling into a fist.

The high-pitched cry trailed off, and with it Spock relaxed his fingers, noting the green smear of blood his fingernails left in the palm of his hand.

When Spock had been very small, his mother had been snubbed by some of the Vulcan elders. Spock had been young enough that their prejudice was still baffling to him, and he did not understand why his mother would not allow him to act on the fury he felt on her behalf. “No my fierce little warrior,” she had said, her voice catching. “Karma will get them in the end.” Spock had allowed her to hug him as he greedily breathed in her scent, knowing that his days of hugs and what his mother called “Vulcan cuddles” were almost over.

Spock had researched this “*Karma*.” He understood why such primitive Terran people would subscribe to it as a system of moral checks and balances, but he did not believe in the concept himself, finding it highly illogical.

As with so many things, Spock was late in discovering the wisdom Amanda had imparted on him before her demise. When one took into account the way Spock had acted; deviously tricking his friend into spending time with him, no matter how much “work” was being done, no matter that Jim desperately needed a break from the ship, and his painfully unrequited....*feelings* towards the charismatic Captain, it was no stretch of logic to understand that perhaps Spock was reaping the negative benefits of that ancient concept.

For what other reason would Jim spend his days with Spock buried in discovery and science, only to spend his evenings involved intimately with Cross and Pownell?

The first night, Spock had thought that perhaps one of the scientists were watching a particularly risqué holovid. He would have rolled his eyes had he been inclined towards such blatant emotionalism. Spock had settled in to meditate, pleased with the discovery of the crystallized dilithium they’d made today. There had been a slightly unstable element to it that Jim had discovered before Spock, and Spock had found himself almost smiling at his friend’s enthusiasm. Later that

evening, when he had heard the low throaty, “Jim”, Spock had frozen, eyes almost comically wide before jumping to his feet, ready to stalk to the bedroom next to him and demand answers: What ... *precisely*...did Jim think he was doing?

He had actually made it to the doors before stopping just short of the triggering mechanism.

With *that* desperate pitch, Spock knew exactly what they were doing. The realization hit him like a punch: Jim’s room was next to Spock’s. Jim *knew* how sensitive Vulcan hearing was. Jim had teased him about it earlier in the afternoon when Spock had isolated a different frequency than that produced by the dilithium they knew of. Ergo, Jim knew that Spock would be listening to his intimate encounter and *simply did not care*.

It was an unspeakably painful realization.

Spock had not slept that night. He could not concentrate enough to meditate, disgusted with his petty jealousy.

As Spock understood the concept, were he truly Jim’s friend he would be happy that the Captain had finally relaxed enough to enjoy a sexual encounter. Nyota had been very clear on what was required of a “good friend”; that of support and understanding. Given that Spock had kept track of Jim’s whereabouts rather obsessively since the *Enterprise*’s year-long refit on Earth after the disquiet with Khan, he knew that Jim had not spent the night with anyone, aside from Doctor McCoy in what Spock knew was non-sexual in nature. Which was not to say that Jim had not enjoyed anyone sexually, but Spock found that in the absence of irrefutable proof, he could ignore such possibilities and focus on what he could prove. That was only logical.

The next day found Jim in a buoyant mood that Spock found he could not ignore. It had been extremely difficult to lock away his ... opinions on the matter and continue to be the understanding and supportive friend that Jim required.

The second night had been a repeat of the first. Several hours of silence, then a muffled thump against the wall. Spock had glared at the offending piece of architecture as though it had personally wronged him. It was *agonizing* to realize that Jim quite probably had her up against the wall as he thrust, messily kissing her neck. Her cries were muffled, but the continuous cry of “Jim... Jim... *Jim*” caused an arrhythmic flutter in his side.

Spock actually contemplated emulating one of the children he’d seen at the Academy’s day care facility by sticking both fingers in his ears, before acknowledging that *that* would be patently ridiculous. Instead, Spock removed himself to the

adjacent room that housed the remainder of their shuttlecraft, and began working on it with such single-minded intensity that when Rick stumbled into the room at 09:00, Spock had already isolated the faulty wiring that had possibly caused the accident. There was a possibility that he was incorrect however, so Spock continued to pull apart wiring, metal, and circuits until he could hypothesize an answer to why the shuttlecraft had crashed. He made it a point to not see Jim at all that day, and while he could not avoid him completely, he could refocus his mind on the problem at hand; namely, answering Scotty's questions of what exactly had caused the shuttle's malfunction.

But tonight? Tonight, Spock was *livid*. He thought he had been angry when he had strangled the impertinent Cadet who had insulted his mother. He thought he had been angry when he had unleashed all of his control to beat (*hurtmaimkill*) the being who was responsible for Jim's death. Now, looking down at the marks he'd left on his own hand, Spock was unsure if he would be able to control himself. Vulcan hands were inordinately sensitive. The dull pain was intensified given the location of Spock's self-inflicted wounds.

Tonight, instead of the feminine voice moaning Jim's name- it was the male. "Ohh, *Jim...*"

Jim.

Jim was...

Spock realized that his hands were shaking again as he stood, pacing around his small room. His stomach was in knots. The bedsprings next door were squeaking and with each throaty (male!) moan Spock found himself growing more and more furious. It was illogical. Spock did not care.

It had been bad enough when Spock had assumed that Jim didn't want him because Spock was male. It was painfully worse when Spock realized that Jim just didn't want... *him*.

A particularly throaty growl sent Spock spinning towards the door, stalking out into the enclosed hangar that held the shuttlecraft. Once there he found that there was no distraction from the constant replay of sounds in his head. He threw himself into the work, rewiring what he could with the tools he had. Spock found that he could focus on the work that needed to be done for stretches of time, but it was almost impossible to calm his anger and disappointment.

Jim did not want him. Jim would never want him. It was neither supportive nor understanding of him. Spock was not equipped to be a true friend to someone who could act so... inappropriately. It wasn't just the fact that Jim had been intimate with

the two scientists. Spock belatedly remembered even Jim's *doctor* had insisted that Jim needed to "get laid," a colloquial directive that Jim had obviously embraced. It was that Jim had... had...

"Spock?"

Spock whirled, holding onto the laser wrench only by his exquisite reflexes. Jim stood there in sleep pants and a t-shirt, hair still damp from his shower. Spock could see the slightly shiny star-shaped scar left from the newly healed skin from where part of the console had pierced Jim's skull. Spock's nostrils flared, attempting to take in the scents of someone else on Jim's skin. The shower would have obliterated any evidence, and the idea that Jim would seek him out, *now*, of all times set what control he had gained over his wayward emotions snapping.

"Leave." Spock barely got the word out. It seemed very loud in the small space afforded by the shuttlecraft.

"What? Spock? What's the matter?"

"If you do not go, I will remove myself from your presence." Spock kept his words clipped, his tone cool. It was vitally important that Jim not realize how his actions had compromised Spock emotionally. Spock set aside the tools with fingers that shook only slightly and stood, walking around Jim carefully so that no part of their bodies accidentally touched. It was not easy given the small space afforded by the shuttlecraft's lack of cargo area. There had been two seats at the front of the 'craft, near the viewscreen, with a bench behind the two seats. There were approximately two and a half meters from the bench to the back of the 'craft, with a door near the port side. Spock found that he actually had to shift his body sideways, as Jim was standing in almost the exact center of the space, one hand resting casually on the bench.

"Wait, what?" Jim's other hand shot out, cupping Spock's elbow and gripping him hard enough to halt his forward movement. Spock, who had been so intent on leaving before he did something unforgivable, froze, each muscle in his body tensing uncontrollably. "What the hell, Spock?"

"Do *not*." Spock forced himself to take a breath. "Cease touching me, Captain."

Jim, in response, attempted to yank on his arm, trying to turn Spock so that they were face-to-face. Spock stared down at Jim's fingers on his arm until Jim removed them. "Alright. Sorry. I'm sorry, Spock. Just... what is wrong? Please?"

It was not wise. Spock *knew* it was not wise but whatever self-control he had claimed appeared to disintegrate when he stared at Jim from mere inches away. They

were so close that Spock could feel the puff of Jim's warm breath against his chin. Spock blinked, attempting to process several things at once: the feel of Jim's touch against him, the fact that Jim's eyes were several different shades of blue instead of one, the way Jim's breath caught when Spock stared down at him.

"C'mon, Spock. Work with me here. Something's got you so upset that you're just about to vibrate out of your skin." Jim licked his lips, a nervous habit that normally Spock could ignore as just one of the thousands of tedious human idiosyncrasies. This time though, Spock found his gaze drawn to Jim's mouth, to his tongue as it slid slowly over slightly-chapped lips as though magnetized.

Spock stepped into Jim's space, something dark within him pleased at the helpless sound Jim made when Spock raised his hand and placed it just below his suprasternal notch, feeling the way the younger man swallowed hard, Adam's apple moving against Spock's palm. Spock's fingers were together, with his thumb sticking slightly out, and his hand fit perfectly above Jim's sternum. The feel of Jim's skin naked under his fingers caused Spock to shiver slightly. It was as though a low-grade electrical current had arched from Jim's skin to Spock's own.

Spock saw that Jim was both confused and startled, his mouth opening and closing with the shock of Spock's touch. Spock took advantage of Jim's silence to bend forward slightly and kiss at the soft patch of skin under Jim's ear. The scent was rich enough that Spock thought he could almost taste it. Almost, but not quite. He bent forward even more, stroking the tip of his nose against Jim's skin, inhaling deeply.

Ah.

There it was. After three days in a small structure, Spock knew the scent of Rick Pownell as well as he knew himself. Disappointment and disgust was a hard ball in his abdominal cavity. The man's scent smelled slightly sour, bitter like bile. It was faint, and the scents of Jim and the soap from his shower were much stronger, yet Spock could not help the way he jerked back away from Jim, a reflex of betrayal he could not control.

Jim must have assumed something else because he followed, bringing their lips together with a crash of teeth and a breathless moan of Spock's name.

Spock prided himself on being a creature of logic. Yet, at the taste of Jim's mouth, longed for after so long, he snapped. Spock heard Jim's shocked cry as he pushed Jim back against the bulkhead of the shuttlecraft, caging him in with his own body. Spock could taste nothing in Jim's mouth but the mint of toothpaste, and the idea that Jim had had to wash the evidence of his intimacy with Rick made Spock

lose the tenuous control he had on his desire. All he could think of was to rid Jim of that other man's stink, to overwhelm him with Spock's own scent.

For his part, Jim kept up, kiss for frenzied kiss. When Spock ripped the drawstring of Jim's sleep pants in his haste to wrap the fingers of his other hand around Jim's erection, Jim only moaned, hitching his leg up around Spock's hip. Spock pulled his mouth away from Jim's, pleased with the breathless, dazed look on Jim's face. It showed that he had been just as lost in the intensity of their kiss as Spock had been. He followed Spock's mouth with his own to recapture the contact and Spock tightened the fingers on Jim's neck slightly, holding Jim's head in place. His other hand paused on Jim's hip, teasing just under the loosened waistband.

"I require your acquiescence."

It seemed as though Jim struggled with blinking open his eyes enough to focus on Spock's face. He licked his lips again (Spock ignored the shudder that crawled down his spine at the look of Jim's red and swollen mouth) and had to try twice before his voice worked. "Wh- what?"

"Attend, my Jim. Do you want--"

Jim interrupted with a "Fuck. Yes, of *course*," launching himself forward enough to kiss Spock again. Spock moved his hand from Jim's neck, sliding it around the back of Jim's head to pull his hair, positioning Jim's head so the long column of skin was fully bared to Spock's teeth, lips and tongue. Jim moaned again, a mangled attempt at Spock's name. The sound pleased something dark and primal in Spock's *Katra* and he continued with his other hand inching below the cloth to the naked skin below.

My Jim.

Spock shook his head hard enough that his bangs fluttered around his head, trying to ignore how inappropriate the "my" had been, instead shifting his body so that he was closer *closer closer*. There was just barely enough room for Spock to wrap his fingers around Jim's length. Spock nuzzled his nose near Jim's clavicle, pleased that he could no longer detect the smell of anyone else on Jim's skin.

Jim froze at Spock's touch, sucking in a deep breath. Spock felt Jim's hands scrabble at Spock's uniform, but Spock simply held both of Jim's wrists against the bulkhead with his free hand, unwilling to have Jim distract him at this time.

Jim made a strangled sound at that, staring at Spock like he'd never seen him before. Seeing him like this, it was difficult for Spock to remember why this encounter was not a logical idea. Jim's body was arched into Spock's, his leg still

wrapped tightly around Spock's hip, although it had shifted down slightly enough that he could feel the muscles of Jim's calf against his upper thigh, under his buttocks. Jim's shirt had rucked up, baring the tan, sculpted muscles of his abdomen. Spock felt Jim press half-heartedly against Spock's firm grip on Jim's wrists, more to test Spock's strength than anything else. Every muscle in Jim's body showed how much he wanted Spock to touch him.

"Spock... please."

Spock bit back a groan and bent his neck to kiss Jim again, moving his fingers as well as he could. Even with the forgiving material of the sleepwear, the angle and their closeness gave Spock little room to maneuver. Jim jerked his head away to bite his lip, and Spock almost frowned, wanting the helpless sounds Jim made. Spock could not see what his hand touched, but it was easy to imagine the girth and length. It was hot, and hard and wet at the tip from just Spock's meagre attention. Jim attempted to rock forward into Spock's hand, but Spock simply shifted into the movement so that he controlled Jim's pleasure.

Jim made a strangled sound before his penis hardened slightly, then caught his breath, fingernails digging slightly into Spock's forearm as he ejaculated. Spock had to exert rigid control of his own faculties before he began grinding against where his own erection pressed into Jim's hip. He did not wish to gain completion at this time, but it was much more difficult than he had anticipated to pull himself from the heat from Jim's body. Given that the act of wishing was wholly inappropriate to one of his race, Spock still found himself wishing that he had perhaps not reacted with such... emotionalism.

He pulled away, reaching calmly to clean his hand on his own regs. Jim's eyes fluttered and Spock found his posture relaxing slightly for the barest of instants as he took in the visual of Jim Kirk recovering from orgasm. Jim's mouth was still swollen, there were two small contusions from Spock's mouth on the pale skin of Jim's neck. His eyelids were heavy with satisfaction and his hair stood up at odd angles from the way it had rubbed against the bulkhead. Spock assumed his normal carriage when Jim sighed and opened his eyes, full mouth stretching into a rather asinine-looking grin.

"Christ, Spock. I don't know what that was--"

"I find that highly improbable," Spock raised an eyebrow, "as all evidence to the contrary certainly shows that you have more than a passing familiarity with sexual congress."

Jim snorted. "Careful there, Spock. I might think that you're pissed off." He shook his head before stepping towards Spock.

His grin turned into something much more sexually charged; something that had Spock received on at any other occasion he would have....

“No. However, I have duties elsewhere.” Spock turned abruptly on his heel and walked quickly back to his quarters. He noticed that his fingers were shaking slightly as he replayed every moment of their encounter in his head. Spock ignored Jim’s startled exclamation and moved through the main area of the structure, heading for his quarters.

Instead of opening as Spock had expected (indeed his body had already leaned forward in anticipation) the door remained closed. Spock frowned and quickly typed in his access code, only to freeze over the threshold once the doors actually opened.

Spock was dimly aware of the fact that Jim had ran up behind him on almost silent feet, but he still found himself stymied by the two people currently occupying his quarters.

Cynthia wore regulation Science officer Starfleet Regs. She had twisted her blonde hair under a short black wig black of hair with very straight bangs. She turned to stare at Spock (and assumedly Jim from over Spock’s shoulder) with her face pale with horror. One could assume that her acute embarrassment was due to the fact that she had been rather enthusiastically penetrating Rick, who was naked from the waist down and bent over on all fours in the center of Spock’s duvet with a bright green phallic-shaped object. Rick wore the Captain’s yellow uniform shirt and was just now realizing that Cynthia had stopped in her attentions. He turned slowly towards the doorway, blond wig askew, face turning a quite alarming shade of red as he realized that he and his ... lover... had been caught In flagrante delicto by the very beings of which they were impersonating.

Cynthia and Rick remained frozen, tangled together on his bed, but that was not what had caused Spock to stand there woodenly, barely even blinking. It was the rapid-fire realization of just exactly what it was that Spock must have heard that had sent him into the foolish confrontation with Jim. Spock attempted to repress the thought as he stepped back so that the door could close, turning on his heel and moving blindly towards the common area of the main room. He firmly ignored the brush of his body against Jim’s, staggering once as vertigo overwhelmed him for a moment. Spock’s stomach lurched. He frowned, temporarily distracted.

“Uh. So that was weird right? I think that was weird.” Jim sounded like he was just barely controlling the desire to break into raucous laughter. The sound of Jim’s voice caused Spock to close his own eyes as though pained. Spock abruptly turned direction again, heading for the labs. The vertigo could be explained by several occurrences, but it occurred to Spock, rather belatedly, that he had been so infuriated

by the perceived slight from Jim that he had not completed a systems check in several hours.

He was despicable.

“Spock... uh. You okay?”

Spock looked down at his hands, clenching on the metal housing of the padd he carried. It cracked and spidered in his hands. The metal had warped as though it was made from thin cloth into the shape of his clenched fingers. He carefully set it aside then attempted to flex them so that feeling would come back to the sensitive digits. He noted absently that there was a small dried crust of Jim’s semen on his cuticle and felt such a wave of guilt that he found himself staggering again.

“Negative. I am... not.”

“Whoa, are you okay? I know seeing that is kind of upsetting? And gross. I mean, dude needs to wax that ass. He looks kind of like a tribb--”

Spock whirled, staring at Jim. Jim actually took a step back, raising his hands placatingly. He sucked in breath to speak, only to have the klaxon of a red alert blare through the building.

He and Jim’s heads whipped to the lab, moving in tandem.

“Shit! What the hell?”

Spock’s gaze quickly took in the readings that all four of them had been much too distracted to pay attention to. “Core temperature reached, It appears the dilithium deposits have become unstable, Captain.”

As if in answer, the very planet heaved and pitched, sending the two of them crashing into each other. Spock’s reflexes were as quick as always, quickly flipping so that he covered Jim’s fragile body with his own. The lab equipment cracked as the long, rending cry of the very foundations broke apart. Spock turned, hanging onto Jim as the floor broke apart, huge plumes of steam breaking through the torn metal and concrete of the floor. The walls, spiderwebbed with cracks, started to crumble, and Spock knew he must act fast.

There was a pained scream from the other room. Spock paused for a brief moment to picture the schematics of the outpost. It was not a standard Starfleet operation, but certain safety protocols were universal. There would be escape pods, if the seismic activity had not damaged them. Spock eased up off of Jim, speaking quickly. “You must get to the escape pod, Jim. I will get the other two.”

“Are you fucking crazy?! *I’ll* get the two--”

“I can move much more efficiently.” Spock whirled, moving quickly towards his bedroom, believing that there would be time. Jim swore behind him, but moved carefully towards the pods, dodging around both debris and cracks in the surface. He was coughing, covering his mouth with the back of his arm and Spock knew that the air purification system was failing, along with the rest of the life support. The structure could not withstand the force of the shivering planetary seismic event. Jim had clearly followed his instructions, and the realization that he would be safe away from this chaos gave Spock the strength to make it back to the two foolish humans.

He had to pry the doors open.

Cynthia was holding Rick on her lap, hunched over his head and torso with her own body. They had moved to the wall of the en suite, huddled under a flimsy table. Rick was unconscious, bleeding heavily from a scalp wound. Cynthia was whispering to him, begging him to wake up. With one hand she had covered the wound with her hand to protect it. With the other, she had also grabbed Spock’s padd and was presumably attempting to sync it to do what she could to stave off the inevitable crash of the life support system. They were trapped. The wall had caved in, separating the two of them from the rest of the outpost proper. There was space for Cynthia to wiggle through, but she was clearly unwilling to leave without her lover.

Spock braced himself against the structure, testing it for susceptibility. “Hand him to me. If we are careful, he will fit through this space. We must move quickly.”

The woman looked up at him with wide, startled eyes. She was still wearing the dark wig of hair, cut like his own Vulcan style. “Oh. Thank god. Oh thank you god. Please. Get him out of here. It’s the dilithium!”

Spock would have rolled his eyes if he could have spared the time. Between the two of them they carefully maneuvered Rick through the space, Spock slung him over one shoulder, then stuck his arm through the space in order to help Cynthia through. “It is imperative we move with all possible haste.”

Before they made it through the small space Spock had created by forcing open the doors, another heave of the planet’s surface sent them both staggering to their knees.

“Shit!” Cynthia cursed. Spock simply concentrated on getting both he and Rick through the doors, staying low to the ground as he moved to the pod storage area, only to stop abruptly when he saw that Jim had *not obeyed his directive*. Jim had clearly started the launching sequence, waiting for Spock to arrive.

“The other one is toast. Come on, if you’re coming. We can all fit if we squeeze in.” Jim had bitten his lip in his nervousness and it was that more than anything that caused Spock to push the woman forward, only to crowd in after her with Rick’s unconscious form. Jim did not wait for them to make themselves comfortable; with a few quick taps of his fingers on the small console, he sent the little pod into space.

Part Three

“Commander, with me.”

Spock drew his body to attention, taking comfort in the familiar movement. He tugged slightly on his uniform shirt, then stood to follow the Lieutenant Commander to the Commander’s ready-room. Starbase 45-B was not large enough to have a Captain present, yet Spock felt no less reprimanded for all that he ranked the officer he followed.

“Commander Clarke wants to debrief. He’s already met with the Captain, so this should go pretty quickly. Just through there, sir.” He pointed, which was unnecessary given that there was only one doorway at the end of the corridor.

Spock nodded, walking through the doors and standing at rest just inside. A rather bored-looking, portly officer stood and came around the desk to shake Spock’s hand, remembered just in time that Spock was Vulcan and stood there rather awkwardly, clearing his throat.

“Please, sir. Have a seat.”

“My preference is to stand.”

“Oh! Well, of course. As you like,” Clarke coughed again. “Well, we can just get started then. I believe Captain Kirk said that the *Enterprise* was due to arrive tonight around 19:00, so best get a move on, eh?” Clarke smiled a little sickly and began.

The mention of Captain Kirk caused Spock’s heart to speed up in his side. Since their rescue, Spock had successfully kept from contact with his Captain. When Jim had asked for an audience, Spock had responded with his need to meditate, and that he wished not to be contacted further. Jim had acquiesced, as he had always done. Yet, Spock had found it almost impossible to calm his mind enough to meditate.

He had behaved in no way becoming of an Officer.

However, before he had left his quarters for the debrief, Jim had sent him a message: *Don't you dare, Spock. We will discuss this fully upon our return to the Enterprise.*

Coded for his eyes-only, and under so many firewalls and protections that Spock was astounded that it wasn't flagged for that reason alone, it was clear that the Captain's patience with avoidance had worn thin.

"This is Commander Clarke, Starbase 45-B. Requested Debrief of the planet Drema V and subsequent destruction." Clarke barely flinched at the mention of the planet's destruction, and Spock imagined that Jim would have had much to say regarding the Commander's tactlessness. "Commander Spock, describe the situation which caused you to be on the planet."

Spock inhaled and straightened his shoulders even further. "Upon realization that the Captain--"

"That would be Captain James T. Kirk, correct?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "To which other Captain would I refer? You are aware of my appointment, are you not, Commander?"

"Hmm." He tapped a few things on his padd. "Continue."

"I shall endeavor to do so." Spock waited, making certain that the Commander was not going to interrupt him again with pointless interjections. "Upon realization that Captain James T. Kirk, of the starship *Enterprise* and recently of the planet Earth," Spock paused for a moment, noting that the man's blush signified his understanding of the small verbal salvo, before continuing. "had been showing signs of exhaustion, the Chief Medical Officer and I discovered a small assignment that the Captain could complete, yet be away from the day-to-day stresses of the ship. Studying the dilithium on Drema V was not a tactical priority, yet it was fascinating enough that it would capture the Captain's interest."

"Hmm. Continue."

"Our shuttle malfunctioned, and the Captain was grievously injured. Using a comm link with Dr. McCoy, I was able to stabilize the Captain's injuries. He recovered adequately and spent part of his attention with scientists Pownell and Cross."

"Part of his time?"

“Affirmative. Both the Captain and I continued to attempt to discover how the shuttle had malfunctioned.” Spock found himself needing to concentrate very precisely on his words. As he’d done for the thirty-four hours that they had been on the starbase, Spock continued to not acknowledge what he had done with the Captain on the tiny shuttlecraft. Whenever his control slipped, Spock found that the almost incomprehensible wave of guilt and shame at his behavior threatened to overwhelm his senses. “Our findings were inconclusive, but our progress was recorded and sent to the Chief Engineer for his perusal as per regulations.”

“Continue.”

“Through a series of uncontrollable circumstances, the dilithium was not monitored at a critical moment; the chemical composition of the crystals reacted negatively and a significant seismic event occurred, necessitating the abandonment of the outpost.”

“Yeah, I’d say. The whole planet practically imploded! The records from the escape pod showed the whole thing. I’ve never seen anything like it before. Just--*brrrrkkkkkhhh...*” Commander Clarke mimed an explosion with his hands. “Just... crazy.”

Behind his back, Spock gripped his opposite wrist so tightly that the sharp spike of pain when his nails dug into his flesh centered him, and forced him not to react. This officer was hardly the first member of Starfleet to be so tactless, and he would hardly be the last. It was illogical to react with such anger, yet Spock was momentarily helpless in its wake.

“Indeed.”

The Commander tapped at his padd, then frowned down at something. “Okay, Captain Kirk said that it was kind of a weird accident, that none of you had really worked in shifts. That it was more of a ...” he tapped something else and Jim’s voice filled the small ready room.

“No, there weren’t shifts. Spock and I were ... in the shuttle, and Cross and Pownell were busy elsewhere. It wasn’t a case of someone shirking his or her duty because there *were* no duty rosters or anything. We kept it informal.”

Clarke’s voice came over the recording. “So if you had to put someone at fault for this tragedy-”

There was a snort. Spock could easily imagine Jim’s big, fake smile, the one he reserved for anyone in the admiralty he didn’t particularly care for, the one that was

both disparaging and disingenuous while seeming as though Jim had their full respect. "Listen, Commander Marks--"

"Clarke."

"Uh huh. Clarke." Spock knew that Jim had not truly forgotten that man's name. "Well, I just said that it was no one's fault. But, if you need to pick a scapegoat, pick me."

"Hmm. Interesting. You *want* to be at fault? So either you are looking for yet more media attention, or you're protecting your buddy. Hmm. You said that you and your subordinate were in the shuttle, yet the logs show no indication of any work performed. Can you explain that?"

"No."

Clarke tapped the padd. The recorded version of Jim's voice cut off. Clarke sat down at his desk chair, swinging up his feet onto the desk. It looked to be severely straining his lumbar region, a fact he ignored as his smug smile stretched his too-fleshy lips. "So, same question, Mr. Spock."

"Commander Spock." Spock raised an eyebrow. It was quite clear why Jim had been so insolent to the man.

"I demand to know who is going to answer for the blatant loss of life!"

Spock blinked. "To which loss of life are you referring?"

Clarke crossed his arms behind his neck. "Your actions, or, rather your *in*actions caused an entire planet to implode." His smirk turned quite smug. "Although, I suppose you're used to that, eh?"

Spock had heard the term 'seeing red', utilized when a human was compromised so emotionally that anger took over all reason. It suddenly came to him with utmost clarity exactly what was meant by the colloquialism. It was only the barest possibility that Jim's reputation could be harmed if he reacted that kept Spock's fury in check. Without speaking, Spock did a sharp about face and left the room. He ignored Clarke's furious summons, both verbally and on his comm to return.

Dimly, Spock noticed that crewmembers were flattening themselves to the bulkhead on either side of the corridor as he strode quickly towards the lifts. Once inside, he forced himself to stop, to breathe deeply and attempt to gain some sort of control over his emotions. Spock removed himself to his temporary quarters, eyes

flicking absently to the chronometer on the door's control. It was simple to lock the door. He entered a code and crossed to the corner, standing motionless for a moment while he attempted to control himself.

"Uh, Spock?"

Spock whirled, startled. Jim stood there in the corner near the miniscule replicator frowning in concern.

Jim's proximity at this time was not optimal. Spock opened his mouth to tell him such when Jim held up both hands placatingly, taking a cautious step forward. Seeing that Jim was once again nervous around him caused Spock's anger to leave him so abruptly that his stomach felt a little sick.

"Wait. *Wait*, before you kick me out. I just. Just give me ten minutes, tops? Please? Then I'll leave you alone."

Spock thought that for one moment he would be ill. Seeing Jim act this way towards him; realizing that he had given Jim cause to do so was unspeakably painful.

Spock nodded once.

"Look, I'm sorry for invading your privacy and I know it was a shitty thing to do, but what that guy said was completely fucked. I was gonna go down there and kick his ass but I thought you'd be even more pissed. But I do have the recording and I can *promise* you he won't be working here for much longer. After Admiral Komack gets done with him, he'll be lucky if he's commanding a shit scooper for a Klingon garbage scow." Jim huffed a frustrated breath. "Look, I know... we have stuff to discuss. Um. If you want to. And Scotty will be docking in twenty minutes, so we don't really have the time for a talk. But. Uh. I got Bones to give us two days of medical leave." Jim winced. "Not that I'm making you or anything. I just... if you wanted to talk. We'd uh. Have uninterrupted time."

Spock reexamined the rushed words in his head, reviewing them for any nuances of anger or sarcasm. As he did so, Jim bit his lip and bent forward, kissing Spock quickly on his lips.

Spock felt as though he had been punched directly in the sternum.

"I know this-" Jim gestured from himself to Spock and back. "-isn't easy for you. But, when you're ready to talk, I'm here." Jim's low voice in his ear caused Spock to blink rapidly, mystified.

"*Jim*." Spock reached for him, only to have Jim take a large step back.

“No time, Spock. But... we’ll talk, okay? Promise.”

Spock found himself nodding, his lips still tingling with Jim’s touch. He wasn’t certain if he was meant to be promising, or if Jim was in actuality promising him, but either seemed just as shocking.

Jim’s lips twitched, and he actually winked as he broke Spock’s authorization code almost as an afterthought, leaving with a small wave.

Spock could not control the small, pleased flutter of his heart in his side at not only Jim’s words, but the fact that he had willingly searched Spock out. It was even more astounding that he did not seem to hold any ill regard towards Spock for the way he’d behaved.

Spock went to his padd and saw that he did, indeed have two messages waiting. The first was from Jim, who left a simple reminder of when *Enterprise* would dock. It was politely worded and timestamped twelve minutes before Spock was to have met the Commander. The second was from McCoy: “We’ll be there in less than half an hour. You have exactly thirty-five minutes to get your damnfool, hobgoblin, pointy-eared ass in my office for a little conversation.” McCoy smiled nastily, eyebrows narrowing. “Consider it more of an order from the Chief Medical Officer than a request.” McCoy even ended the comm in an irate manner, and Spock allowed himself a small sigh. His foolish actions had endangered the Captain. Spock expected no less from Jim’s very best friend and acknowledged that his discussion with Jim would have to wait. He looked around the room and made his way to the transporter bay, moving much more slowly this time.

The Commander attempted to waylay the two of them, blustering about regulations, but Spock took a page out of Jim’s book and ignored the rude little man. Jim didn’t often use the clout brought to him from the accolades given from his many heroic endeavors, but when he did slide into his ‘Captain Kirk’ role, people automatically listened. The Commander was no different, especially when Jim looked him directly in the face and casually mentioned his proof of Clarke’s xenophobia. Spock took no little pleasure in watching the way the man darted a panicked look to Spock, as though he had any intention whatsoever of helping him, then attempted to regain control of the situation by ordering them transported to the *Enterprise*.

What a ridiculous human.

Jim sat approximately 3.24 inches closer to him than to Doctor McCoy. Spock found this supremely distracting, especially given that the doctor sat with both arms

crossed over his chest with almost perfect military precision. Spock and Jim shared a small couch in Jim's quarters, while the good Doctor had pulled over a chair so that he could stare directly at them.

"I am not certain I want the kid here for this, Spock. When I said that I wanted to meet with ya, I meant meet with *only* you. What I got to say ain't his business."

Jim opened his mouth to speak, looking mildly horrified. Spock ignored his reaction and spoke clearly, so that there could be no doubt to his wishes on this matter. "I have nothing that I wish to keep hidden from Jim. Given my recent unprofessionalism, I wish Jim be privy to all discussion for the events leading to, during, and leading from our endeavors on Drema V."

The doctor's eyebrow rose.

Spock's echoed the movement.

"Aw come on guys, I can't make my eyebrows do that. Look, Bones, once we tell you why the dilithium wasn't being monitored... well I mean, not even *you* can get mad, then with what happened after when Spock debriefed on the starbase . It'll fire up even your grouchy ass. And Spock, don't be ridiculous. You don't owe me anything. I know that you value your privacy, and don't want to infringe."

"Ain't that sweet." McCoy rolled his eyes.

"Your presence is not unwelcome, Jim," Spock said, speaking over McCoy's tedious opinion.

McCoy held up a hand. "Okay if you two start that crap we'll be here all year. I know you're both on *medical leave*," he emphasized, making air quotes, "but some of us have shit to do. So. Here goes. Spock, I commed your dad."

Spock froze, refocusing his gaze from the slope of Jim's neck to McCoy's eyes.

"Yep. Unfortunately, M'Benga, the only expert we have on Vulcan biology is on maternity leave, and I was afraid that she'd remove my balls if I tried to find her with a question, and frankly your dad is less terrifying. So here's the thing. I was a little worried about you, to be honest. You've not been acting right. A little out of your normal 'hobgobliny' ways, ya know?"

Spock blinked several times in rapid succession.

“Acting nervous, quick to anger, quicker to... well... *emote*, and most of it seemed to be centered around the kid, here.” McCoy pointed, and Spock realized that his mouth was slightly unhinged. He shut it immediately.

“So, uh. Spock. Now, I’m sorry to just come out and say this but... I think it’s relevant. Do you think that you can possible be... can it be that time of your cycle?”

“My... cycle?” Spock had the barest moments of trepidation.

“Uh, Bones, I don’t think you--”

“Hush, kid. Yeah, Spock. Your... *Pon Farr* cycle. Your dad said that--”

Spock felt the heat as his ears turned alarmingly green. Several responses went through his head almost simultaneously; many of which involved maiming the good Doctor in some way, shape, or form.

“Uh, Bones...”

“*Hush*, Jim, damnit.” McCoy leaned forward, ticking points off his fingers. “You’ve been angry. Well, anger has always been your thing, but it’s on the surface almost all the time. You said you were having trouble concentrating. You were close to a blood fever, by your own admission, again involving Jim. And uh. You have been more inclined towards violence. Now your dad assured me that this reproductive cycle is a very natural process, experienced by all Vulcans of age, and that if you’re a little more moody than usual, oh and we might need to get you back to---”

“Doc. Tor. Mc. Coy.” Spock enunciated every syllable with careful precision; it seemed imperative that he make himself perfectly understood. Thankfully, McCoy finally ceased speaking. “I am not experiencing *Pon Farr*.”

“How do you know?”

Jim made a sound that Spock was 98% certain was either a laugh or indicative of the imminent collapse of one of his internal organs.

“My half-human heritage ensures that I will not experience *Pon Farr*. I am sterile. Given that my conception was not natural, I am certain even you are aware of the highly different reproductive systems of both humans and Vulcans Dr. McCoy-Dr. M’Benga has postulated, and indeed her subsequent hypothesis corroborated by no fewer than twelve highly respected reproductive specialists located at medical research centers on seven different planets, that while I am sexually mature, *reproductively*, my ‘time’ will not occur.”

Spock chanced a quick glance over towards Jim, who indeed appeared to be biting both of his already chapped lips.

“Hnnhn. See, your dad said you might say that.”

Spock only just managed not to roll his eyes.

“Then that other you butted in and said that it was much more likely that you were suffering from a poorly aligned bond.”

Spock, who had begun to respond before McCoy had finished, froze again. The air felt as though it had ceased existing in his lungs. Spock cocked his head, taking stock of his inner self, ignoring Jim and Dr. McCoy for the moment. A malaligned bond? That was... shockingly possible. Probable, given his inability to meditate properly, something that he had not shared with Doctor McCoy.

McCoy shifted in his seat, his face appearing solemn. One small part of Spock's mind realized that McCoy had compared *Pon Farr* to the human female reproduction cycle on purpose in order to elicit an emotional response from him, while the larger part of his mind sifted through the bonds his mind held.

He had no mating bond, and no need for a betrothal bond.

His father? Familial bond, not as strong as before. Spock did not fault his father from, as Nyota said, ‘pulling away’ from Spock after his mother's death. Sybok might as well not have a bond with him at all, given the amount of time they actually communicated.

The space for his mother's half of their bond was aching, agonizingly, empty.

He did have several potential bonds of friendship, but none currently as strong as his former bond with Nyota. It had faded to a gossamer strength after ending their intimate connection. Realizing that it was weak was unspeakably painful, as though Spock only now realized how much he had failed her.

Spock opened his eyes, only to find McCoy and Jim staring at him with eerily similar looks of concern.

“My counterpart's hypothesis is not ... without merit. Traditionally, before Vulcan's destruction, all of a young Vulcan's bonds were familial, or for mating.” Spock made a mental note to inform his father, and his counterpart of his distress. If it was happening to him, then it must be happening to others of his race. “The concept of friendship is not widely recognized, so one may postulate that most Vulcans do not experience bonds of that nature. I am lacking.... in--”

“Spock, I’ll bond with you.” Jim blurted, reaching out to touch Spock’s arm. He shifted so that the line of his thigh pressed warmly Spock’s. “I... As your... your friend. Your family.”

“I have no desire for a familial bond or bond of friendship with you--”

“Hey now wait just a damn--!” McCoy interrupted, looking from Jim’s face to Spock’s.

“--because you are not only my family. You are not only my friend, Jim. I would--”

Jim made a small sound, his eyes seeming to soften as Spock’s words penetrated his understanding. McCoy, too, made a sound that Spock recognized as faintly horrified.

“Look, I really think this isn’t the place for this. I think I’m gonna go on back to my office,” Spock found McCoy’s mutter and subsequently hasty exit perfectly timed. Spock did not know why he had not thought of this before. Indeed, he had no certainty of Jim’s regard, yet he found it impossible to not speak honestly towards the man who had become everything to him.

Spock straightened, holding his first two fingers out towards Jim who sat biting his lip, foot tapping restlessly against the surface of the floor.

“I wish to join with you, Jim. Not only as family, because you are that. Not only as friend, because you are that too. Something more.”

Jim’s gaze cut to Spock’s fingers and to Spock’s astonishment, he copied the movement, stroking their fingers together. “I uh. Did some research. This is a traditional sign of affection between Vulcans and their... their mates.”

Spock had trouble controlling the shiver the stroke of Jim’s fingers produced.

“And... I’m pretty sure I figured out what pissed you off. If your head is all wonky, you tended to let your human side rule rather than your Vulcan side, huh?”

That was an apt a descriptor as anything other hypothesis Spock had endeavored to prove.

“That does not excuse my actions. I had no claim on you, and I behaved abhorrently; allowing petty jealousy to mar our first encounter of a sexual nature. I

believed you capable of such hurtful manipulation that I am ashamed of my thoughts, Jim.”

Jim pulled away slightly, changing his grip on Spock’s hand to lightly wrap his forefinger and thumb around Spock’s wrist, as though he needed to think but couldn’t bear to break away from Spock completely.

“You were kind of a dick, but believe me if you had tried to leave that shuttlecraft I would have jumped you. Although... and I cannot stress this enough... I thought the same thing about you.”

Spock raised an eyebrow. Jim’s thumb made several passes over his pulse-point.

Spock found this immensely distracting.

“I heard them having sex. I mean, I couldn’t hear anything distinct. Just a moan, or whatever. I thought it was you and I was so fucking *pissed*, Spock. You don’t even know. I couldn’t even look at you the next day. Then I heard it again, and came storming out of my room to the shuttle, only you were there. Then... I didn’t think much of anything except how much I wanted you to keep doing what you were doing.”

“Your misconception does not excuse my own abysmal behavior, Jim.”

Jim shifted his body again on the couch, holding onto Spock’s wrist. He brought Spock’s wrist up to his lips and Spock gasped when Jim kissed him softly on the curve of his first finger. The brush of Jim’s lips was unspeakably erotic.

“Yeah, it kind of does. I uh. I had no idea that you felt this way about me. Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

“I was unfamiliar with the protocols of such a nature.”

“But- Didn’t Ny--uh. I mean--”

Spock appreciated Jim’s attempt to spare his feelings, but it was not necessary. “Nyota pursued me once I was no longer her professor, or her advisor. It was... rather. I believe the term ‘a whirlwind romance.’” Spock watched Jim’s mouth tighten slightly in clear distress and blinked, organizing his thoughts. “Nyota was my friend.”

“--Was?! Spock...”

Spock tightened his hold, briefly enough that Jim ceased speaking. "You must understand that Nyota is exceptionally careful of Vulcan cultural norms. I understand that compared to fully human relationships, ours moved quite slowly. I had never had an intimate connection with another individual, and she had never had an intimate connection with a Vulcan."

"So.. you both had a lot to learn?"

"Affirmative, Jim. Nyota once said that she knew all about Vulcan cultural norms, and she knew all about human cultural norms, but occasionally she could not gauge how I would react to a given situation; if I would respond as a "human" or as a "Vulcan." I understand it is the normal progression for a relationship of that nature. I believe that you experienced something quite similar when you referred to 'my human side' before going into Starfleet Headquarters prior to Harrison's act of terrorism. During the events prior to our mission to Kronos, and the subsequent results of your death and the near destruction of the *Enterprise*, perhaps because of our connection, she understood ... how I had begun to feel about you before I did. My response was ... enlightening."

"Your response?"

Spock shifted, bending over and gently brushing the tip of his nose against the strong line of Jim's jaw. Spock inhaled, and it was Jim's turn to gasp in reaction. Spock could smell Jim's scent: slightly clean sweat emitting an intoxicating bevy of subtle pheromones that Spock remembered from the damaged shuttle on Drema V. He inhaled again. Spock found it was problematic to remember exactly what he had wished to say. Spock brushed his lips just under Jim's ear, where the scent was quite strong and then forced himself to pull away.

Jim had closed his eyes, and Spock watched them open slowly, focusing almost as an afterthought. The pupils had enlarged significantly, almost obscuring the blue. Jim's breaths had increased in both number and heaviness, and his face was flushed in the most pleasing manner. Spock found it very difficult to not simply lean in again to taste Jim's lips. He swallowed hard, and took a deep, calming breath.

"You held your hand to the glass of the core chamber, Jim. Do you remember?" Spock had been quite curious as to the points of Jim's memory before his death, but had never before found the inclination to pose the query, stymied by the belief that his questions would be invasive or painful. But there could be no dissembling here. Here was only truth.

Jim blinked again and cleared his throat, obviously attempting to concentrate on their conversation. Spock was... pleased... at the knowledge that Jim found him just as distracting as he found Jim.

“No. I’m sorry. I remember your voice, but not the words. You were ... fuzzy. It went in and out though. I remember putting my hand up, and it was almost like you were touching me, but... nothing after that.”

Spock found that he needed a moment to compose himself. He could chose to dim the intensity of images supplied by his eidetic memory, but for several seconds he was flooded with such a stream that he could not help but feel the same emotions he had 1,607 Standard days ago: dismay, grief, loss, agony, rage... love?

“It was unspeakably cruel to realize at that very moment that my regard for you was not mere friendship as I had previously believed; that I thought of you as much... more. I do not believe I will ever forget the sound of your hand falling from that glass, Jim. I could not help you without flooding the entire ship with radiation. I did not care. Had Nyota and Commander Scott not chosen that moment to interrupt my grief, I would have done so. My rage against Khan was absolute. His betrayal had caused your death, and I wished to be the instrument of his.” Spock stopped, unable to look Jim in the eyes. Speaking clearly of the shame he felt at his blatant disregard of anything resembling logic still filled him with a complex tumble of emotions he could not readily identify, but none of them made him proud.

Jim did not force him to go on, instead waiting patiently. After a moment he continued lightly tracing Spock’s fingers with two of his own.

Spock heard his own shaky breath and continued. “Nyota knew then that the emotions I experienced at your death, at Khan’s capture, and after the reversal of your.... death-”

Jim wrinkled his nose, interrupting. “Man, that still sounds weird. But that’s better than ‘my resurrection’ or ‘the brief circumstance of my unfortunate demise.’”

“-were, in her words, ‘more than you had ever felt for me.’ She ended our relationship, and we have not resumed our association.”

“Oh. Well, I can help you with that, if you want. I hate the thought of both of you not being friends with each other.”

Spock blinked. “Indeed? You would not feel... conflicted?”

“You mean jealous?” Jim licked his lips, a nervous habit that Spock found no less distracting than the gentle feel of Jim’s callused fingers on his own. “Well, that depends. Do you.. uh. want me? Want a relationship with me, I mean. A sexual, only-me, only-you relationship?”

Spock's eyes narrowed. "I do not care for the thought of you sharing intimacies with another."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure we're in agreement there, so: I won't feel jealous of your friends, Spock. Now that I know how dumb I was being- how, ah... dumb **we** were being, I can't imagine that you'd ever give me any cause not to trust you. If you want this..." Jim gestured from his chest towards Spock and back again, "I want this too."

Spock felt such an intense flood of emotion that he knew the only way to possibly contain it was to show Jim physically how much those words meant to him. He leaned forward again, only to find that Jim had anticipated his desire, tilting his head and raising his lips to Spock's. This kiss was what none of their predecessors had been. Jim made a low sound, deep in his throat as Spock cupped his head, burying his fingers in the short blonde hair, anchoring them together. Their tongues slid against each other's; Spock could feel Jim echoing everything he did, every move of his mouth, every press of his lips. Eventually though, lack of oxygen forced them apart, and it was Spock's turn to moan when Jim slowly slid his lips up the curve of Spock's ear.

Spock felt his penis jump in the confinement of his trousers and shuddered slightly. Encouraged, Jim sucked on the tip of Spock's ear, and Spock's fingers spasmed helplessly in Jim's hair. His penis thickened and he could feel it become wet at the tip. The probability of him staining his undergarments increased exponentially.

To be so undone by such a simple thing was humbling. Spock gently disengaged himself and moved slightly away, only to bring his lips crashing back down onto Jim's, a little too forceful and a little too desperate, wanting Jim to feel the same way as he felt. Spock slid his fingers down the strong column of Jim's neck, brushing over the musculature of Jim's shoulders and biceps, stroking down Jim's chest over the two uniform shirts.

"Wh- wait a sec." Jim's whisper caused Spock to freeze, meeting Jim's eyes with concern.

He was not... absolutely certain how he had ended up lying on top of Jim on the couch, pelvises rocking together, Jim's legs wrapped around Spock's calves while they kissed deeply, but he had absolutely no desire to cause Jim any emotional harm and ceased immediately.

"Jim?" Spock attempted to pull away, but Jim's legs tightened in reaction, keeping them pressed together.

“Fuck. My timing is.... look. Don’t take this the wrong way, but are you sure we should be having sex right now? If your head is all... uh... broken?”

Spock tilted his head, eyebrow raising in confusion. Several thoughts ran through his head and he found himself strangely comforted by the realization of Jim’s meaning. “My misaligned bonds- if that is indeed what troubles me, and I cannot know for certain until I have meditated fully- does not function like a person who is under the influence. I am here-” Spock bent down and quickly kissed Jim’s lips- “because I wish to be. Utterly and completely, despite whether or not you agree to bond with me.”

Jim’s smile was incandescent.

“I would feel... I mean, I know it’s not about me or anything, but I really would feel better if you were all the way *you* before we went any further. I just think that regrets afterward would be...” Jim trailed off with a frown.

Spock felt Jim’s legs fall to the ground. Spock pushed himself up on his elbows, then into a sitting position and smoothed his hair, while Jim did the same so that they were once again more or less presentable. Spock allowed himself a small smile at Jim’s obvious sense of relief, and nodded.

“If that is your wish, I will endeavor to meet your needs, Jim.” Spock moved to the floor, slightly away from Jim on the couch, using the small space in front of Jim’s bed. Jim shifted in his seat, making an inquiring sound and Spock turned to him.

Jim’s brow crinkled as he thought. “Wait, you can go from uh... Aroused to meditation in just a few seconds like that?”

Spock allowed himself a small smile, which clearly delighted Jim, as evidenced by the way his entire face lit up with obvious joy. “I did not say that it would be a simple feat. Indeed,” Spock flicked his gaze down at the bulge in his trousers, “this does likely pose a problem to my equilibrium.”

With that he closed his eyes and began to meditate, ignoring Jim’s bright bark of a laugh.

Spock slipped into his familiar trance with very little effort.

He saw immediately that his mind had changed. The strands had twined together from the last time he’d meditated, including the emotions that Spock had been too cowardly, or too distracted to acknowledge. It all appeared to rotate together, almost pulsing like an organic being. There was the occasional pulse of

light, like it was self-satisfied, as though it had accomplished all of what it wanted to do.

Spock quickly checked for breaks or tears. He had only experienced this sense of comfort once before, many years ago when his mother was still alive. Her death had left his mind like a gaping wound. His father's subsequent divorce of their tenuous attachment had widened it still further, and Nyota's estrangement had helped the wound fester. It was healed now, scarred, not perfect but Spock now understood that with both time and care the scar would fade.

With this realization, Spock found himself opened his eyes, staring blindly down at his folded knees. He blinked twice, quickly checking his equilibrium. Spock did not dream like humans did, but he likened the feeling to waking up after a mild nightmare and knowing that he was safe in his living quarters. His mind felt... right. Spock did not know how to better explain it.

Spock heard a soft sound and looked up, only to forget every thought in his head.

Jim was lying on the bed, propped up on pillows so that his body was displayed to its best advantage. Spock did not have a true sense of time while he meditated; yet several minutes must have passed in what seemed like only a few. It would have taken Jim several moments to strip his clothes off, and fold them neatly on the chair in the corner of the room. It would have taken several more minutes to arrange the pillows just so, to arrange his body so that Jim could smirk slightly at Spock from his sprawled position. Jim's hand stroked slowly over his erection, and a fine sheen of sweat lightly coated Jim's strong, muscled body.

Spock made some sound that was neither Standard nor Vulcan. He did not know the expression that was on his face, but Jim's eyes darkened, the eyelids half closing with barely-suppressed desire. Jim's smug expression bled to an answering intensity and Spock was on him, pinning his hands to the pillow above his head. Spock knew that his eidetic memory would never forget that sight; indeed, he had no wish to do so. Jim sighed, almost like Spock's grip was the only thing he wanted, and leaned up so that Spock would kiss him.

It was no great hardship to do so.

Their tongues met, sliding wetly together, and Spock pressed down firmly on Jim's wrists taking control of the kiss. Jim only arched in response, and it was Spock's turn to growl when he felt the wet heat of Jim's penis pressed to Spock's stomach. Feeling it caused Spock to ease his weight back onto his heels and knee walk over so that no part of him was touching Jim. Jim started to sit up, but before

he could much more than blink in confusion, Spock raised an eyebrow and flipped Jim over.

Jim's arms flailed for balance, causing him to sprawl in an X shape, pillows flying everywhere. Spock found this very pleasing indeed.

"Uh, Spock did I do something wrong?"

"You did not. I wish to taste all of you. Are you amenable?" Spock bent down and brushed his lips over a small scar low on Jim's back, flicking his tongue against the ridged skin. It was not common for someone to be so scarred, and Spock could see that the damage had been extensive.

"I. Uh... *Jesus*, Spock. Yeah. Have at it." Jim waved his hand slightly distracted when Spock bit at one of the deeper ridges of scar tissue, then laved at the spot. Spock knew his control over the muscle was absolute. Given that Vulcans tended to have slightly more texture to their tongues than humans (Nyota had once likened it to a cat and Spock had been quite far from amused.), Spock knew that the way Jim writhed underneath him was not at all contrived. Spock moved his way up Jim's spine, mouthing not-so-gently over the numerous freckles, the small scars that peppered his back, and the dips and valleys of the musculature of Jim's strong back. Jim had fisted both hands in one of the pillows. Spock was very pleased by the sounds Jim made, and slowly moved down Jim's back, licking at his tailbone.

Spock cupped his hands around the globes of Jim's buttocks and paused, spreading the cheeks apart and cocking his head, attempting to regulate his breathing. As before, Spock found that he had not been aware that he had been the one breathing heavily.

He heard Jim's muttered, "Aw, shit yeah," and allowed himself a wide grin before bending to and doing as he said he would- tasting all of Jim. The scent of Jim's arousal was stronger here, and Spock found himself flicking his tongue one moment, and laving the next. Jim's voice was hoarse, the words muffled in the pillow as Spock experimented, teasing the small, tight muscle with the tip of his tongue before slowly coaxing it open.

At this, Spock found he had to hold Jim more firmly as he began rocking backwards, seeking out the feeling of Spock's tongue. Spock pulled away to look at what he accomplished, and saw to his surprise that Jim was holding himself open, balancing with his shoulders on the bed. As Spock moved, Jim turned his head to look back at him. His face was flushed red, lips bitten and reddened, hair plastered to his face with sweat. His eyes seemed very blue, clouded with want, and Spock calmly pulled further away to check his handiwork.

Jim's rear end was covered in saliva, The small hole loosened slightly. Jim's fingers left white marks where the blood had left the tightly-held flesh, and Spock calmly wiped his chin, pushing back so he was not on the bed.

"Spuh--" Jim's voice dissolved into an undecipherable gargle when Spock bent down and slid the very tip of his finger against the rim. He lightly stroked around it, teasing, and Jim collapsed flat onto the bed as though his muscles no longer worked.

That was a quite satisfactory reaction. However, since Spock had no desire to hurt his Jim, he crossed quickly (many would perhaps say... smugly) to the replicator and murmured his request. Silicone-based, and featuring a number of Vulcan herbs, it served as both a sexual lubricant and massage oil, when warmed. That would be more than adequate for their needs.

Spock hurried back and calmly removed his boots, knowing Jim was watching him, peering at him with one dazed eye. Spock removed his shirts, and his trousers, along with his undergarments and stood there naked, lips twitching slightly at Jim's reaction to his body.

It was quite gratifying.

"God... Spock. Come on. I feel like I've been waiting for years."

Spock clambered back on the bed, making himself comfortable on his stomach, so he could properly see while working Jim open. He did not wish to rush, or to forget any part of this experience.

Jim shifted on the bed and opened his legs, rocking up again so that he was braced on his forearms and knees, giving Spock easy access. Spock grimaced slightly as he adjusted his own penis, attempting to ignore his own arousal so that he could see properly to Jim's. He was quite hard, and removing his clothing allowed was both freeing and oddly distracting. Spock could smell Jim's scent, wished only to bury his nose back where it was strongest and take it somehow into himself.

"Jim?"

"Yes. Jesus, fuck yes. Blanket permission to do anything you want, *god!*" Jim balanced himself on his shoulders again, spreading his buttocks as widely as he could.

Spock found himself becoming very fond of Jim's propensity to blaspheme. He bent back to Jim's wet hole and spread it slightly with his thumbs. Jim cried out sharply, and Spock flicked his tongue around the entire rim, ensuring that he had not dried out in the short time Spock had been away. He dipped his first two fingers into

the small container and coated them fully, moving so that he could work his first finger inside. Spock pressed his forehead against Jim's fingers and they both groaned at the action; Spock at the visual of his finger disappearing inside of Jim, and Jim, presumably, at the sensation of taking Spock's finger. Spock took some time working him open with both his finger and his tongue, then with two fingers, then with three.

By this point Jim was thrusting filthily back onto Spock's digits, and Spock found that he could not bear to wait much longer. He lipped over Jim's testicles, until Jim was gasping, groaning a mixture of swear words and Spock's name.

When Spock finally pulled away, he tangled his fingers with Jim's to pull him apart, fiercely enraptured by the way Jim's hole was no longer as tight. He could see the faintest kiss of pink, and could not control a shiver at the way the mix of lube and saliva shone in the lights of Jim's bedroom.

"Spock?"

Spock blinked rapidly, all at once aware of the passage of time. He allowed himself one more lick, tracing the pointed tip of his tongue around the entire rim before sliding it inside, then pulling sharply back before he forgot himself again.

"Does this position please you?"

"I. I..."

"Jim?"

Jim breathed in a long, choppy breath. He shifted and turned so that he was on his back, and flopped there, flinging his sweaty arm over his eyes. "I'm. I'm fine, Spock. Just... was really close."

Spock was horribly afraid that his self-satisfied expression would leave little question of what exactly he was feeling at this moment, and ducked his head. He quickly used most of the remaining lubricant on his own penis, wincing at his own sensitivity.

"Come 'ere?" Jim reached out a shaking hand and Spock took it, allowing Jim to guide him up onto the bed so that both their heads rested on the greatly abused pillow. Jim took their joined hands and placed them on his hip, turning onto his side so that Spock spooned him from behind. Spock quickly stretched his other arm under the pillow, and curled around him, tangling their legs together. Jim moved so that he was in a better position, wiggling so that his buttocks brushed against Spock's pelvis and they both sucked in sharp breaths at the sensation. Jim raised one leg a little and Spock slid into him slowly. He could not help the way his hand clenched on Jim's hip,

nor the way his mouth dropped open in shock at the feeling of the slick, wet heat surrounding his own hardness. Jim was impossibly tight, and it took some maneuvering until Spock was sheathed fully inside.

“Oh god Oh Spock oh god--” Jim’s whisper broke off abruptly as Spock bottomed out, his own testicles bumping against the curve of Jim’s buttocks. Spock slid his free hand from under the pillow, placing it over Jim’s racing heartbeat.

Spock kept himself from speaking only barely, the *You are perfect, my Jim* almost rolling off his tongue. Instead Spock managed to keep his vocalization to a simple “Jim.” Spock’s own voice had lowered by two octaves. This prompted Jim to shiver, which caused Spock to thrust reflexively. Spock hooked his chin over Jim’s shoulder and began rocking with minute movements, unable to keep himself still. Jim’s free hand reached back, curling around Spock’s shoulder and resting partially on his neck, fingers buried in Spock’s hair.

Spock moved slowly, and Jim thrust back with a dip of his hips, and they both quickly picked up the rhythm. Spock tugged at Jim’s hand with their entwined fingers, and they both wrapped their hands around Jim’s flushed penis. At that Jim could no longer keep quiet, crying out with every thrust back onto Spock, groaning when Spock echoed the movement with a thrust of his own. Words were much too complicated, but his low growl would have frightened a lesser being. Jim just gripped his fingers more tightly.

Spock could not keep himself from biting lightly at Jim’s shoulder, no more than Jim could keep himself from tugging sharply on Spock’s hair. When Jim froze, arching into the tight thrust of their fingers, Spock’s eyes shut in reaction. Even in this they were together, both cresting into orgasm only seconds behind one another. Spock could feel the hot splash of Jim’s ejaculate onto his curled fingers, and knew that Jim could likely feel his own surge deep inside.

Jim’s heart thundered under Spock’s palm like a small, trapped thing. Spock had barely gotten his own breath back before Jim had turned in his arms, kissing Spock’s mouth with an almost lazy fervor. Every muscle in his body fairly screamed to his relaxed state, and Spock found to his own chagrin that he could easily sleep, as long as Jim was not too far from him.

Spock kissed Jim back, once on his forehead, once on his nose, and once on his lips before pulling away. “One moment, and I will get you a cloth.”

“Mmm,” Jim kissed him once again and allowed him to leave their bed. Spock found that he didn’t much wish to do so, but also desired that Jim be comfortable before sleep, so reluctantly turned to go into the ‘fresher, pulling a towel down.

Looking at himself in the mirror, Spock saw that he was covered in sweat and lubricant, and reflected that a shower would not be remiss.

He had just turned on the sonics when two arms wormed their way around his waist, and Spock felt a kiss in the center of his shoulder blades.

“You have all the best ideas.”

Jim quickly flicked the controls from sonic to a standard hot shower, ducking behind Spock as the cold blast of water came out of the shower head. It quickly heated, but Spock turned to glare at a grinning Jim from under bangs quickly flattened by the steamy spray.

“God, I love you so fucking much, Spock.”

Spock found that it was rather difficult to maintain a proper glare when his facial muscles wished to smile, despite his Vulcan discipline. Jim took advantage of his silence by soaping Spock’s penis, cleaning it, and rinsing it off.

“And I, you, my Jim.”

Jim’s grin was positively wicked as he dropped to his knees, ignoring the spray of water as he wrapped his mouth around the head of Spock’s penis.

Much ... *much*... later, the crew members assigned to fix the fist-sized holes in each side of the shower stall’s tile might have questioned exactly what had caused the fissures to crack, but as neither Spock nor Jim particularly wished to enlighten them, it would perhaps remain one of their mission’s unsolvable mysteries.

Epilogue

::TRANSMISSION: INCOMING::

Hello, Mr. Spock! First of all, let me start off by thanking you for your timely rescue. Rick and I have recovered fully, and are pleased to report that our study on the dilithium was saved with Mr. Kirk’s quick thinking. Fortunately, since the planet was so remote, the end of Drema V didn’t cause any other planetary troubles. It did, uh, leave both Rick and I out of a job though. That would have been a complete clusterfuck if we had not turned our scientific endeavors to the creative.

You'll notice that enclosed with this transmission are two advance copies of our novel! Yeah, it's the romantic adventures of two heroes, Captain Kirk James and his Vulcan lover S'elek as they travel the galaxy. We're calling it *50 Shades of Green*. It's totally fictional of course. Anyway, I'm sorry it took us so long to reach you. Mr. Kirk said that you'd love the advance copies though, and he would surely know! I'm sure glad he's doing better...

Anyway, thanks again. I hope you enjoy the book.

Much love,

Cynthia Cross

::END TRANSMISSION::



The Box

sunshine

(beta: littlemonkfish)

When he'd started dating Jim, Spock hadn't been concerned about The Box. It was stored in his closet, and there was no reason for Jim to become aware of it. In fact, he'd been rather close with Nyota and *she'd* never noticed it. And so most of the time, the secret of his box didn't even cross his mind.

Jim, for his part, was bouncing out of his skin the first time Spock had really let him in his quarters. Oh, he'd spoken to the Vulcan several times at Spock's door, and had once been invited as far as the small sitting room, where they'd both stood to finish their conversation, before leaving. Even that small taste had excited him beyond reason. Spock, his best-friend-boyfriend-obsession Spock, was just so infinitely interesting. He'd been dying to see some of Spock's personal effects. But Spock was Vulcan, so while Jim was maybe a little disappointed, he wasn't exactly surprised when there were none to be found.

"I just want to see it!" he'd bounced.

"I assure you, Captain, there is nothing to see."

"Spooooock."

"Captain."

Jim's eyes had darted from side to side, and then Jim himself had darted into the room past his stoic friend to get his own look around. Could Spock have stopped him if he'd really wanted to? Trivially. But Spock had allowed Jim to have his look and satisfy his curiosity. He hadn't been lying. There really was nothing to see.

And now Jim was seeing just that. Spock's room was strikingly utilitarian. The only decorations Jim could see in evidence were a book he'd given Spock himself, and an

interesting-looking bowl that he later found out to be a gift from Nyota Uhura. Everything, right down to the blankets on Spock's bed, were standard Starfleet issue. It made him blink the first time he realized just how stark Spock's room was, but he took it in his stride. After all, the lack of decoration was just as much part of Spock's personality as decorations themselves would have been. It was *him* that Jim was in love with.

It was one and a half months into their official dating relationship that Jim had wanted to spend the night in Spock's room. Spock enjoyed his privacy, and he enjoyed being in Jim's room. Jim's room was full of *Jim*, vibrant colours and objects that captured the imagination and explained nuanced facets of the man. Spock's room, by contrast, was hollow. Empty. It made him... not *uncomfortable*, because that was an emotion he did not allow himself. But he certainly preferred Jim's room.

"I do not understand why we cannot simply maintain our routine of spending the night in your quarters, Captain."

"Spock, if we're talking about where we're going to sleep together, you don't have to call me Captain."

"Yes, Captain."

Jim sighed. "Look, I just *want* to, alright? What's wrong with sleeping in your bed sometimes? Do you not want me there?" Jim bit the inside of his cheek in a flash of raw vulnerability he didn't show to many aside from Spock, and the Vulcan's heart melted a little.

"Of course I want you there, *ashaya*," he admitted, because he would deny Jim nothing. He hoped that Jim's vibrancy could shine through his dull grey walls.

For his own part, Jim immediately perked back up, his inner five year old overjoyed at the prospect of a sleepover at Spock's place.

And Spock, in preparation, simply made certain that his closet door was closed.

While Spock didn't think of The Box at all times, he was always a careful person. He'd never moved his clothes in or out of his closet in front of Jim, at least not with the door opened widely enough to expose The Box. It was an easy habit to adopt. He'd never asked for Jim to get him something out of the closet, and when he *had* asked Jim to fetch something from another room, he was always clear about its location. He'd never allowed Jim to leave his own jacket in his closet, though Jim had never actually tried to do so -- simply throwing his clothes over the bed or a chair or the floor as he saw fit. And so Spock never actually thought he'd have to address this issue at all. But he hadn't accounted for the fact that Jim was *not* Nyota. Jim was a five year old playing at being an adult, and while Spock saw this as an endearing quality 99% of the time... it apparently had its drawbacks.

He realized his oversight as soon as he walked into his bedroom to see Jim *not* in his bed reading as he'd left him 2.4 hours ago, when he'd left to take care of an emergency in the labs. No, instead Jim had pulled open seemingly every drawer and door Spock owned, simply to satiate his own curiosity. Now Jim looked up innocently from his perch at the closet floor and smiled when he saw his partner. "Hey, Spock!" he smiled. "What's the deal with the case?" He gestured at the thick, black, Starfleet issue destruction-resistant box on the closet floor. The one Spock had never meant anyone to find out about, and certainly didn't want to discuss.

Jim stared up, and saw a rare deer-in-the-headlights look from his Vulcan friend. Maybe some people wouldn't see the difference, would see Vulcan impassivity at all times, but Jim had been dating Spock for a while now and knew all the subtleties of that face. "Spock?" he questioned, beginning to get worried. Shit. Shit, he'd broken Spock. He wasn't sure how he'd done it, but he had no doubt that it was his fault.

And Spock, for once in his life, had *no* idea what to say. He felt... something, that if he were human might be akin to panic, but he didn't allow himself to feel it for very long. Instead, he simply turned and walked out of the bedroom, and into his sitting room. His eyes were on the door to leave his quarters altogether when his brain caught up to the illogic of what he was doing. He was actually running away. Where would he go? Where would he possibly walk to right this instant that would make this okay? Could he simply, in fact, walk around the halls of the ship and come back to his room and have the problem magically disappear?

Jim was a step behind. "Hey. Shit. Spock! Wait up. Is it because I went through your stuff? Listen, I'll put it all back in order. If I overstepped some line or something...." His voice quavered with real worry that he'd done something truly Not Okay by Vulcan standards, or at least by Spock standards.

Spock sighed. He actually audibly sighed, and Jim knew that was not a good sign. "Captain. Jim. No, you have not... you have done only what... that is, you are curious by nature and I should have foreseen --" He pinched the bridge of his nose as his eyes came closed in a rarely-seen display of actual distress.

Jim wrapped his arms around his mate and kissed his neck. Gently, he said "Listen, it's okay. Whatever it is. I'm sorry I upset you."

Spock was silent for a long moment, simply feeling Jim's arms around him, holding him, grounding him. "It is not you," he finally said quietly.

"Hm?" Jim had lost the thread of the conversation, content to just hold Spock awkwardly as they stood in the middle of the sitting room for as long as it took.

"My distress is largely not based around something you have done."

"Oh?" Jim blinked in confusion. "Then what..."

"The box."

Jim blinked. What box? Oh! The black box in the closet? Confusion swam over him even more. "What about it?"

"I did not strictly obtain permission for it when I borrowed it from the storage area, and I will accept a reprimand if you indeed --"

"Spock, Spock!" Jim laughed and stopped him. "You stole a box? Is that why you're freaking out? Listen, I really don't care. You can have it." He laughed again. "Is that what this is all about?"

And of course, it wasn't. He had been deflecting, unintentionally. His mind was... scattered. "Negative," he said at last.

Jim's confusion was overwhelming at this point. "Then what's the *problem*?"

Spock reluctantly pulled away from Jim and stared at him for another uncomfortably silent moment. "Perhaps it would be easier if I just showed you," he admitted, and led the way back into the bedroom, where there were no decorations on the walls, and the room was in disarray, and the closet door was open, and there sat The Box.

Reverently, Spock knelt beside it and dialled in the code that sprung its lock with a gentle click. Following Spock's lead, Jim knelt down beside him on the floor, a million questions swimming through his mind. But he kept silent. This was obviously important somehow to the Vulcan, so he would wait, and he would listen.

When Spock opened the lid, he began pulling things out slowly. Gently.

The first was a quilt, Jim saw, folded neatly and laid atop everything else. Next came two robes -- one old and worn, another exquisitely ornate. A tin of Vulcan tooth powder. A wooden comb with delicate etchings on its handle. Some sort of weapon made of cloth and heavy weights. A knife. A full tea set and two tins of Vulcan spice tea. A single packet of incense, partly empty.

Jim watched with confusion at first, and then dawning comprehension as he saw the scattered array of items removed from the chest. There were more, small things, simple things. Each one was held reverently and placed on the floor around them as if it were the most important thing in the entire world.

And to Spock, Jim knew, they probably were.

They were the last bits of Vulcan that Spock owned.

It had taken several nights until Spock had even processed the fact that they'd lost T'Khasi. All of it. Forever. And so he couldn't be blamed for using his rare and precious hygiene products those first few nights after. He could not logically be blamed, but once he realized what he'd done, of course he blamed himself for his oversight.

He was brushing his teeth as he'd always done, just before bed, when everything seemed to stop. He stared at the tin of powder before him, so different from Terran toothpaste, full of the clays and spices of his homeworld, when he realized -- when the tin was empty, it would never be refilled.

Spock stared at the tin, his breathing unregulated and panicked, and rare tears threatening to break free of his eyes, though he did not allow them. For a moment, he wasn't even certain what to do with the damp paste still in his mouth, on his brush. His heart ached in his side as he rinsed it all away. Precious Vulcan clay and spice down

the drain. Fragments of his planet that he was continuing to destroy. It was illogical -- they were simply atoms like everything else. But they were Vulcan.

It was with wide eyes that he stared around his bathroom after that, and with unsteady steps that he entered his private quarters and continued to observe how many things he owned that were part of Vulcan. And for the first time since he'd entered a starship, he noted how fragile the ship was around him.

During battles and natural phenomena alike he'd never felt as vulnerable on a ship as he did now. Because if the ship should be destroyed, so would all of his belongings, and then there would be even less of his planet than there was now. Wildly, he thought perhaps to send it all to Earth to be kept safe, out of space, but no. Earth, like Vulcan, could disappear. It nearly had.

And so it was in the middle of the night that he moved through the halls of the Enterprise and down to the storage area, taking one of the empty destruction-resistant boxes without any permission obtained, without any justifiable reason according to Starfleet regulations. It was the only time in his entire life that he'd stolen, and he didn't care.

He gathered nearly every single thing he owned and placed each item one-by-one into The Box, where they would be safe. Then he hid The Box in the closet, where he could open it sometimes, before or after he'd meditated, and remember. It left his rooms barren and empty of all his memories and comforts of home, empty of all the gifts he'd received through the years and trinkets he'd acquired for himself, empty of even the most basic comforts such as tooth powder and hair oil. And in their place he simply filled in the gaps with Starfleet regulation toothpaste and soap, blankets and mugs. He shut a part of himself away into The Box.

"It is perhaps not logical," Spock confessed, one step away from tears but holding them at bay.

"Of course it's logical," Jim said in hushed tones, grabbing Spock's hand and holding it tightly, anchoring them both. Spice tea from spices that may as well be extinct, and some that were. A carving of an animal Jim had never seen and didn't know whether it had survived anywhere in the universe. And the quilt? It so clearly had to have been made by Amanda.

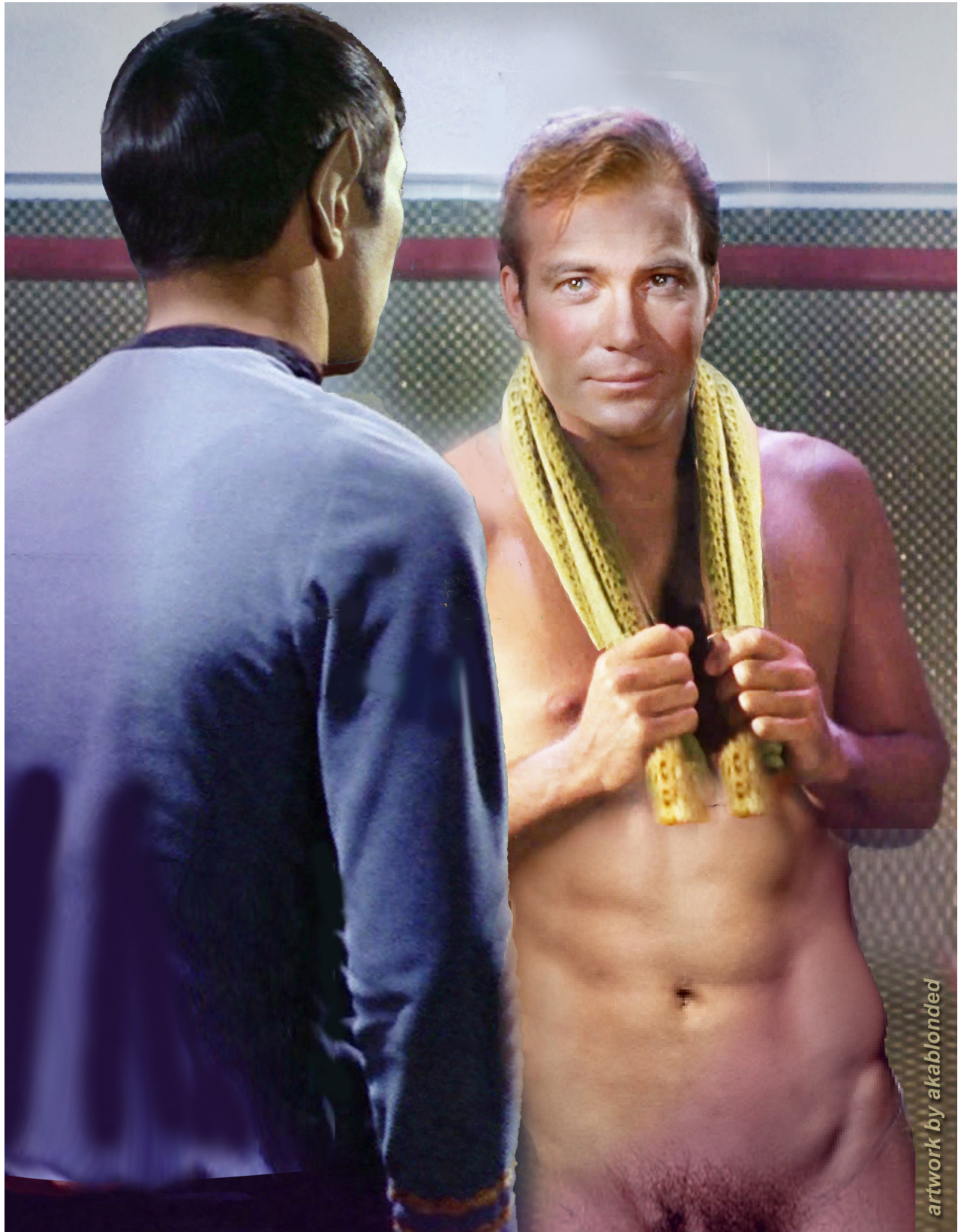
“Perhaps, then, it is selfish,” Spock amended. “I could submit some of the items to the historical preservation efforts. The antiques. I could submit some of the more mundane items to the efforts to analyse and recreate them.”

“Fuck that,” Jim said in a surprisingly hard tone, gripping Spock's hand all the more tightly. “These are yours.”

Spock closed his eyes, a sort of relief sweeping through him. “Yes.” They *were* his. They were his memories and his burden. Something that comforted and caused pain in equal measure. Something that he kept tucked away in a box where they would be safe and not a constant reminder. And Jim now knew why Spock's room was so stark. Why everything he owned was Starfleet issue. Why he'd stolen for the first time in his life -- a simple box out of storage.

Perhaps one day Spock would know why he kept all these things, kept them all together in a box. Kept them as if equally ashamed and reverent of them. Perhaps one day he would know what to *do* with these things.

But today, he was simply grateful when Jim so carefully helped him to lift and store each item back in its place, and stash the box back into the closet. It was enough. Someday, he would properly deal with all of this. But for now, the magnitude of his grief was still too raw and expansive. For now, he had a box.



artwork by akablonded

Lost in the Woods

interrobanng

The Beast slept.

Nothing disturbed it for there were no disturbances left. Once there had been many, billions of shallow minds that hounded the Beast and nipped at its heels. But the Beast turned and swallowed them all until there was nothing left. The Beast slept, finally at peace with itself and its silent world.

Something moved in the forest.

The Beast woke up.

He was lost.

He was sweating like a pig, gasping with thirst, covered in bruises and he didn't think his shoes would ever be dry again.

And he was lost.

James Tiberius Kirk stared at the thick, succulent red foliage of the alien jungle that surrounded him. The canopy was so dense that it blocked out the sun. The forest floor was illuminated only by the dim glow of the iridescent moss that hung from the trees like cobwebs. He'd been slogging for miles in what he'd thought was the right direction, using his phaser like a machete to hack through the dense brush. For hours he'd been telling himself that the river was just a few more feet away. For mere minutes he'd been increasingly aware that something was following him.

And for the past few seconds he'd been realizing that he, bona fide hero and soon-to-be Admiral Kirk, was lost, exposed and very, very afraid.

At least I won't have to wear that stupid uniform. He thought in a sad, desperate attempt at humor as he turned to face whatever it was that was following him.

Three Weeks Ago

Jim stared in horror at the monstrosity lying on the mattress before him. "It's hideous."

"It's an Admiral's uniform." McCoy was trying, and failing, to keep a straight face. He was sitting at the desk in the corner of Jim's bedroom. It was still early and the thick fog rolling in from the San Francisco bay pressed against the window. "It's supposed to make you look like a decorated man of action."

"No man of action would be caught dead in this thing." Jim thought about it for a moment. "Actually, a man of action would be caught dead in this thing because in the field this much gold braid would get you killed. It's got sequins, Bones!"

"Only a few." McCoy chewed on the inside of his cheek to stop himself from laughing. "And think how proud Spock will be when he sees you wearing it. Not that he'd ever show it, mind."

"...Yeah." Jim looked away.

McCoy sighed. "You still haven't heard from him?"

"No." Jim snapped. He didn't mean to but any reminder of his boyfriend's mysterious absence over the last month put him in a snapping mood. "I thought Sarek might have but he hasn't been returning any of my calls. Which means either that he hasn't heard anything or that he has and it's bad."

"Or that he finally got annoyed with you calling him every day of the week," McCoy pointed out. "In case you haven't noticed, Sarek is kind of a dick that way. But I'm sure that if he heard from Spock he'd tell you."

"Not if he thought the information was irrelevant. In case you haven't noticed, Sarek is kind of a Vulcan that way." Jim snatched the dreaded Admiral's uniform off his bed and started shoving it back into its bag.

"Easy there, Admiral. You don't want to rip your new duds."

"Stop calling me that!" Jim glared at his friend. "I'm not an Admiral yet."

"Whoa." McCoy raised his hands in the air. "Jim, this is a good thing, remember? You're being promoted to Admiral. You'll be one of the most powerful men in the Federation."

"That's just another way of saying politician. And you know how I feel about politicians."

"Politicians are high-functioning sociopaths who surround themselves with people too polite to say anything about it, yes, I know your feelings on the subject." McCoy rolled his eyes.

"No. That's how I feel about doctors." Jim threw the bag with the uniform into his closet and kicked the door shut. "Politicians are rabid weasels in suits with too much time on their hands."

"Well, speaking as a high-functioning sociopath, my medical opinion is that you're over-thinking this. I've never seen you so stressed out, Jim. Relax! You're on vacation." McCoy waggled his eyebrows. "You could still come with us on the cartography mission to Arula."

Jim was facing the wall so Bones couldn't see him wince. The reminder that the Enterprise was no longer his was almost as painful as the reminder that Spock wasn't by his side. "I don't think Captain Uhura would appreciate that very much."

"She should, seeing as how it was her idea," Bones said casually, drawing a circle in the condensation that was forming on the inside of the window.

Jim turned around and stared at him.

Bones saw his face and sighed. "Did you think we all stopped liking you when you got promoted? Believe me, the crew isn't any happier about your promotion than you are. They already miss you and they'd love to have you back for one last wild ride. Besides, this is your chance to do everything you ever wanted to do onboard the Enterprise but couldn't because you had to be the responsible grown up."

Jim's eyes brightened. "You mean...?"

Bones nodded. "That's right. Zero gravity food fight."

Jim was tempted. Actually, he was more than tempted. After a month on Earth he was practically salivating with wanderlust. Every night he dreamt that he and Spock were back on the Enterprise where they belonged and none of this, not his promotion, not Spock's mysterious mission for his father, had happened. It made waking up every morning to an empty Earth-bound bed that much harder.

"I can't," Jim said, the light fading from his eyes. "It wouldn't be appropriate and besides, I want to be here if...when Spock comes back." And if he doesn't, Jim added silently. I don't want anyone feeling sorry for me or trying to make it better.

"Suit yourself." Bones knew better than to argue when Jim used that tone of voice. "But if you change your mind we're staying in orbit until Monday." He rose to his feet.

"You're leaving?" Jim asked, surprised. He'd been about to pull out a bottle of Saurian brandy he'd been saving.

McCoy offered him an apologetic smile. "Sorry. I have to interview applicants for Chapel's job."

"You couldn't convince her to come back?" Jim asked sympathetically. McCoy's face turned dark and stormy.

"No. She said Starfleet Command was making her a Commander and giving her a 25% pay raise. Told me the only way she was coming back to the Enterprise was if she could have my job. Did you know she got her medical license last time we had shore leave on Earth? Became a fully qualified doctor and never said a word about it. How is a simple country doctor like me supposed to compete with that? And now I have to go talk to new people. You know how I feel about new people."

Jim laughed, his own troubles momentarily forgotten, and clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Rabid weasels?"

McCoy nodded emphatically. "Every last one of them."

The Beast inhaled and its nostrils were filled with the stench of living flesh. The intruder was getting closer, leaving a swath of destruction in its wake. The Beast shuddered with rage. How dare this creature bring ruin and devastation to its perfect, peaceful world! How dare this foul animal blast the trees with its evil device and leave the saplings broken and bleeding on the ground as if they were nothing more than sticks!

And then there was the thing the intruder had brought with it. The Beast did not know what the thing was, only that it was cold and lifeless and that it crushed the fragile seedlings and smothered the grass beneath it. So the Beast ripped it apart and left it sparking on the ground.

The Beast stalked through the jungle.

Jim pressed his back against the wide trunk of a tree and held his phaser out in front of himself. He didn't dare shoot until he had a target. Sidearm phasers weren't meant to cut through jungles and his was almost completely drained of energy. Of course he never went anywhere without spare energy packs, but they had been washed away in the river along with the rest of his belongings. Jim estimated he had two, maybe three shots left. He had to make them count.

Something moved in the darkness.

Jim couldn't see it or hear it, but he could feel it. Somewhere, hidden at the bottom of every human soul, is a big-brained monkey that always knows when something with big sharp teeth is nearby. Right now Jim's inner monkey was jumping up and down and howling that not only was there something with big sharp teeth but it was *right behind him*.

But that was impossible. Jim had his back pressed up against a tree that was twice as wide as he was tall. The only thing behind him was solid wood.

A puff of warm air tickled the hair on the back of his neck.

The monkey screamed. The man panicked, toppling to the forest floor in his haste to flee. A blood-curdling roar filled the dense air, shattering the tranquility of the empty jungle. It was only as the last syllable died away that Jim discovered the animalistic

sound had burst from his own lips. As the echoes faded Jim raised his head and peered at his surroundings. The jungle was as still and silent as ever, with no perceivable sign of the thing that was stalking him. Jim rose to his feet and walked back to the tree, ignoring his inner monkey as it called him ten different kinds of idiot. Jim examined the tree, searching for the source of the warm air that had spooked him. He found nothing but smooth, papery bark and soft, fragile moss. It was just a normal tree, exactly like all the other trees that enveloped the uninhabited planet of Arula.

Or at least, that's what it seemed to be. But Jim knew all about how things weren't always as they seemed. Jim glared suspiciously at the tree. The tree remained impervious.

"...Hello?" Jim called, despising the nervous quaver in his voice. In the dark jungle heat and the eerie moss glow the familiar word sounded alien and strange.

The tree did not respond, and Jim finally allowed himself to relax.

"I must have hit my head in the river and now I'm going crazy," Jim decided, speaking out loud. "Pull yourself together, Kirk. There's no animal life on this planet, remember? You're imagining things. Focus on finding the river. Then you can follow it back to the shuttle and get the fuck out of here. What would Spock say if he were here?" Jim pursed his lips, stuck his nose in the air and raised one of his eyebrows. "I am Spock of Vulcan and I will do whatever I want because you are an illogical human and your behavior is irrational, logical factoid, overly simplified Vulcan philosophy, illogical, fascinating, I am a stupid fart face."

None of that struck Jim as being helpful. He sighed. Looked like Spock was a lot better at being Spock than Jim was. Too bad for Jim. Maybe Bones would prove more useful.

Jim furrowed his brow and stuck out his jaw stubbornly. "Dammit Jim!" He said. "I'm a doctor not a forest ranger! How the hell should I know which direction to go? Mixed metaphor, half-hearted threat, long suffering sigh." Turned out Bones wasn't very helpful either.

Jim craned his neck and peered blindly into the lightless canopy above him. Was it just his imagination again, or was the jungle getting darker? Day lasted 93 hours on Arula, but night lasted two weeks. During the day Arula was a humid, tropical planet but at night the temperatures dropped and the jungle froze. If Jim couldn't find his way back to the shuttle by then his chances of survival would be slim.

I wish Spock were here.

Jim grimaced at his own thought. "Yeah, well, that's not gonna happen," he hissed at himself. "He's gone and he's not coming back. Focus, Kirk. Moss grows on the north side of the tree, right? So north is..." Jim looked at the trees. He carefully examined the iridescent moss, comparing the growth on each tree. In the end he was left with only two possibilities. Either north was in every conceivable direction including up and down, or the whole moss growing on the north side of the tree thing was bullshit.

Frustrated, Jim grabbed a handful of the glowing moss that was hanging down from a tree branch as thick as his waist and pulled. Instead of coming apart in his grasp the fragile-looking moss tightened and held. Jim blinked at it and then pulled again, this time putting all his strength into it. The moss still held.

"Huh," Jim said, looking back up into the dark canopy. "That might work..."

Two Weeks Ago

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Jim's comm unit was going off in the night. He rolled over in his bed and, without opening his eyes, grabbed the unit and flipped it open.

"Wuh..." He grunted.

"Jim."

Jim was immediately awake. "Spock!" He sat up in bed and clutched the comm unit, his grip shaking in his excitement. "Where the hell have you been? I've been worried sick you idiot! When are you coming home?"

There was such a long pause that for a terrible moment Jim feared they'd been disconnected and then, "I am not coming home, Jim."

Jim fingers still clutched the comm unit so tightly it shook but he could no longer feel the cold metal biting into his skin. He could no longer feel anything. "What?"

"I should have contacted you sooner but I had to be certain the line was secure and...and perhaps I wished to delay the inevitable. But it is not fair to you."

"Stop." Jim closed his eyes and prayed. "Just tell me where you are, okay? You don't mean this. We'll talk about it. Whatever it is, we'll figure it out."

"...I am on New Vulcan."

"Perfect, I'll be there in the morning. I'm getting dressed now." Jim threw aside his covers and leapt out of bed. He dashed to his closet and started rifling through his clothes, trying to find a clean pair of underwear.

"Jim, I will be gone within the hour. You cannot get here in time."

"Gone? Gone where?" Jim refused to believe what he was hearing. This couldn't be happening. This had to be some sort of nightmare. "Spock, what the hell is going on?!"

"The Vulcans are dying, Jim. The suicide rate is so high among the survivors that we will not last another generation." Jim could hear the pain in Spock's voice and it made his own heart ache all the more. "In order to survive drastic steps must be made. This is why I traveled to Romulus a month ago, at the request of my father."

Jim's shock cut through the savage pain in his heart. "You've been on Romulus for the last month?" At least that explained why he hadn't heard anything. Spock must have been so deep undercover even the tiniest slip would have gotten him killed. The Romulans had no mercy for spies, or anyone else for that matter.

"Yes. I was able to make contact with an underground movement that seeks to reunify the Vulcan and Romulan races. I smuggled one of their leaders back into the Federation to meet in secret with my father."

"So you're done now, the mission is over. Why aren't you coming home?" Jim knew he sounded desperate, but he was desperate. How could Spock do this to him, to them? Jim sank to the floor, already drowning in despair.

"Jim. This is the only way to save my people. I must return to Romulus to offer whatever assistance I am able as a representative of Vulcan. They need me."

Jim knew he was right. Of course he was right, he was Spock and Spock was always right. But Jim also knew that Spock loved him. He'd seen it, felt it, tasted it a

thousand times or more. How could Spock make this decision, just like that? "I need you." A single tear slid down his cheek.

"You will be the youngest Admiral in history. They will sing songs about you, write books about you. Even children will know your name. You do not need anyone anymore."

"Don't I get to decide what I need?"

"Ashayam...please forgive me..."

"No."

"...What?"

"I said no. If you want my forgiveness you're going to have to ask me for it to my face. I'm not doing this over a comm unit."

"Jim. That is not possible."

"If you go to Romulus we might never see each other again. Don't you care?"

"Of course I care, but—"

"I refuse to accept this," Jim interrupted him. The despair had vanished and been replaced with a white-hot rage. "I refuse to believe that this is what you want."

"It does not matter what either of us want, Jim. This is the way things are. We must do what is necessary. For me, that means going to Romulus. For you, that means becoming an Admiral."

"You're breaking up with me because it's necessary?!" Jim shouted at his comm unit. "Fuck you, Spock!"

Spock was saying something but Jim couldn't listen anymore. He couldn't bear the sound of Spock's deep, patient voice anymore but he couldn't bring himself to close the comm unit and cut him off. This could be the last time he ever heard Spock's voice. Jim stared at the far wall without comprehension and allowed his torrential emotions to overwhelm him until they finally faded into numbness. Spock spent the next 45 minutes desperately trying to explain himself and convince Jim to forgive him but Jim never said another word. He couldn't.

Finally...

"I must go now, Jim."

Jim turned his head slowly and stared at the comm unit lying on the floor next to him, his eyes wide with horror. Don't go, he wanted to scream. He wanted to reach through the device and grab Spock and never let him go. He would have begged and pleaded, bribed and threatened, cajoled, consoled and capitulated if he had thought it would convince Spock to stay. But he knew that once Spock had made up his mind nothing Jim said or did would change it.

"I do not know when or if we will be able to speak again."

This couldn't be happening. There was still so much Jim wanted to say, so much he had put off saying until the moment was right. And now those moments would never come.

"...Farewell."

"Wait! Spock!" The words burst from Jim's lips like startled birds. But it was too late. Spock was gone. And he wasn't coming back.

Jim sat on the floor until the sun came up, unable to move, unable to think, barely able to even breathe. Losing Spock like this hurt more than anything had hurt in his entire life. When the birds outside his bedroom window began to sing Jim picked up the comm unit again and called the newly appointed Captain Uhura to ask if her offer of one last ride still stood. His old crew welcomed him back with open arms and a ridiculous amount of fanfare considering he'd only been gone for a month. Curiously, as they made their way to Arula, no one asked Jim about Spock or even mentioned their former First Officer in front of him. Even Bones seemed to be leaving well enough alone, though he was keeping a close eye on Jim's alcohol consumption. Jim didn't know if they had heard something or if the news was written on his face, and he didn't ask. The night they reached Arula McCoy asked if Jim had anything he wanted to tell him. Jim changed the subject.

The next morning Spock showed up.

Jim climbed higher and higher, using the hanging mosses like ropes as he scaled the towering tree. The higher he got the less moss grew and the darker his surroundings became. The air was colder up here and thick with pollen. The muscles in his arms screamed in pain and begged for mercy but he forced them to keep going. At one point he made a terrible mistake and looked down. He was half a mile up, so high up that the tree was starting to sway slightly under his weight, and the distant forest floor almost looked like it was spinning around the trunk of his tree.

When Jim finally made it to the top and his head burst through the dense layer of leaves and he finally got a good look at his surroundings, all other thoughts in his mind faded away.

Dusk had come to Arula, bathing the planet in the warm soft light of the distant star that pulled the orb through the vacuum of space with its dense mass. Jim stared out across the jungle canopy that stretched as far as his human eyes could see. The lush red leafs caught the light and reflected it back again, glinting in the sunset as a gentle breeze brushed across them. The canopy was periodically interrupted by gargantuan naturally-forming monoliths, rising up through the trees like craggy black whales breaching in a sea of twinkling red stars. They reminded Jim of the Stone Forest in the Yunnan Province back on Earth but he knew that unlike the great rock formations of the Far East, these were not made of limestone or any other substance known to him. Their strangeness was even more pronounced in the twilight. The waves of light that fell on them vanished, swallowed by the blackness of the rocks, never to be seen again.

But that wasn't possible, surely. Only black holes were dense enough to swallow light. Surely nothing with that much mass could exist naturally on as lush a planet as Arula. Jim was letting his imagination run away with him. Again.

"Pull yourself together, Kirk," he ordered himself once more. He carefully shifted his weight on the branch he was standing on, turning his head and searching for the river that would lead him back to his shuttle.

And there it was! A slender band of silver, almost completely obscured by the trees. He might have missed it entirely if the light wasn't reflecting off the surface and turning the crystal clear water into shimmering flame. Any later in the day and he would have been just as lost up here as he was on the forest floor. Jim traced the path of the river with his eyes, hoping he might be able to see the large clearing he had left the shuttle in. He wasn't sure how far the vicious rapids had carried him but he estimated it could be anywhere between ten and fifteen—

There was a plume of thick, black smoke rising into the atmosphere.

Jim's heart stopped. Fortunately it started again a second later, but he was *that* surprised.

Was that his shuttle? No. It couldn't be. The smoke seemed to be originating from what he thought was more or less the right spot, but how was that even possible? Starfleet shuttles didn't just burst into flame. They were designed to survive even the most hazardous of environments. He had piloted that very shuttle through electrical storms, in and out of hostile orbits, even along the cusp of black hole event horizons. What's more, Jim knew for a fact that Montgomery Scott, the miracle worker himself, had inspected that very shuttle not 48 hours ago. Jim stared in horror at the plume of smoke, knowing it could only mean that someone or something had destroyed his only means of contacting his ship and returning to the Enterprise. His inner monkey was right. No matter what the sensors on the Enterprise said, he was not alone down here.

The tree shuddered so violently Jim almost fell off his branch. He wrapped his arms and legs around the trunk and held on for dear life. He stared down into the dizzying darkness beneath him as the tree shook and swayed. All he could see were bent branches and shreds of glowing moss that were falling down, down, all the way down to the forest floor as *whatever it was* climbed higher and higher, coming up after him.

Jim had just enough time to scream as something hot and scaly and invisible closed around his torso and pulled him back down into the darkness.

"Spock!"

19 Hours Earlier

"Uh...Jim?"

Jim glanced up from the chessboard. He had bullied McCoy into playing a match with him but he was starting to regret it. The doctor's lack of interest in 3D chess was matched only by his lack of skill. It was taking all of Jim's tactical know how to keep the game knowing. He half-suspected that Bones was trying to lose.

Uhura—sorry, Captain Uhura—was standing in the doorway of the officer's lounge with a look on her face like someone had just forced her to eat Klingon gagh.

"What's wrong?" he asked, startled.

"Nothing's wrong, exactly," she said slowly. "Um...Spock's here."

He stared at her. The words had sounded like words he knew, but she couldn't possibly be saying what he thought she was saying.

"Is that a euphemism?" he asked.

Uhura frowned. "No. He just beamed on board and there's a Romulan woman with him. What's that about?"

"A Romulan? On the Enterprise?" McCoy's eyebrows shot up. "What the hell is Spock thinking?" He turned to Jim for an explanation, but Jim wasn't in an explaining kind of mood.

Instead, he leapt to his feet. "I'm going camping," Jim announced. Uhura and McCoy stared at him as if he'd just declared his eternal love for toenail fungus.

"We're in space, Jim," McCoy reminded him gently. "You can't go camping. There's no air."

"I'm not going camping in space," Jim scoffed, pushing his way past Uhura and into the hallway. "I'm going to Arula."

"You can't!" Uhura argued. She and McCoy had to jog to keep up with Jim as he flew down the hall. "Our transporters don't work on Arula!"

"Nonsense. I saw Scotty beam up rock samples last night."

Uhura groaned. "We can teleport things off of Arula but we can't teleport things to Arula. There's too much ionic interference. That's one of the reasons Starfleet is so interested in the planet. Well, that and the fact that even though the whole planet is covered in plant life there is absolutely no animal life, not even bacteria. And we can't get a transporter lock on anything down there. Scotty's been entering the coordinates manually. We were only able to get those rock samples because we could literally see the formation from space. Our sensors won't be able to pinpoint your location and without exact coordinates we won't be able to beam you back!"

"Fine." Jim shrugged. "I'll take a shuttle." He turned left and headed for the shuttle bay.

"Or you could stop running away and hear what Spock has to say!" Uhura wasn't going to give up that easily.

"I know what Spock has to say," Jim answered grimly. "I have no intention of hearing it."

How could Spock do this? Didn't he understand that saying goodbye had nearly destroyed Jim? Didn't he know that Jim wouldn't survive a second time?

You're the one who told him to say it to your face. A nasty little voice in the back of Jim's mind pointed out. You knew Spock wouldn't be able to move on until you gave him your blessing. Isn't that why you refused to forgive him? You wanted him to come after you.

Maybe that was true. All the more reason not to let Spock find him, because when he did that really would be the end of everything they had and everything Jim wanted for the future. He knew he was being childish and petty but he also knew that as long as he kept running Spock would have to keep chasing him. If the chase was all they had left Jim would do everything he could to prolong it.

Scotty was in the shuttle bay when they barged in, up to his elbows in the engine of one of the two shuttles.

"Scotty! Just the man I was hoping to find," Jim said with forced joviality. Scotty looked up from his work with a guilty expression.

"I didn't do it!" he told them.

"You didn't do what?" Uhura frowned. "Scotty, are you doing something illegal to that shuttle?"

Scotty's look of guilt deepened. "Not technically."

Uhura crossed her arms and gave him a Look. "What does 'not technically' mean?"

"It's not illegal to build it," Scotty muttered without meeting her eyes. "It's just illegal to use it."

Uhura sighed. "Scotty, step away from the shuttle."

"But I was only—" Scotty started to argue.

"Is this one working?" Jim interrupted him, heading towards the second shuttle.

"Perfectly." Scotty nodded. "I inspected it this morning."

"Come on, Jim." McCoy tried to stop his friend. "Don't do this."

Jim was already pressing the button to open the shuttle door. "Bones, please. I can't deal with him right now, okay? I just...I just can't."

McCoy grabbed his arm before he could climb into the shuttle and forced him to turn. Their eyes met and McCoy must have seen something in Jim's gaze because, after a tense moment of silence, he nodded and stepped back. "Fine. Go. Just don't get lost, okay?"

"I won't," Jim promised. He gave his friend a grateful half-smile. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me," McCoy growled. "I'm not sure I'm doing you any favors by letting you go."

"Well, I'm completely sure you aren't," Uhura snapped.

"Are you going to stop me?" Jim asked her.

He could tell from her face that she was sorely tempted to try. But in the end she sighed and said, "You still outrank me, Admiral. Technically I can't stop you even if I want to."

"Where are you going, Jim?" Scotty asked innocently.

"Camping." Jim answered, climbing into the shuttle. "Don't tell Spock where I've gone."

Scotty brightened. "Is Mister Spock coming to visit too?" he asked.

Jim closed the door before anyone could answer.

As Jim moved through the pre-launch procedures and then piloted the shuttle down to the planet below, his mind stayed blank. If he actually thought about what he was doing or why he was doing it he'd fall to pieces. Was this how Spock kept such complete control over his emotions all the time, by banishing them completely from his own mind? It didn't seem sustainable to Jim. His own control shattered like glass when he landed safely in a large clearing next to a wide river on the planet, and the shuttle's comm unit was switched on.

"Jim."

Jim's heart stuttered and his gullet tried to climb into his mouth at the sound of Spock's voice. In his haste to escape he had forgotten to turn off the ship's access to the shuttle communication system.

"Please return to the Enterprise," Spock continued before Jim could respond. "Your behavior is irrational."

Jim just shook his head, even though he knew Spock couldn't see him. He needed to escape. He hadn't run far enough yet. Jim grabbed the shuttle's emergency rations pack, just in case, and clipped his phaser to his belt. He left his communicator on the pilot's seat. He wouldn't need it, he decided. The only person he wanted to talk to was also the only person he couldn't stand listening to right now. He stumbled blindly from the shuttle, desperately telling himself over and over that he couldn't hear Spock plaintively calling out his name through the crackling comm unit. But Spock's voice carried, following Jim out of the shuttle and into the clearing like a begging dog. Jim needed to get further away; somewhere Spock's voice couldn't reach him. Jim fled, not caring where he was going, too consumed with his grief to pay attention to his surroundings.

Which was how he ended up falling into the river.

He plummeted into the freezing waters so suddenly that at first he didn't realize what had happened and he inhaled, filling his lungs with water that burned and stung. His training took over before panic could set in and he struck out for what he hoped was the surface, though the current was so strong it was somersaulting him over and over and he could not be sure which way was up and which way was down and which way was sideways. The river was dark and he didn't see the rock until he rammed into it nose-first. He didn't see anything at all for a while after that.

When he came to he was lying on the riverbank and his pack was gone. All he had left was his phaser and a piercing headache. He had just enough strength left in him to roll over, glance at his surroundings and release a long, stuttering groan punctuated by gasps of pain as his probably-bruised ribs complained sharply about their recent treatment.

Instinctively, his hand reached towards his hip where his personal communicator would have been under normal circumstances. It was only when his grasping fingers found nothing but wet clothing and tenderized flesh that he remembered leaving the communicator on the seat in the shuttle.

It seemed that his impromptu camping trip had, in true Kirk fashion, gone terribly wrong. Why was he not surprised?

First things first. Jim carefully eased his body further up the bank, gently flexing his appendages and prodding his sides. Good. He was badly bruised but he didn't think anything was broken. He allowed himself a good ten minutes to lie in the warm sun and catch his breath. His thoughts were unfocused, slipping from his grasp before they could be fully formed, which told him that he was most likely suffering from a mild concussion.

All in all, it wasn't the worst situation he'd ever woken up to.

When his head felt clearer he got to his feet and began what he was certain would be the long hike upriver to his shuttle. At first the path was easy. The river was wide and the bank was wider, but soon the bank began to narrow and the trees came closer and closer to the water's edge. Soon the bank vanished completely and Jim had to push his ways through trees that grew so close so close together there was barely enough space between them to force his aching body through. He ended up getting stuck wedged between trees more than once. Just when he was starting to think that his journey couldn't possibly get any more difficult he ended up tripping over a root and, once again, toppling nose-first into a rock wall. Jim yelped and stumbled back, gingerly touching the bridge of his nose and thanking his lucky stars he hadn't broken it yet. He glared balefully at the giant...thing that was obstructing his path.

It was a skyscraper made of stone. It towered above him, reaching so high into the sky that no matter how far back he craned his neck he could not see the top of it. It was cool to the touch when he placed his hand on it and the texture was unusual, almost rubbery. But when he pulled out his phaser and used the metal end to scrape the rock it crumbled like sandstone. It was black like obsidian but it lacked the gloss of the volcanic rock. Jim had no idea what it was made of, but he knew it was huge. Part

of the monolith was submerged in the river and the rest of its width was hidden in the trees. Jim knew that if he wanted to keep walking upriver he would have to get around the rock somehow. There was no chance of him being able to climb over it. He briefly entertained the idea of getting back in the river and swimming around the rock, but one glance at the white crests on the water told him that would be an exceedingly foolish thing to do, and Jim felt he'd fulfilled his quota of exceedingly foolish things to do for the day. He decided to follow the rock wall into the jungle and hope it wouldn't take too long to make it back to the river.

It wasn't as difficult as he had expected it to be. There was at least ten feet of space between the base of the stone tower and the trees so Jim had plenty of space to walk. And walk he did. He walked and walked and walked. He walked until he thought he couldn't walk anymore and then he kept on walking. Finally there was a curve in the rock wall and Jim thought he would surely find the river again soon. But then there was another curve, and another, and another and still no sign of the river. Jim was just starting to suspect that the rock wall was somehow making a fool of him when he thought he heard the welcome sound of running water. He stepped away from the rock and into the dense thicket of trees. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the light. The path along the rock wall had been filled with sunlight, but a few steps into the jungle and all was darkness. Gradually he began to notice the soft glow coming from the hanging moss, but there was still no sign of the river. Jim sighed. He must have been imagining things. He turned to go back to the rock wall, but it wasn't there anymore. Jim couldn't understand it. He'd barely taken three steps away from the wall but after walking through the dark jungle for ten minutes and still not finding the rock or the river he was beginning to suspect that his concussion wasn't as mild as he had initially believed. Was he suffering from some kind of sporadic short-term memory loss that left him thinking he had only walked three paces when in actuality he had walked god-knows-how-far?

Still. He couldn't have gone that far off course. Jim kept walking, telling himself that he'd find the river again any second now, all the while ignoring the terrible certainty that was growing in the back of his mind.

He was lost.

And he was pretty sure there was something following him.

The Beast snarled and hissed at the tiny creature clutched in its fist. It was nothing, just a squishy biped with intermittent patches of fur. It struggled and flailed, trying to escape, but its efforts were weak and useless. The creature's mind was a different story. Full of bright lights and sharp corners, it stung the Beast like nettles. No matter how the Beast tried to cringe and hide the mind followed, stinging and burning and yapping, "Look at me! Look at me! Look what I can do!" The Beast gripped the creature's body for purchase and bore down on its mind. No more stinging. No more burning. No more incessant yapping. The Beast would have peace and quiet once more.

Jim couldn't see anything, but he could feel it—whatever 'it' was. It was crushing him. He couldn't breathe and either the glowing moss was getting dimmer or his vision was starting to fade. He had to escape, at least enough so he could get air into his lungs. His left arm was pressed against his side, his hand plastered over his hip right on top of his phaser.

He still had two shots left.

Jim grit his teeth and directed all his energy to grabbing the phaser. But his attacker was holding him too tightly and even though he now had the phaser in his hand he couldn't move his arm or pull the trigger.

Spots were beginning to crowd the edges of his vision, static inkblots that told him he didn't have much time left.

Jim poured every ounce of strength he had left into turning his hand palm-side up, so that the muzzle of the phaser was shoved half an inch deep into the invisible flesh of his assailant.

Please let me kill this bastard before it kills me.

Jim pulled the trigger.

The Beast screamed and dropped him, falling backwards and clutching its bleeding appendage. There was a small hole shot clean through the center of its padded spade-like paw. Physical pain was not a sensation the Beast was accustomed to and it went wild, thrashing blindly from tree to tree as if searching for a way out. But of course there wasn't one. There never was.

Jim rolled over, gasping for breath and tears of pain streaming down his face. He glanced down at his left hand and instantly regretted it. What remained couldn't even be called a hand anymore. At best, it could be called pulp.phasers weren't meant to be used

at such close range. Jim supposed he was lucky the blast hadn't cut through his arm entirely and damaged his side.

Jim could hear his attacker nearby. He wasn't out of the woods yet. He rolled over onto his stomach and began to drag himself forward with his right arm and shoulder. The phaser had fallen on a pillow of moss just a few feet away.

Gotta get it. Gotta get it. Gotta get the phaser.

The Beast heard him.

Jim's eyes widened in horror as the moss and the phaser were flattened by the invisible weight of his attacker. His one and only weapon, gone.

Jim suddenly realized for the first time that he was probably going to die here.

Spock! Please!

Commander Charvanek of the Romulan Empire was not impressed by the starship Enterprise. The ship did not even possess a rudimentary cloaking device and the crew was far too informal with one another in her humble opinion. Mere moments ago she had witnessed the lowly doctor accuse the Captain of being a 'cruel, unfeeling mongoose of a woman' and the Captain had not even had him executed on the spot. Were these truly the people who kept even the Tal'Shiar guessing at each and every turn? Perhaps they had secrets they were keeping from her. After all, she had not been allowed to wander the ship unaccompanied, which she approved of. For all these Federation droolers knew she was a Romulan spy here to steal all their secrets. If one of them had come onto her ship she would have thrown them into the brig immediately, regardless of their reason for being there or who had brought them. Captain Uhura had decided not to go that far. Charvanek thought that was a mistake but hey, who was she to judge?

For the most part she'd been confined to sickbay. Not because she was in need of medical treatment in any way (as her biology was far superior to humans' and not so prone to injury and disease) but because she was not allowed to go anywhere without Spock and Spock had not left sickbay since he had learned of Admiral Kirk's escape. Ever since he had been attempting to do the impossible, achieve contact with Kirk by way of a latent telepathic bond the two shared. At first Charvanek had been skeptical,

such a thing was unheard of, but she had agreed to watch over Spock and divert any interruptions. As the hours dragged on and on she realized why Spock had chosen sickbay as the physical location for his telepathic journey. His face grew haggard with the strain and his blood pressure dropped dangerously low. The human doctor named McCoy had been enraged (“That dim-witted green-blooded short-sighted unfeeling irresponsible *hobgoblin!*”) when Charvanek explained to him what was happening but fortunately he had been distracted by the arrival of a spitting mad Captain Uhura. That had been two hours ago and they were still fighting. Charvanek could not tear her eyes away. It was incredible. She’d never seen two people argue for this long without someone getting stabbed.

“He should be up here, working things out, not wandering off god-knows-where on a god-damned camping trip!” Captain Uhura shouted.

“Maybe he needs some time! Maybe he needs some space! Maybe it’s none of your business!” Doctor McCoy snarled back. He spun around and advanced on Spock. “And you! What’s the big idea, you break his heart then you pop back out of nowhere? And who is this random woman you’ve brought with you, huh? Your Romulan bride? Is that how you’re gonna unite the races?”

“Certainly not.” Spock answered firmly, but his eyes remained fixated on the floor as if he weren’t really paying attention to what was going on around him.

“Besides, he is not my type.” Charvanek added, attempting to divert the doctor’s attention. Couldn’t the humans see that Spock was busy?

“Oh?” Captain Uhura snapped. She seemed to have taken offense, though Charvanek could not fathom the reason. “And what exactly is your type?”

“Heterosexual.” Charvanek answered.

Captain Uhura’s ruffled feathers slowly began to settle. “Fair enough.”

“I assure you, Doctor McCoy, I have only the best interests of my people at heart.” Charvanek smiled politely at the red-faced human. “Change takes time on Romulus, and a lot of patience. Unfortunately, since our entire solar system will be destroyed within the next century, time is a luxury we do not have. It is unfortunate that our situation is causing your friend so much pain, but we need Spock to guide the way. We cannot do it without him. I am reminded of a story my father once told—”

Suddenly Spock’s head snapped up. “I have found him.”

Charvanek spun around in her chair. "You are *shitting* me right now." There was no way Spock had found the missing Admiral through a telepathic connection! That kind of stuff only happened in fairy tales! True, Romulans had never developed their telepathic abilities the way Vulcans did but surely their sister race wasn't evolved to the point where touch was no longer necessary!

"He is on the planet." Spock's eyes were glazed over. He was staring at something none of them could see. "He is in danger."

"You can tell that from this distance?" Charvanek gasped, her pulse racing with awestruck amazement. "Are you a wizard?"

"James Tiberius Kirk is always in danger. You don't need to be a wizard to figure that out," McCoy snapped, already grabbing his medical tricorder. "Spock, do you have exact coordinates?"

Spock rattled off a set of coordinates that Captain Uhura relayed to the crewmembers in the transporter room. Then she nodded at McCoy. "Stand by for emergency transport to sickbay," she announced.

They held their breath and waited.

Victory was close at hand. The Beast grasped the intruder with both of its huge shovel-like paws and growled. The turbulent mind of its prey burned a brilliant white-hot but the Beast ignored the sting. It was nothing more than the dying throes of a wounded animal. Soon it would pass and the Beast would feed again. The Beast finally unleashed its hunger, infinite and ancient. It ate the human's rancid fear. It devoured the human's caustic determination. It feasted on pain and grief and terrible rage and still the Beast could not find satisfaction. The human gradually lost consciousness and still the Beast fed, burrowing deeper and deeper into the feeble sentience trapped beneath its paws.

NO.

The voice came from nowhere and for the first time in its existence the Beast knew true fear. Suddenly there was a presence standing between the Beast and its prey. It was

a mind unlike any other the Beast had encountered since the great black monoliths trapped it in this mortal dimension. It was like an ocean, deep and vast and filled with mysteries.

YOU WILL NOT TAKE HIM.

The ocean raged and the Beast cowered before the storm. The powerful other-mind pursued the Beast, driving it away. The Beast tried to turn and fight but no matter how it moved its body or twisted its thoughts the other-mind was there, pushing the Beast back and protecting the human lying motionless on the forest floor. The Beast fought harder, battering the defenses of the other-mind. For a moment the defenses seemed to give way and the Beast struck triumphantly, but it was a trap. The shields snapped back up and the Beast found itself completely surrounded by the other-mind. The Beast fought harder, desperation making it vicious.

The battle raged for an eon. The battle raged for a few seconds.

And then it was over.

At first the Beast was confused. It stumbled through the jungle, seeking blindly for its enemies but they were nowhere to be found. The Beast paused. Had it won? Cautiously, in case the other-mind was planning another trap, the Beast allowed its consciousness to spread on the wind, searching the entire planet for any trace of sentient life. It found nothing.

Finally. Peace. Quiet. Solitude.

Victorious, the Beast went back to sleep.

Spock was at Jim's side even before his atoms had fully materialized on the biobed in sickbay. McCoy was half a step behind him, already shouting.

"Chap—son of a bitch—SOMEONE get me a dermal regenerator!" the doctor roared as he wrapped a tourniquet around Jim's mutilated forearm. A nearby nurse ran to do his bidding.

Spock caressed his lover's temple with his finger. "Jim..." The name fell from his lips like a prayer. Jim's eyes flickered but he no longer had the strength to open them.

You came, Jim thought.

Yes. Spock answered simply, trying to convey in that one word how much Jim meant to him and how close they had come to truly losing one another forever.

Never again, Jim promised as Bones stuck a hypospray in his neck. Jim felt himself start to drift off but he struggled against the siren song of chemically induced sleep.

Rest, t'hy'la, Spock soothed him. *I will be here when you wake up.*

Jim slept.

Later, Jim woke up.

The first thing he knew, even before he had opened his eyes, was that Spock was still standing next to him just as he had promised. The second thing he realized was that he couldn't feel his left arm. His eyes flew open as panic surged within him. Almost too afraid to look but unable not to, his eyes were drawn downwards. When he saw his left arm lying motionless in a regenerative field he almost wept with relief. He was going to be fine.

He glanced at his surroundings. He was in a private room in sickbay, filled with white light and the gentle beeping of medical equipment. Spock was standing at attention beside the bed and Jim knew from experience that he had been standing that way the entire time. Any other person would have found themselves a chair, but not Spock.

"Jim." Spock had noticed his return to the waking world.

Jim couldn't have stopped himself for all the starships in the fleet. He raised his uninjured arm and grabbed the collar of Spock's robes, dragging the Vulcan's mouth down to meet his in a bruising kiss. At first Spock hesitated, perhaps concerned that he would do Jim further injury, but Jim pressed harder, coaxing Spock further and further. Finally Spock surrendered and wrapped his long-fingered hand around the back of Jim's head, deepening the kiss. The rest of the universe vanished and for a moment it was just the two of them, still breathing and still together. Jim knew in that moment that he would do whatever it took to keep it that way. When he could no longer ignore the

protestations from his bruised ribs and oxygen-deprived lungs Jim allowed his grip on Spock's robes to loosen and the two men slowly drifted apart, lingering over every point of contact.

"Have you forgiven me?" Spock asked hopefully.

"Of course not." Jim let his head fall back on the pillow. "I'm furious that you decided to go to Romulus without even discussing it with me. But it'll take us weeks to get there. I'll have plenty of time to think of a suitable punishment."

Spock was silent for so long Jim almost hoped he wouldn't argue. No such luck. "Jim—"

"Don't say it."

"You cannot come with me."

"Of course I can."

"You are an Admiral now." Spock ignored his interruptions. "Your place is with Starfleet. It is your best destiny."

"*You're my best destiny.*" Jim reached out and grabbed Spock's hand, pulling it to his chest. "As far as I'm concerned you're my only destiny." He placed a chaste kiss on each of Spock's long, slender fingers. "If it's a choice between my career and you, I pick you." He peeked up through his eyelashes and added, "Unless you don't want me anymore."

It was cheating and a part of Jim felt terrible about saying it, but it was a small part. Spock's fingers twisted around Jim's and held him tight.

"I always want you." Spock's voice was husky, and though his face was locked in its Vulcan mask his brown eyes spoke volumes. Spock was in anguish. "But I cannot ask you to sacrifice everything you have worked for."

"It isn't a sacrifice. It's our next big adventure," Jim argued. But he could see that Spock still wasn't convinced. Desperation surged within him and he clasped Spock's hand as if that single touch would be enough to keep them together. "I'm still Jim Kirk even without my uniform. But I don't know what I am without you."

Spock could feel the truth of Jim's words through their hands and it was more than he could bear. "Neither do I," he confessed in a voice so quiet it was almost silent. Jim shifted his aching body to the far side of the wide biobed and patted the now-empty space. Spock raised an eyebrow at the suggested impropriety but something in Jim's face changed his mind and he sat on the edge of the bed. Jim gently pushed Spock back until he was lying on the pillows and then rested his head on Spock's shoulder.

"We'll figure it out," he promised. "Trust me."

"Always." Spock sighed.

They lay together in silence for a long time, their bodies entwined as they listened to each other's heart beats and tried not to dwell on the enormity of what they had almost lost. They were together now and they would continue to be together in the future and that was all that mattered.

There was a knock on the door and McCoy entered before either of them could answer. Jim groaned. Bones had that look on his face that meant Jim was about to get screamed at.

But instead of launching into one of his now-familiar tirades about basic safety precautions and not going off on your own on strange planets, he crossed his arms and glared at Jim. "Are you going with him to Romulus?" he growled, nodding towards Spock.

"Yes," Jim answered. "How did you find out about that?" He looked up at Spock. "I thought it was supposed to be a big secret?"

"Yeah, the Romulan Commander he brought with him didn't get that memo. She's been going around telling everyone all about how Spock's gonna unite the races and save the galaxy with his magic super-telepathy. Uhura's gonna call a staff meeting about it later to make sure no one, you know, tells anyone else." McCoy rolled his eyes. "And just so we're all on the same page, I'm coming with you."

Jim and Spock both sat up and stared at him.

"No," Spock said.

"Not a chance in hell," Jim snapped.

“Well...” McCoy drawled, clearly enjoying their reactions. “I already told Uhura that I was quitting and she already called Chapel and Chapel is already on her way here to take over my job. So...this is happening and neither of you get a say in it.”

“Bones!” Jim tried to argue anyway. “Do you have any idea how dangerous this mission is going to be?”

“Why do you think I’m coming?” McCoy scoffed. “If I let you two morons go off without me to take care of you you’ll both be dead within a week. So I’m going too. End of conversation. Jim, do need a pain killer? I’ll go get you a pain killer.” McCoy looked insultingly pleased with himself as he turned and left the room. Jim and Spock stared after him, a thousand possibilities running through their minds, each more horrific than the last.

“Spock.” Jim said.

“Yes Jim?”

“We have to find some way of getting out of this alive.”

“Agreed.”

“We can’t let Bones die because of something we dragged him into.”

“Agreed.”

“We’d never hear the end of it.”

“Indeed.”

“How the hell are we going to pull this off?”

“I would assume,” Spock answered slowly, looking at Jim with a warmth in his eyes that lit a fire in Jim’s soul. “We will figure it out as we go along.”

A sly grin spread over Jim’s face as he looked back at his friend, lover and partner in crime. “You know,” he said suggestively, “we are already in a bed...”

Spock’s answer was another kiss.

Freedom Is Standing in the Light

Syn Ferguson

A tree cracked the pavement where the cobbles met the wall and grew up as tall as a man. To the one who watched from the deep window or the arched doorway across the alley, it seemed to happen apart from the ebb and flow of Arketh traffic, outside time.

One day there was nothing but the whitewashed wall, scarred by overburdened carts and stick-wielding boys, then the young tree stood man high, swinging its green and silver leaves, throwing its graceful shadow over the plaster and the cobbles.

The watcher had no illusions. When a club was needed, or a fire, the living tree would be slain; yet it was the tree in the alley he watched, not the plantings in his water garden.

He had chosen his house because of its location in the alley. The hillmen took this narrow way from the north gate to the free quarter of the city. Any free man was wise to do so. Kahnsmen policed lesser forms of life from the wide ways the nobles took. So all the travelers from the steppes passed this door, marching south for adventure, selling their daughters into slavery, bringing their beasts and barter and stories.

It was the stories he bought, paying round silver coins for tales of the wild clans who lived up on the edge of the world. During the day a succession of small boys had cried his need to the passing crowds, pointing to the large, pointed ear drawn on his wall. At night he visited the inns, ignoring the drinks he ordered to listen to travelers' tales as if he believed them.

He was accounted rich without belonging to any clan. No one knew who his people were. Some said Southron; some said he flew in over the ice and was looking for a way back. Several times he had made up parties of hillmen to guide him on the Edge, and once he had forced them to take him clear to the ice, losing half the guides and all the animals, but he paid the clans well, and as the years passed he was accepted. It was a saying in the marketplace that a man might grow ears as long as he liked if he grew his purse longer.

This night the sun set in bloom of sulphur and brass. The sky faded to a red-brown dusk as the first wind blew the fine, fine dust in from the desert. When the light was gone and the traffic with it, he left off watching the tree and went to prepare

his meal. He had no servant to intrude on his solitude. He closed the door to the house, but left the gate open that led from the alley to the garden.

Water was wealth in these lowlands. He would not hoard it. Many hillmen, descending the stone passes and canyons from the Edge where water was free, would have suffered want of it but for that unlocked gate. At first the lowlanders had stolen from him -- a little, not enough to make him move -- but he had ignored them. Now there was less of it.

When he had eaten it was still too early to go out. As the silt sifted down underfoot the air cleared, and he waited in the garden, watching the stars brighten the dark. Arketh was a moonless world, far out at the tip of one spiral arm of the galaxy. Its dark sky was only sparsely spangled with stars, so the central knot of brilliance that filled one quarter of the dome drew the eye to its magnificence. That blaze was the heart of the galaxy, and beyond it, obscured by the glory, was the other arm, where his homeworld circled its sun.

The watcher's face was lean and dark, without much expression. When he heard the uneven rush of running feet and a tattered figure skidded through the gate, he turned to face the intruder without alarm. A long knife leveled at his chest he ignored. The runner was a youth, scarcely more than a boy, dressed in the long woolen shirt of the hillmen. The belt at his waist held an assortment of gear and weapons. His brown legs were bare to the knee where his soft boots tied. His long hair was light, his eyes green or amber, bright with total concentration and with pain. The snapped-off shaft of a throwing stick protruded from the back of his thigh and hampered his stride. Blood ran down his leg into his fur-lined boot. Other running feet clattered over the cobbles -- the hard-shod feet of city dwellers.

"In there," said the watcher, with a slight inclination of his head toward the arched entry to the house.

The runner hesitated, the knife still poised for action; then he jumped for shelter as his pursuers ran past the door, checked, and doubled back. Five of them spilled into the garden, giving tongue all at once, like a pack of hounds that tolerate each other for the sake of the prey.

They were sons of the city's lesser nobility by the clothes they wore, too young to be Kahnsmen yet, but eager to grow into it. Each of them had a weapon pointed at the watcher.

The leader silenced them with a snarl. "A running man, where is he?"

Dark eyes studied each face in turn, seeming not to see the threat. Finally the watcher shrugged.

"You must have lost him. No one but you is here uninvited. Search if you wish."

His indifference daunted them. They had no authority.

The leader's voice cracked in indignation as he replied. "Be glad this one isn't. He's killed three Kahnsmen. He'd as soon cut your throat as give you good evening."

The watcher made no reply, and one of the pack plucked at the leader's arm.

"He wouldn't go to ground right here in Spenarr; let's watch the gate."

With an insolent nod and no apology for their intrusion, the leader consented. The watcher followed them and, for the first time in many years, closed the iron gate and barred it. Then he returned to the pool and stood watching the small life there until all sound had died away. Gossamer fins fanned the water; languorous weeds swayed on the surface.

"You can come out," he said at last. "They have gone."

The boy came limping out, his weapon still in his hand, but under the watcher's dark eye, it wavered and fell. With a sigh, he sheathed it again. His breath was still coming fast; his bare chest, where the shirt fell open to his waist, rose and fell in a slowing rhythm. Even wounded, he moved with assurance. Powerful shoulders balanced the long legs, but he was still growing. His hands were a little too big for him yet -- square, the hands of a doer. He rubbed his forehead with the back of his wrist and offered a left-handed apology.

"I didn't mean to bring them down on you. I'll go now."

"You are welcome to stay."

"You'd be a fool to let me. What he said was true. I might cut your throat, and the Kahnsmen certainly would if they knew you'd sheltered me." The hot, light eyes brooked no compromise with truth, but the lips were thinned to a bitter line.

"If you do not tell them," the watcher said, "I will not."

The boy looked a little startled. He frowned, but before he could speak again, the watcher went on.

"How were you wounded?"

"Breaking out of the slave pits. My father told me never to turn my back on a dead man unless I'd cut his throat myself."

"Your father is a warrior?"

The boy's face closed again, controlling emotion. "Was. He's dead."

"A great loss to his people." It was the ritual phrase of condolence, but the boy refused it, lifting his chin a little.

"No. He was a clanless man. As I am."

On Arketh that was damning. Loss of clan affiliation was a death sentence on the Edge -- worse because the clanless man died in two worlds at once, flesh and spirit. He had no name to survive him in the realms of the dead. The boy's control as he spoke showed what the lack meant to him, but the mane of bright hair shaken back, the level stare, warned that there would be no pity asked or accepted.

"And I," said the watcher quietly. "Your wound needs care. Will you trust my skill?"

The feral stare faded, and abruptly the boy relaxed and grinned. "I'd be glad of help. It burns like fire."

Without comment, the watcher led the way to the kitchen and silently offered fruit, cheese and bread. The boy wolfed the food and watched with interest as his host lit the lamps and put two kettles on the fire, one with knives, tongs and needles in it. His chewing slowed as he watched the preparation and at last he shoved the food away.

"I hope I don't lose it when you cut me. It's the first time I've had enough to eat in a week. You must be rich to have a house this big. Don't you have any servants?"

"No."

The boy's quick eye inventoried the wealth of pots and food in the room. Ignoring his wound and a tendency of his leg to drag, he got up and made a circuit. Most of the utensils would be strange to him, but the frown lines between his brows seemed to reflect some deeper worry. Restlessly he swung around and studied the watcher.

"A clanless man, but rich. No friend of the Kahn's, since you put that pack off my trail, yet you're free. Why aren't you working in a quarry with your wealth in his coffers?"

"He does not know where my treasure is hidden. If he kills me he will not find it. The hare may dine with the hound if he brings the bone. On the Edge, money would not buy equal safety."

"No," said the boy. "We don't enslave strangers; we kill them, but you'd be free while you lived. Cities stink. My father warned me to stay out of them."

"What does a clanless man do with freedom?"

The boy acknowledged the hit with a deprecating smile, but his eyes focused on the middle distance as he looked into some interior landscape.

"He stands in the light, as long as he can."

They were quiet then, until the watcher pulled the simmering pots off the fire and put them on the wide table. The boy helped clear the remains of the meal, then eased himself up onto the dark wood and stretched out, belly down, pillowing his head in his arms. The watcher hung a lamp on a long cord from a beam over the table and wrung out a steaming rag with his strong hands.

"First I must clean the wound."

"You sound like my father. Clean the dishes, wash yourself, pick up this pigpen." There was no real resentment in his tone.

The watcher made no answer, but set about his task with a light, firm touch. The throwing stick had entered the thigh from above, striking down into the tendons at the back of the knee. The skin had been torn -- probably when the boy broke off the hampering shaft. The boy lay still, but the racing beat of his heart had started the bleeding again, and rhythmic tremors of pain or chill tensed the muscles in his leg as the blood was wiped away.

When the wound was clean, the watcher brought a length of cloth and slid it under the boy's thigh above the wound. He knotted it tightly, and almost in the same motion reached up to the angle of the boy's neck and shoulder. At his touch, the tense form slumped into unconsciousness.

Working swiftly now, the watcher cut deep into the flesh, following the shaft of the stick to find the barbed point. It was lodged against the bone and slippery in his fingers, but he freed it, rotated it to bring the barbs up through the incision, and had

it out. Dark blood trembled and welled from the wound, but there was no bright arterial gush. He had fashioned the curved needles himself, and now he painstakingly sewed the wound shut with thin strips of gut -- muscle, fat, and finally the skin. He made a neat job of it, like a man who has learned to rely on his own handiwork. He was wrapping the leg in clean cloth when the boy came swearing and panting back into consciousness.

"I fainted! But it's not so bad now, just aches like the devil. Did you put tar on it?"

"Tar?" An incredulous eyebrow climbed the watcher's forehead.

"Clan Davin's healer packs a wound with tar to stop the bleeding."

"Indeed. I used no tar. Nonetheless, the bleeding has stopped. Tell me how to reach your friends."

The boy raised himself on an elbow and shook his hair back to look up at his host with narrowed eyes. He was sweating and pale, closer to shock than the watcher liked, and refusing to acknowledge his weakness.

"I have no friends. Clan Davin might do me a service, if I asked. Why?"

"You do not wish to stay in the city."

"Oh. No. But they wouldn't trust you..." He ran a hand over his eyes, obviously trying to clear his mind and come up with a solution to the problem. He had the air of being used to solving them.

"You could leave a message at The Hanged Man. Show the barkeep this..." He fumbled at his neck, pulled something dangling on a thong over his head with an effort. The supporting elbow trembled. In the very act of holding out the object he dropped it and slumped over the edge of the table. Quick hands caught him. As if it was no burden to his strength, the watcher lifted the limp form and carried it through a curtain in to a room where a narrow bed and a low brazier were the only furniture. The room was warm, a concession to the second wind which would blow chill off the Edge as the night turned toward morning. The watcher knelt, stretched the boy on the bed and pulled a rough woolen blanket snug under his chin.

The young face was strong, full of impetuous life even in unconsciousness. The lips were even and firm. Long straight lashes cast a ragged shadow on the pale cheek. The closed eyes had been large and full of light, set deep under the sandy brows. The small human ears were round as seashells. The watcher reached out one lean hand and touched a bruise that stained the cheekbone. The hand hesitated, then

reluctantly withdrew. No. Generations of ancestors who had respected the privacy of the mind forbade it. He had broken enough laws.

He rose and returned to the kitchen, removed the traces of his surgery, then found the talisman where it had fallen under the table. He held it in the light. It was bone, cut from the horn of some large animal with a loop of wire. He could see the mark of the cutting on the back side, almost like a fingerprint.

He turned it over. There was carving on the front, but not the usual loops and swirls of Arketh art. This was an abstract design. Nine lines of varying lengths sprang from a central circle. The design was poorly balanced. Some of the lines were much longer than others, and yet the length did not increase in even intervals. Some of the lines terminated in dots, and one had a line across it. He ran his thumb over the surface. The work had the look of deliberation. The bone was polished and scraped, the fine lines even. He considered it again.

Nine lines springing from a circle, arranged in order of length. The third line had one dot, the fourth two, the fifth four, the sixth was crossed by a line.

Calculations progressed below the level of conscious thought as the watcher stood very still in the dark room, his thumb stroking the design...the diagram. One sun, nine planets. The third has one satellite, the sixth is known for its rings. A diagram of Earth's solar system carved for the clanless son of a clanless man. The watcher's face showed nothing. His thumb circled the design. Thirty years of search, thirty years of waiting and watching. One wild boy whose father was dead.

The effort it took to realize the two facts disoriented him, like the growth of the tree. Over him rushed a river of time, and it was the same river that washed other shores less durable. A tree can grow up in a night. A son can grow into manhood. The meaning of it eluded him, but his hand closed over the talisman, and the slow surge of his own blood sounded in his ears. He had stopped breathing. The room rocked around him...but no. Not yet. Air slid back into his lungs. There was still work to do. Feeling could come after.

Forgetting the cloak that hung by the door, the watcher let himself out into the night, locking the gate behind him as if it guarded the one thing of value in the world.

It was near morning when the boy awoke. The second wind was dying. Across the room the dark man sat against the wall, his eyes gleaming out of shadow. The look was so intense that the boy thought it must have worried him in his sleep, yet the man's words, when he spoke, were quiet.

"The men of Clan Davin will bring a cart for you soon. They will take you out of the city. Many were concerned for you."

"For Sarveth. They are glad to have him out of the slave pit today. In a year they will have forgotten." The boy's tone was bitter.

"You do not value friendship?" The deep voice was not pressing, and the boy responded to the detached interest in the tone.

"I want no man's friendship. Believing in it killed my father."

"Then I will not insult you with the offer of what you do not want."

Quick color flushed the boy's face, and his arrogant tone faltered. "I didn't mean -- you have been more than kind to me, sir -- "

Amusement warmed the deep voice momentarily. "No apology is necessary. Like you, I believe friendship a hazardous venture. And my cooking may also be one, but you should eat, and I have made what I think is a stew. Will you try it?"

"I can't repay you for any of this," the boy said ungraciously.

"I collect stories. You can tell me the tale of a clanless man who died because he believed in friendship -- after you have eaten."

"And if I survive," suggested the boy.

"That, too."

The boy ate almost enough to satisfy his host, then handed the bowl back.

"That was good, better than my story, I'm afraid."

"Why?"

The boy's face sobered, and he picked at the hem of his blanket as he answered.

"My father was a liar or a fool. What story is there in that?"

"You are not a liar, so I think he was not. Did you really think him a fool?"

"Not while he lived. He made it seem real. He said he came from beyond the ice, from a clan no one had heard of. He refused clan standing time and again. Even after my mother went to him, he wouldn't bend. He said it was against his law."

"Must it be a lie because it did not suit you?"

"No. But the friends he expected never came."

"Perhaps they did. Perhaps they could not find him, one man alone on the Edge. Perhaps they had to look in secret." The watcher's voice was low.

"Secret. That's what he always said. It was their law to keep secret. What law is worth a man's whole life? He was a great warrior. He could have been the leader of a clan, but he would not take a name. So I have none."

"You do not know what he had before. Perhaps...perhaps it was enough to justify the price." The watcher's dark face was lowered, his eyes hooded. The boy stared at him with lion-colored eyes.

"Not to me. If his friends came to me now and offered gold enough to walk on, I would spurn them. They caused his death."

"How did they do that?"

"He was always looking for someone, expecting someone. When he heard of a stranger, he would travel many days to see the man's face. Word came of such a one captured by Kahnsmen traveling north. He went after them. I wasn't with him. He was getting old. They..." He cleared his throat and forced it out. "They put a spear in his gut. The stranger was too cowed to help him. They left him to die. He was gone when we found him, and my mother lay down beside him and gave up her life from grief. I have sent that coward after him into hell, and five Kahnsmen dogs to follow him. I need no friends."

The watcher let the silence stretch. "Yet you risked the slave pits to free the son of Clan Davin's chief."

"Not for friendship, but to pay a debt. He helped me trail my father's killers. And if they ask me to join them, I will."

The boy looked toward the window, a gray square in the darker wall. He shook the hair back off his forehead and breathed the air off the Edge like a wild horse scenting water.

"Cities and crowds are not for me with their stale air, stale laws. If I shed blood again, it will be for a clanbrother who must aid me when I am in need."

"Isn't that friendship?"

"All men know what one clanbrother owes the other. If he fails, all men will know it and he will lose his name. It is *that* he protects. Friendship..." the boy's face twisted with pain. "Friendship is more than that. In all the years they didn't come, he never blamed them."

The boy stretched, impatient, a little embarrassed at revealing so much.

"A poor story, sir. I should have told you about the three-year winter, or fighting the worm from the ice, or how he rode an ice-floe into the camp of Clan Innon, but you have heard of that, surely?"

"Traveler's tales -- many of a fair-haired outlaw, but none that gave him name or place. None told how he died..." the watcher's voice faltered, "...or if he was happy."

The boy's keen gaze raked the tall figure, but for once the dark eyes were bent on the floor, as if the watcher felt he had asked an embarrassing question. The boy felt a chill that was not the wind off the Edge. The leather thong of his talisman hung down from between the watcher's clasped hands. He was gripping it until his knuckles showed white.

"He died fighting--and I think he was happy, most of the time. He didn't grieve, but sometimes he would watch the stars, just stand there and watch them, as you did in the garden..." From a throat suddenly gone dry, the boy asked, "*How long have you been asking travelers for these tales?*"

The watcher rose and went to the window, looked out, far past the walled garden into which it gave. He said, "Thirty years," as if it were nothing: a day, a week, the time it takes a tree to grow.

"For him?" It was an incredulous whisper.

"No," said the watcher, like a man who discovers a truth he has hidden, even from himself. "Not for him. For myself."

Tears rose in the boy's eyes. "If he could have lived one year more, could have known-- You would have taken him back to the clan beyond the ice?"

"No. We couldn't go back. I would have joined him," the sleek head bent, and the voice was dreamily low, "if he desired it."

The boy threw back the cover and limped across the room on his bandaged leg. He reached out, hesitated, then placed both hands on the watcher's lean

shoulders. The watcher started, as if the touch pained him. He raised his head but didn't turn. He didn't move away.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I said what I did about friendship. I didn't know. I was wrong."

Slowly the tension under his hands eased. After a moment he moved back. A cart turned into the alley, loud in the silence. The watcher turned and looked again at the tall boy with the bright hair and the stubborn jaw. The slightest hint of a smile curved his lips.

"I think your friends have come."

Answering warmth brightened the boy's face. "Yes, sir."

They walked together through the house and out the door. The watcher helped the nervous hillmen hoist the boy into the bed of the cart. They were anxious to go. The boy silenced them with an imperious gesture. The watcher held the talisman up.

"You could keep it, sir. He carved it himself."

The watcher shook his head. "It was meant for you -- it's the sign of his clan. I will think of you wearing it."

"But I'd like to give you something...." At the actual moment of parting he was finding it difficult to go, but every heartbeat increased the danger to driver and guards. Then the vitality flashed forth, pleasure in giving pleasure. "You never asked my name; it might mean something to you; it was one of his clanwords."

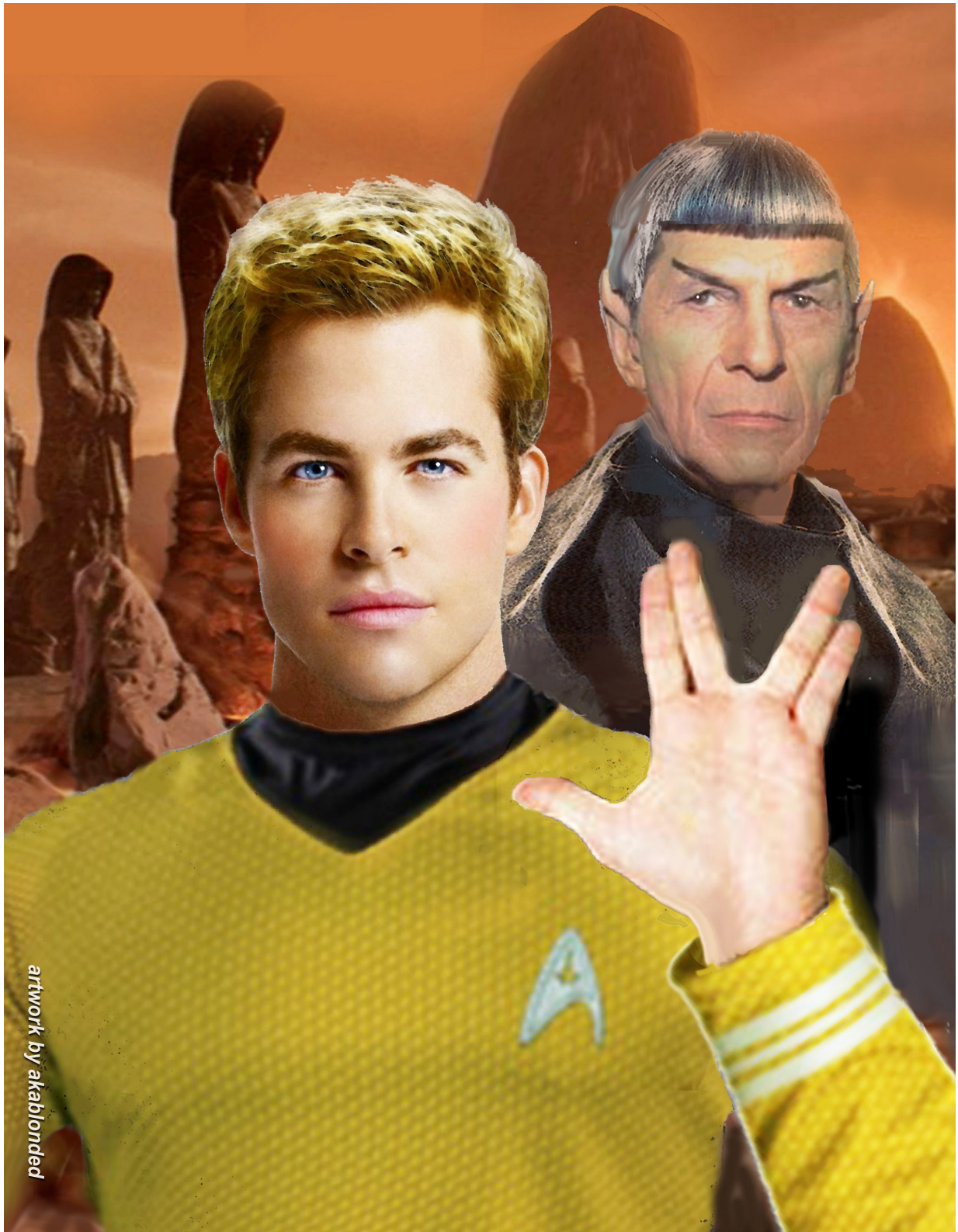
"I would be honored to know it."

"Spock. My name is Spock. Good fortune, sir. Thank you." He laughed. The hillman started the cart with a jolt, and the laugh was the only thing he left behind him as they clattered around the corner and out of sight.

"Spock," said the watcher. He listened until the last rattle of the cart had faded away. The quarter was quiet. One last star, quick and golden, moved across the sky -- a new star, one that had appeared a year after his own arrival. The sun came up, spilling brilliance over the Edge from the high country the boy was bound for, where he was shaping the strong pattern of his life. Freedom, he'd said, was standing in the light.

For the last time the watcher studied how the tree grew so abruptly up into the air, making its place in the world. Each branch, each leaf was edged with light. The

tree's dark shadow was an elongated, angular twin of itself that stretched twice the tree's length down the wall, but they sprang from the same source, and when he walked across the cobbles and broke off a leaf, both trees, bright and dark, trembled to the root.



Hold My Broken Heart Gently

Ashaya T'Reldai

Hold my broken heart gently
Though the shards may bite and bleed;
Gather the shattered pieces in your loving hands
And knit them together again.

Hold the fragments of my mind,
Friend, brother, lover of my soul.
Weave them together tenderly with your own
So that we may never be parted.

Hold my battered spirit, *ashayam*,
And in your compassion,
Heal the bruises and ease the sting of scars
And make me whole with yourself.

Hold my torn and beaten bloodied body,
T'hy'la, in your kind embrace;
And let your tears, O eternal companion,
Be like rain to parched ground: a sign of grace.

Intersections

alrightcat

United States of America – Riverside, Iowa. [4th January 2015]

As the sky lightens over the Iowan cornfields, a man stands alone in his room. It is scarce, bare; everything that had made this house a home has been long packed and sent almost halfway across the country. There is nothing much left now. Around him, the dust motes swirl and dance in the early glow of sunrise.

There is nothing left to do here. He turns around and walks out of the room, footsteps like thunder in the quiet of the dawn. He picks up a beaten up leather jacket draped over an old chair and puts it on as he walks along the hallways of his house. There are patches of discolouration on the walls from where previously photo frames had hung; he had made sure they were all packed safely into boxes and sent them first to his new home.

Downstairs, a car horn sounds, jerking him out of his thoughts. The man hurriedly picks up his duffel bag by the door and heads out of the house for the last time. A taxi is waiting for him, and the driver rolls down the windows to look at him appraisingly.

“Morning, sir. You’re James Kirk?”

The man smiles, his grey eyes flashing. “Yeah, I am.”

“Alright then. Hop on.”

He falls asleep in the taxi an hour into the ride to the hushed chords of country music from the radio. He dreams again.

The golden fields of Iowa so familiar to him slowly blur in his dreamscape to something red, warm and alien. Before his sluggish mind can process it, however, the scene changes. These dreams have a fleeting, flickering quality to them, almost like a flame shuddering in the wind.

The landscape shudders and the red desert is suddenly strewn with metallic debris and fire, pillars of acrid black smoke rising into the sky. The heat James feels is unnaturally realistic, and for a moment Jim thinks he might be dreaming of Hell. Over the sounds of explosions, he hears a woman’s tortured screams clear against the

damning silence of the desert, and he feels a roiling in his stomach and barely holds down his breakfast down.

Then, the picture changes, and James knows: it's him, again.

The silence of the room he is in is disorientating after the chaos of the ravaged desert. The high glass ceilings and chrome steel speak of progress and technology, but James knows by now that the people in this scene are not human. The beings seated at the high table all have pointed ears, slanted eyebrows, with bowl-cut hair, as does the man he is standing next to.

"...You have achieved so much despite your disadvantage. Your father would approve."

He feels the man besides him stiffen. "If you would clarify, Minister, to what disadvantage are you referring?"

"Your human mother."

There is a beat, and James turns his head to look at the handsome face of the alien he has come to know in his dreams. His slanted brows are slightly furrowed, and his warm (human) eyes turn to look at an ostentatiously empty seat at the table.

"I...I thank you, Ministers."

The beings at the high table began to rise. "With the situation at hand, it is dire that we can get as much manpower as possible, Spock. Session dismissed."

Beside him, Spock lowers his head and clenches his fists, and James' heart aches. He reaches out an astral arm to touch Spock's pale cheek, but the scene begins to blur, and he cannot help but watch as it fades to black.

Beta Quadrant – USS Enterprise (Stardate 2260.40)

"Receiving communication from Admiral Komack, Captain. Priority one."

Kirk blinks blearily at the ceiling of his room, awoken by the loud chirp of his communicator. He turns his head slowly to look at the bedside chronometer; it is only 0200, way too early for a call with Komack.

“Captain?”

Uhura’s voice slices through the haziness of sleep, and he sits up in his bed, stifling a yawn.

“Kirk here. Patch him through to my console, I’ll take it here.”

“Acknowledged.”

Kirk pushes his blanket away, brushes his hair with his fingers and rubs the sleep grit out of his eyes. Shuffling over to his desk, he pulls his tunic over his bare chest on the way. He forgoes wearing pants; if Komack can call him during such an ungodly hour, he can deal with Kirk not wearing pants while answering.

By the time he reaches his console, the Admiral is already on the screen waiting for him. He makes sure to position the camera to only show himself from the waist up.

Komack’s face is stony, as usual. “Captain Kirk.”

“Admiral. Sorry for the delay, I wasn’t expecting a call at this hour.”

“I understand, Kirk. But I received some new orders from top brass, and I need to know if you’re up for it.”

Immediately, Kirk straightens up, the remaining cottony feel of slumber cleared from his head. “As you know, Admiral, the Enterprise is currently on a star charting mission. I believe we can afford to take on new orders.”

“Good,” Komack intones. “I need the Enterprise to rendezvous at the site of the Narada wormhole. An anomaly has been detected and Command needs to know if this poses a threat.”

The Narada, Kirk thinks to himself, back to the event that earned him his command so many years ago. This anomaly could be as serious as a bug bite, but he knows that the Federation cannot afford another incident like Nero, especially after the devastation Khan has wreaked upon Earth.

“I understand, sir. We already know the coordinates – we’ll plot in a course now.”

“Good. I’ll send you the mission brief. Komack out.”

The screen of his console goes blank, and Kirk is left alone in the dim 25% lighting of his cabin. Idly, he notices the light of his bathroom sluicing into his own room via the gap on the floor. He hears the low hum of the sonic sink running, and he wonders if Spock – the man he shares a bathroom with – is going to sleep soon.

Kirk suddenly feels hollow, and he swallows down the familiar tightness of his throat and blinks away the stinging of his eyes. It is dangerous thinking about his First Officer like that. He hurriedly switches off his console and takes in a breath.

It is futile entertaining thoughts of Spock standing by his side against the stars, of blue and black spilling onto white bed sheets. Since he couldn't get Spock to know, to accept his feelings when he was dying, he's come to doubt that Spock feels anything more than platonic for him.

The sonic humming from the sink stops, and irrationally Kirk strains his ears harder to catch the sounds of his First Officer moving around in the bathroom. He can only watch, however, as the light from the bathroom fades into blackness, and he allows himself to lean against the bulkhead for a while.

United States of America – Florida, Kennedy Space Centre. (6th January 2015)

James stands awkwardly in the lobby, a duffel bag in hand. Around him, people are walking with purpose and talking in hushed tones. Standing still in this sea of movement does not help lessen the throbbing pain behind his eyeballs.

He rubs his hand wearily over his brow and drags it over his face. James dreamt again last night of pointed ears and flushed emerald skin, and he awoke with sticky thighs and a pounding migraine. Something is wrong with him, he knows; it isn't normal to be dreaming so intensely of some non-existent alien-like being. He knows by now that medication doesn't help either. His therapists don't have an answer, and who can blame them?

Someone taps him on his shoulder, and he knows who it is before he fully turns around. He is greeted with warm blue eyes and gets pulled into a hug before James can protest.

“James! Good to see you again, son.”

James winces in his grip, suddenly feeling too much like a ten-year-old for his liking. “Yeah, Pike. It’s nice to see you too. Do you mind, uh, letting me go, though? Migraine.”

Reluctantly, the arms around him pull away, and James can now properly look at the man he has come to know as his father. Standing there in a wrinkled dress shirt, despite the passage of time, Christopher Pike has barely changed from the man that pulled him out of the orphanage 25 years ago. He feels a familiar shit-eating grin carve onto his face despite his pounding headache.

“Yeah, it’s nice to finally be here,” James commented, changing his hold on his duffel bag. He can’t help but feel a fluttering against his chest; this place was the subject of so many of his childhood dreams and aspirations, and to finally be here makes him strangely nervous.

“It sure is. Anyway, I’ve been sent here to collect you and escort you to the meeting rooms for the quick debrief on what happened.” At that, Pike smiles, eyes going bright in restrained excitement. “We’re keeping it secret for now, but since you’re going to be needed for this, you have to know what’s going on.”

Pike leads him down further into the building, slicing expertly through the sea of people, and James hurries after him.

“James,” Pike starts, after the doors of the elevator slides closed. “How... are you?”

James stiffens, his grip on his duffel bag tightening. Pike was the only other person he let know about his persistent dreams, and the only one to believe him. He turns his head to look at him, but ends up looking at somewhere over his left shoulder instead.

Five years ago Christopher Pike had been the one to disqualify him from the space program.

James isn’t as angry now as he was. Still, he can’t help but feel resentment at having his dream taken away from him by the man he trusted the most. Intellectually, he understood why; his dreams were worrying, to say the least.

Though emotionally, he still feels a squeezing ache in his chest at the thought that the only person he had dared confide in had denied him the thing he had lived and breathed for. After that night, James had run away to the old farmhouse in Iowa, the only thing his dead parents had left him, and spent the first night polishing off a bottle of whisky alone.

He doesn't make a move to look at Pike as they walk out of the elevator, but he knows that the old man is asking out of concern for him.

"I'm fine, Pike. I just slept in a weird position last night, is all."

James tries not to squirm as he feels a pair of sharp blue eyes on his downturned head. As much as he hates feeling like a gawky 10 year old, he also misses someone caring for him. For a moment, he lets the warmth of being cared for wash over himself; he hadn't felt like this for too long.

Pike says nothing but pats him on the shoulder, and the comforting weight of it makes him his chest feel slightly warmer.

They eventually stop in front of a nondescript door, and Pike pushes the door open to reveal a whole room of suits, with all eyes on them.

James suddenly feels underdressed in a wrinkled shirt and cheap pin-on tie. He swallows, and hopes that he doesn't get disqualified over his dressing of all things. He tries to give them a smile, but he knows that it looks more like a grimace than anything. Embarrassed, he looks away from the unimpressed looks of everyone in the room and stares at the plush gold carpeting instead, feeling his heart sink impossibly low in his stomach.

Pike clears his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the candidate: Mr. James Tiberius Kirk. Before we begin the meeting, I would like to clarify that he is brought in here today without any prior knowledge of the plan we have and will be discussing today."

James' limbs feel like lead as he stumbles his way into the only empty chair in the room at the far end of the table. He sits up unnaturally stiff, and tries to pretend not to notice that almost everyone in the room is sizing him up. He can do this, he tells himself. James ignores the confusion and nerves rolling about in his stomach and looks straight ahead where Pike is sorting out a few documents at his seat on the other end of the table.

"May I ask everyone to look at the meeting briefs in front of you, please." James looks down to see a thick stack of papers lying innocuously in front of him. The front is emblazoned with official symbols, and James recognizes a few. The crest of the United Nation's Security Council, NASA, CNSA, RNSA and the logos of other governmental space agencies are stamped onto the cover, along with the word "Confidential" in bold and underlined. James swallows, the magnitude of this meeting beginning to dawn on him. He should've put on a nicer shirt.

“If you would look at page 35,” Pike intones, flipping through his own handout. The silence is broken by the sound of shuffling papers, and James snaps out of his reverie enough to flip through his own packet, only to see his own grey eyes staring back at him. The confusion he feels is turning slowly but surely into a rising wave of panic. His eyes dart across the page, barely registering the twenty other pictures of other astronauts and words like *imperative* and *wormhole* and *anomaly*.

James looks up at Pike, eyes wild. *What is going on?*

“Mr Kirk,” Pike begins, voice suddenly more serious than he has ever heard it. “This meeting is held in the strictest confidence. What we will be discussing here cannot be let known to others, do you understand?”

A pause. “What *the hell* is happening?”

???? - ??? (Date Unknown)

A clock ticks in the room. It is silent, blessedly so, and for a moment it is almost as if everything is normal. A man is bent over a desk, dark hair gleaming in the harsh sunlight of the desert. He has not slept for four days, and has not rested for a few months now.

Too accustomed to it, he does not react to the sound of footsteps outside the door.

This time, however, there is no quick rapping of the knuckles against the fortified steel doors. Instead, he hears the sharp *snick* of the lock being opened and the whispery sound of metal over stone.

“Spock,” a gentle voice calls out from above him. “Spock, you have to rest.”

“This report is of utmost importance, Mother,” the man replies, not deigning to even look up from the various tablets strewn over the table. “You know that.”

A shadow falls over his tablets, and Spock stops writing. “Vulcans are capable of performing under less than optimal stress levels.”

A warm, soft hand lands gently on the top of his head, and only then Spock looks up to meet the red-rimmed eyes of his mother.

"I know, Spock." He feels the hand slide down from his hair to cup at his cheek. "I married and gave birth to one." A frown mars his mother's otherwise beautiful face. "You need to eat, at least."

In the harsh light of day, his mother cuts a dark fragile figure dressed in all black. Spock knows, black is a colour with significant meanings in his mother's culture. Still, he does not need to understand that to see that his mother is still mourning: her bloodshot eyes and haggard complexion tells him what he needs to know.

As gently as he can, he trails two fingers over the back of his mother's hand in a rare sign of familial affection. "I will, mother. After I have completed what I must do."

"You haven't eaten in three days. Please, this can wait at least for a while."

The increasing desperation in his mother's voice gives him pause. The death of his father had been devastating to the both of them, but unlike Spock, she does not try to reason Sarek's death with logic, and accept his passing. It is typical of her species that they do not try to control their emotions, and it is phenomenon that is of both interest and distaste to Vulcans.

That is not to say that Spock has not been affected by the passing of his father at all. He, however, does not have the luxury or the benefit of doubt to be mourning as openly as his mother is. There is nothing to do but to soldier on, especially in times like these. There will be time to grieve later, in the privacy of his chambers.

"I cannot rest, Mother," he says frankly, feeling the warm hand on his cheek slide away. "As I am half-Vulcan, the Council requires me to put in more effort to prove my worth as a seat holder. Additionally, this ceasefire we now have with the Romulans will not last more than one week. We must prepare in order to prevent further civilian loss."

"I understand," his mother whispers, suddenly sounding wearier than she has ever been in years. "But, oh, you are far too young to be carrying the weight of Vulcan on your shoulders."

"What is, is," Spock replies, the history and weight of his words resonating in the room. "I cannot afford to think otherwise."

As his mother turns around to walk away, his grip on the pen tightens, suddenly feeling an overwhelming sense of desperation. He does not hesitate before blurts out: "Have you received anything? From him?"

Immediately, he curses his weakness. Spock should not be thinking about *him*, not at a time like this. Nonetheless, it has been a while since the last time the transmitters have received any other messages from this mysterious man of his mother's race. To his shame, he is exceptionally eager to see this man again, to the extent that he watches the video clips the Vulcan Space Institute received in the darkness of his own office repeatedly.

A small laugh breaks out of his mother as she turns around to face him again, face lighting up briefly and amusement and maternal love. He can already feel his ears flushing, and he looks down back at his tablets again.

"I apologize if I appear presumptuous – "

"It's okay, Spock." He watches his mother's face soften into a now rare smile. "I'll keep an eye on the VSI channels for you."

"Thank you, mother," Spock replies, disgracefully embarrassed for a Vulcan of his standing. "I am... grateful."

There is a moment of silence before his mother replies. "Spock, the place where I came from – Earth – and where this man comes from has yet to reach warp capability. A mere accident brought me here, and..." She trails off, expression wary. "I don't want you to get your hopes up."

Spock's face feels hot, and he is awash with shame and a strange sense of melancholy. "I am aware."

His mother sighs again. She has been uncharacteristically muted, her cheerful eyes now muddled by stress and grief. Spock wishes he could take away some of that pain, and he knows the sooner this war ends, the sooner he would be able to spend time with the only relation he has left. He looks down back at his tablets, the swirling Vulcan words scrolling across the screens. "Leave me now, Mother. I will be finished soon."

Alpha Quadrant – USS Enterprise (Stardate 2260.42)

"Estimated time of arrival, Mr Sulu?"

The bridge is mostly silent, with all personnel focused on their current task at hand. Kirk watches as Sulu checks his calculations on his station again before speaking.

“ETA in about eighteen and a half hours, Captain.”

Sulu’s voice is terse, and Kirk understands. Having asked that question at least five times in the past two hours, he has a feeling that his helmsman is *this* close to getting up from his station to throttle him in his chair. He can tell that his restlessness is affecting the rest of the bridge crew too. Uhura is tapping her nails against her own console, Chekov is swearing quietly under his breath in frantic Russian, and Spock is – well, Spock.

Ever since the change of course, there has been an uneasy roiling in Kirk’s stomach, and he fears something will go terribly wrong with this mission. Everything about it is ominous, from the inexplicable anomaly detected from the Narada wormhole, to the suddenly tense atmosphere in the ship; Kirk knows that nothing good could possibly come out of this.

In eighteen hours the Enterprise will be arriving at the rendezvous site, just before the estimated time the anomaly is due to take place. Kirk’s shift would be over by then, but he knows he has to be ready for action at the mission point. He didn’t sleep well last night, or the night before, and Kirk can already feel the bone-deep exhaustion kicking in after almost twelve hours on duty. He’s vaguely surprised that his good doctor friend has yet to pay a visit to the bridge and drag him off to sleep, but even he knows that he’s bitten off far more he could chew again.

He briskly summons up his beta shift replacement to the bridge and leaves the conn to Sulu before stepping into the turbolift. But before the turbolift doors could slide fully shut, he hears the emphatic sighs of relief of the whole bridge crew at his exit.

He paces the corridors leading up to his quarters, the heavy *thump thump* of his boots hitting the metal deck. Kirk keeps his ears open, and there it is, another pair of much lighter footsteps trailing after him.

“Captain,” a familiar rumbling voice sounds out from behind him. “You are displaying signs of undue fatigue and insomnia. I suggest you seek medical attention from the Doctor McCoy.”

Kirk swallows a sigh. “I’m fine, Mr. Spock. Aren’t you supposed to be on duty? Go back to the bridge.”

“Negative, my shift ended approximately two hours ago. I chose to remain on the bridge with you, sir.”

“I – Fine. Go get some rest, I’ll see you later when we reach the rendezvous point.”

A hand lands gently on his shoulder and Kirk stops in his tracks, silently cursing his fluttering heartbeat.

“I believe that you are suffering from emotional trauma, Captain. Please allow for a psychological evaluation upon your person whenever possible.”

Kirk is shocked into silence. He pauses, turning around to meet Spock’s infuriatingly shielded eyes. “Are you questioning my ability to command, Mr. Spock?”

Spock furrows his brows, a sign of confusion at his Captain’s sudden anger. “No, Captain. I am merely – “

“Really? Because it sounds like you are.”

“I am not.” Spock insists, annoyingly calm in the face of his anger. “I am only caring for your welfare as your first officer and friend.”

“Friend?” Jim spits, chest almost heaving with anger and betrayal. “If you’re really my friend, act like it.”

He doesn’t wait for his commander to answer before he turns away, eyes wet with frustration. Kirk knows he probably should’ve gone to Bones when the insomnia started. Even though he accepts the logic of Spock’s concern, it had still hurt to hear his First question his psychological health.

His steps gets slower, and he eventually stops in his tracks, a dawning sense of dread pervading his being. *Shit*, he thinks. Spock probably hadn’t meant that to be offensive. Kirk doesn’t know what’s wrong with him lately; he can’t get a good read on Spock anymore, since after Khan. Spock has been distanced from him – not rude or borderline insubordinate, like after the Nero incident, but politely removed.

Kirk, in retaliation, has been snappish right back towards Spock to get back the reactions that he used to get out of him. He doesn’t understand anything, and he feels he’s just grasping at straws trying to understand what has happened between them.

The torch he's carrying for his First Officer is far from snuffed out, however. If anything, it's grown ever stronger. He knows Spock went absolutely batshit crazy after he died; Kirk spent countless nights watching the security tapes from after his death. He also knows Spock broke up with Uhura sometime during his stint in limbo, and that only serves to add fuel to this one-sided adoration. Previously, he could reason to himself that Spock was taken and he was lucky to even qualify for the position of 'friend', but now, Kirk hopes.

His feet takes him in the direction of his quarters, head hanging low.

He knows it's no use thinking any more about this. If it's anything to go by, Spock hasn't shown anything remotely close to romantic interest in Kirk. Perhaps Spock already knows about this pathetic crush, and is just politely distancing himself from him as a form of rejection.

A chill pervades his being at the thought. He can envision Spock's pity already, warm brown eyes cold with it, like how one is sympathetic to a rat caught in a trap.

He quickly keys in the code to his quarters and stumbles inside, trying to keep his emotions all under wraps. Kirk doesn't even bother taking off his boots before tumbling into bed and squashing his face into a pillow to drown out his jumbled thoughts. Hopefully, sleep will claim him before he loses his mind completely.

United States of America – Texas, Johnson Space Centre. (10th January 2015)

"James! James, hold up."

Pike's voice calls out to him just when he steps out of the Sonny Carter Training Facility, and he looks around to see his adoptive father power walking from the other end of a hallway towards him.

"Pike," he says in greeting, affording a tired smile as the graying man approaches. James is absolutely bone-tired; he started training the moment he stepped foot into Houston. "What's up?"

"Walk with me for a while, won't you?"

Before James could refuse, Pike interrupts him with a glint in his eye. "Your session at the Simulation has been postponed. I think you'll find that your next hour is free, son."

So it wasn't a request. "Sure," he said, exhausted. "Do you mind if we sit somewhere first? I've been on my feet since 6 am."

They walk in silence to a secluded area outside the building and James allows himself to collapse on the nearest stone bench, and Pike looks at him strangely.

"What, never seen a man tired before?"

Pike shakes his head, and sits down next him sedately. "I'm sorry for calling you on such short notice. You really shouldn't have to push yourself like this."

"Are you kidding? If you didn't, I would've never spoken to you again." James laughs, a quiet but genuine one. "We've actually found sentient alien life, holy shit."

"I know, and it's all thanks to you." A warm hand thumps him solidly on the back, and he feels his cheeks warming up. "Your messages got through to them."

When James had recorded the audio recordings for SETI all those years back, he would never have thought that they would actually find a recipient.

Sure, the Institute did give him a script to read off, but nevertheless he never told them about the encryptions he had put into those audio files with his own personal anecdotes. There was nothing harmful; of course, James would never express any opinion of his that was controversial onto tapes meant to represent the whole of humankind. He mostly kept to silly little stories, like what his favorite brand of cereal was, or what the weather was like on that particular day.

He is mortified. James would be the first human ever to get speak to aliens, and all he did was talk about Lucky Charms.

There is a rustling to his side, and James looks to see Pike retrieving a sandwich from his satchel, and hurriedly catches it when Pike lightly throws it at him.

"You probably haven't eaten. Eat up for later."

Pike is right. He can't remember when was the last time he's eaten, only realizing now when he's peeling the plastic off the sandwich.

"Thanks."

"No problem. How are the other candidates? Is anyone stealing your lunch money yet?"

“Ha ha,” James says, mouth full with ham and cheese. “Very funny. They’re all very nice people, thank you very much.” He pauses for a while to swallow. “What are my chances?”

“Honestly? Your mental state is still in question. Otherwise, you’d stand a pretty good chance. It’s your message the aliens replied to, anyway. But – “ He stops in the middle of his sentence, his stance suddenly reflective, “–how badly do you want to go onto this mission?”

James swallows the last of his sandwich and shifts around to face Pike. “What do you mean? Of course I want to go for this.”

“James, you have to realize that this mission is most likely a one way thing. We just aren’t capable of two way trips into deep space.” He retrieves a manila folder and passes it to James. “I just received this from the higher-ups today. These are the specifications for the ship we’re going to be sending out.”

A realization dawns on him as he flips through the papers. “You really aren’t expecting anyone to return from this.”

A beat. “No. These candidates here – they don’t have much to lose. No family, nothing. Once you get onto that ship, the chances of you ever seeing Earth again would be close to zero.”

“Why did you sign me up then?”

“Well, if I didn’t, you would never have spoken to me again.” Pike looks older than James has ever remembered him being, the lines around his eyes and mouth drawn tight together in tension. “I know how much this means to you. You’re meant to be an explorer, and this looks to be the only way to get you up. Do you – do you still want to go aboard this mission?”

James thinks of his small apartment and empty fridge. Then he thinks of Pike. “Do you want me to go?”

A silence. “No. No, I don’t. But that shouldn’t mean anything. Don’t let me pull you down.”

“I –“

“I’ve already done it once. I’m getting old, and I can’t be selfish. I want to see you do the things you were meant to do, even if it means never seeing you again.”

James goes to his simulations and training, but all he can think of is the choice he is about to make; to leave Earth for good. If he seemed particularly moody, his fellow candidates said nothing about it and continued to work as usual.

When he gets back to his tiny apartment, he can't bring himself to shut down and sleep like he normally would. Instead, he sits at his desk, reads through the specifics of the ship, and thinks.

Clearly, the technology in this mission is absolutely state of the art, but it still isn't enough for sustainable interstellar travel. The tech has been developed in secrecy away from the public eye, so naturally they have yet to undergo actual test flights. Theoretically, they would work, if the calculations were correct, but there was still a huge margin for error left.

The ship would be called the *ITS Enterprise*, a small spacecraft able to support up to two people and fitted with an untested cryogenic sleep system. For all intents and purposes, it is a sleeper ship able to carry out rudimentary functions intended to transport the two people on board to their destination.

Tomorrow, the candidates would undergo cryosleep for the first time to test the actual functionality of the machine. It won't be for long; they'll stay in their cell for about ten minutes first to test its functionality before increasing the time spent in the cryosleep by intervals of five minutes, in hopes that it'll prepare the astronauts for potentially years of travel time.

James thinks of all that time he would potentially spend in artificial slumber, and he knows that there's a chance he might never wake up from it. He wonders if he would still dream of the mysterious alien, even then.

He then thinks of the man who had raised him, and he thinks of leaving him behind for a shot at the improbable. Truth to be told; Earth has nothing for him but boring dead end jobs and strings of meaningless relationships. The only thing tethering him to this planet is Pike. He breathes in the stale air of his apartment and reaches for his phone.

After three rings, Pike picks up. "You've made up your mind, kid?"

"Yes. I want to be put up there into space. I'm sorry."

From there on, time passes by in a blur. Cramming two years of training into a few months is brutal, to say the least. He stands firm as the other candidates drop out of the race from sheer exhaustion, until only two of them are left. The other

candidate is a woman of petite figure from Japan who goes by Reika, and the only thing James knows about her is that she has no family whatsoever.

And so, James is the only one present when she is put into cryosleep. He shakes her hand as she quietly lies down in her cell, and he watches until she is fully asleep, the cell door sliding shut. Then, in the loaded silence of the ship, he waits.

James is already in his full flight suit, ready to be sealed into his cryogenic cell. He is waiting, however, for Pike to come and see him for the last time. Absentmindedly, he slides into his cell and sits down. His hand are shaking, and as much as he likes to pretend that he isn't afraid of what's to come, he is still human, and the concept of eternal sleep hasn't fully sunk into his brain yet.

At least, he thinks, he'll dream. That might not be such a good thing, after all considering the sometimes gruesome nature of them, anything really would be preferable to emptiness. James might see *him* again, though, which is nice to think about.

The sound of a door hissing open snaps him out of his revelry. He looks up from his hand to see Pike entering the room with his head bowed low to avoid hitting it against the low ceiling of the spacecraft.

"Pike."

Embarrassingly, his voice cracks. He isn't ready for this, not by a far shot, but James doesn't want to appear so. Pike would worry.

Pike looks absolutely exhausted, his countenance frighteningly fragile. James's heart aches at the sight. "James. Are you all set?"

He laughs hollowly. "Yeah, as ready as possible, I guess. What about you?"

He waves his hand absentmindedly as he comes to sit down on the edge of James' cell. "Don't worry about me. You should think about yourself now."

A wave of guilt threatens to spill over his chest over the sight of the suddenly aged man in front of him. *How can I not worry when I'm leaving you behind?*

"I'm sorry." He can't help the few tears that slip out of the corner of his eyes. "I don't want to leave you."

Besides him, Pike frowns, heartache written clearly all over his face. "Its fine, I'm going to be fine. Listen, kid, I don't have much time here. Take this." He hands over a little plastic box sealed carefully shut. "Every astronaut should have a care

package, and I made one for you. Take care of it, and take care of yourself, you hear me?”

James grasps the little box in his hands gently, and he tries his best to hold in his shuddering breaths. A small beeping sound starts up somewhere, signaling his turn to enter into cryosleep. He looks back up at Pike, grey eyes shot with red.

“Will you stay with me? Until I fall asleep.”

“Of course.”

He slips lower into his cell, and feels the cell begin to chill. Irrationally, he feels his heart begin to race, and only now does the full impact of his decision hit him. James can’t look anywhere else but into Pike’s anguished eyes, and he knows that this would be the very last pair of human eyes he’ll ever see.

“Pike – Dad – “

“I’m here. Don’t struggle, James.”

“Please – Look at me – “

A plastic sheet slowly rises over his entire figure, and the cold is starting to shut down his biological systems. James struggles to stay awake, but now he can barely make out anything beyond a blur now. He doesn’t want to sleep, not yet.

The door of his cell hisses shut over his head, and he is encased in complete darkness. It’s getting even colder now, and James feels a mask clamping onto his mouth and nose, providing him with oxygen. The temperature continues to drop, and he can no longer help his eyelids sliding shut.

The last thing he hears is the muffled sound of a hand touching the door of his cell, and then he is no more.

Vulcan – Vulcan High Council (Date Unknown)

Spock feels the hairs at the back of his neck prickle at the absolute silence in the room. Next to him, his mother is absolutely stone still, face concealing her usual gentleness.

“Councilor Spock, are you absolutely sure you are thinking clearly?”

He tries not to show how thoroughly irritated he is at the entire Vulcan Council. He has spent countless nights toiling over this proposal and consulted with his mother to gain a thorough insight into his subject. He did not put in so much effort to only be ridiculed by what should be his peers.

“Yes, Councilor Storak. Rest assured I did think of each and every possible ramification of this proposal if, of course, it should pass. Fellow councilors, I see no logic in rejecting a proposal without exploring the benefits it will bring to Vulcan, especially now in her state of need.”

“But this proposal is radical, and goes against the principle of our prime directive.”

“This is no time to argue about ethics, considering the state of emergency we are in. Councilor Storak, do you think it more ethical to stick staunchly to a rule meant to ensure the progress of other worlds at the risk of destroying our own?”

“Nevertheless, Councilor Spock, it is the humans you are planning to ask assistance from. We know nothing about them beyond a few reconnaissance missions. There is nothing to assure us that they will not turn on us after we make first contact.”

“There is logic in your statement, but I must refute it. The most probable course of action the Romulans will take after Vulcan will be for the subjugation of Earth. Humans not as wholly unintelligent as you believe, they will see the logic of the situation and join forces with us. We are pressed for choice, Councilor Storak; the Tellarites are too engrossed with their skirmishes with the Andorians to aid us. The Betazed are cannot be counted upon. We are under siege, and our rations have a finite term. The only logical way out is to arm the closest planet and to ask for support there.”

There is a silence following his words, and he feels his mother’s grip on his knee tighten.

“Councilors, if we may proceed into the voting procedure?”

There is a murmur of agreement around the table, and Spock knows that half the battle is already won. He looks to his mother, who is smiling a little out of the corner of her mouth. Across their familiar bond, he hears his mother laugh.

“All those for contact with Earth, raise your hands.”

Irrationally, Spock holds his breath as the hands slowly start to rise in the air. One, two, three, four – more and more hands go up, and Spock counts them all until they stop.

“All those against contact with Earth, raise your hands.”

He watches as the usual few rigid traditionalists raise their hands, and then some.

“The vote is 15 – 6, with 15 for, and 6 against; by majority, this motion passes.”

Voices erupt at the table again, and Spock tries his hardest not to gloat at the obvious contempt on Councilor Storak’s face. His objections would ultimately go unanswered; Vulcan has lost too much to keep with their old ways.

After the proposal has gone through the proper channels, he would start work replying to the Earth messages from the SETI Institute he had secretly collected from one James T. Kirk.

Soon, he thinks.

USS Enterprise – Narada Wormhole (Stardate 2260.42)

“Captain on ze bridge!”

Kirk steps onto the bridge and nods at the conning officer as she vacates his seat. With the exception of Chekov and Spock, the alpha bridge crew is off duty, and instead the beta shift bridge crew is manning the consoles. Kirk studiously ignores the stare of his First Officer as he slides neatly into his chair, his eyes only on the viewscreen ahead.

“Report, Helmsman.”

“You got here just in time for arrival, Captain. We are dropping out of warp in approximately one minute.”

“Good. Status update, Mr. Spock?”

Kirk tries not to stiffen as he hears the footsteps of his First Officer slowly increase in volume until he’s right by the Captain’s chair. Kirk can feel goosebumps rising from underneath his shirtsleeves when Spock is leaning close to him, but he keeps his eyes resolutely away from Spock.

“Here are the reports of the Science Division detailing the anomaly in the wormhole, Captain.” He hands over a PADD, and Kirk can’t help but notice how Spock’s fingers are tucked into his hands more than usual to avoid contact with him.

“Thank you, Mr. Spock.” He flips through the report, careful to absorb the important points, as Spock stands beside him. “As you were, Commander.”

There is a moment of hesitation as Spock stills for a second at his side, but then walks quickly back to his station as commanded. Kirk doesn’t allow himself to feel disappointed.

“Captain, we are dropping out of warp in about twenty seconds.”

He rests the PADD onto his lap. “Thank you. Lieutenant Matson, please alert all personnel to ready battle stations. Raise shields and go to yellow alert.”

“Aye sir.”

“We’re dropping out of warp, sir. In five, four, three, two, one –”

Kirk feels a familiar sensation: a subtle shift in his stomach as the ship drops to impulse power and finally to a standstill in the great expanse of space. The bridge crew shifts in their seats to look at the wormhole. There is a moment of silence on the bridge as they wait for something to happen.

“Captain, the sensors are picking up something in the wormhole.” Kirk turns around in his chair to look at Spock, who is bending over his sensor screen. “It is approximately circular in shape, with specifications of a primitive space transportation system.”

“How fast is it approaching us at?”

“It is approaching us at a speed of 1500 kilometers per second, sir. It will arrive at the end of the wormhole in thirty point six seconds.”

“Thank you, Commander. Ensign Chekov, ready the phaser banks and photon torpedoes for any incoming threat.”

“Aye, sir. Shields are fully functioning right now.”

“Commander Spock, I want another sensor scan, but this time, check for lifesigns.”

“There are two lifesigns on the ship, captain.”

“Can you get any more specifics?”

“No, sir. There is unidentified interference of the sensors that prevent me from determining further information. The vessel is close to the end of the wormhole now and will make its presence known in ten point four five seconds.”

Everyone on the bridge looks back at the viewscreen with in so much silence that the only sounds audible are the beeping of the consoles, and the whirr of the ventilation machines.

Then, the wormhole lights up. Not with the lighting and fire that associates with the appearance of the Narada, but merely just an intense flash of light illuminating the darkness of the wormhole. Immediately after, a glint of metal shoots out, and Chekov has to bend over his console to furiously relock the phaser banks onto the ship.

“Chekov, can you get a lock?”

“Aye, sir! Just give me a leetle more time.”

“Drop that. Get a tractor beam on it first; it’s moving too fast.”

“On it. The ship iz slowing down sir; we’ve got it.”

“Good. Now lock the phaser banks on it. Mr. Spock, can you get more information on the lifesigns now?”

“Yes, Captain.”

The ship that had gotten all of them so worried seems to be merely a blimp on the viewscreen. In fact, it looks smaller than a junior officer’s cabin. Kirk feels a strange sort of disappointment that he feels pretty sure is mirrored by the other bridge crewmembers, with maybe the exception of Spock.

“Captain, the lifesigns on board the shuttle are... human. Interestingly, the sensors indicate that they have been asleep for eight point five one months.”

Kirk feels his brows wrinkling in confusion, and he picks up the PADD with the science reports to flip through them again. “What’s your professional opinion, Commander?”

“The scans have shown that this ship is incapable of travelling at even sub-light speeds, Captain. Given the antiquated machinery, I estimate that it originates from early pre-warp Earth. However, I am unaware of any such ship being launched in the history of Earth space travel.”

“You’re right; there are no records for this ship anywhere at all.” With a few taps of his fingers, he quickly retrieves the complete records of Earth’s pre-warp spacecraft. “Do you think it’s possible that it came from another timeline?”

“That is not impossible, Captain. However, I believe it to be best to find out for oneself, sir.”

“I concur. Does this ship pose any danger to us at all?”

“None at all. It does not come equipped with even a basic self-defense system; the ship merely functions to maintain the cryogenic systems on board.”

“Thank you, Mr. Spock. Lieutenant Matson, I want you to assemble a security team and a medical team in Shuttle Bay One, and recall beta coning officer.”

“Yessir.”

“Lieutenant Chekov, bring the ship into the main bay.”

“Aye, Keptin.”

“Spock, you’re with me.”

Quickly, they both make their way down into the underbelly of the Enterprise, where a security team is already milling around down in the hangar by the shuttle. They hurriedly snap to attention when he walks by them over to Bones.

“At ease, boys. Bones, how’re you doing?”

“Fine,” his best friend grumbles, fiddling with his medical tricorder. “Just have a bad feeling, is all.”

“Good day, Doctor McCoy. If I may ask, what is disturbing you?”

“Well, remember the last time we fiddled around with frozen people? That didn’t end so well, did it?”

“You are referring to Khan.”

“Who else?”

“There is a high probability this ship does not belong to this universe, and is therefore unrelated to the Khan incident entirely.”

“Why, I was just expressing my concerns –“

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” Kirk cuts in before this day could get any more confusing. “Now’s not the time. Scotty, how’s it going?”

Over by what seems to be the solitary entrance to the ship, his Chief Engineer waves back at him. “Heya sir, come look at this.”

Kirk walks over, only to see the familiar word *Enterprise* emblazoned in bold black letters over the side of the door. Next to him, Scotty grins like a madman. “What a coincidence, huh?”

“Yeah. Think the captain will be as hot as me?”

“Nah, sir. Haven’t seen a more charming lad than you around here.”

Behind him, Spock opens his mouth to speak, but Kirk cuts him off before that could happen.

“Any luck with the door so far?”

“I’ve managed to disengage the door lock, but honestly, even a wee bairn could do it. It almost seems as if this ship was made to be opened by someone else.”

“I see. Thanks, Scotty; I’ll take over from here. Security, I want you guys to stand behind me and make sure that nothing goes past me. Set your phasers to stun.”

As the security officers move to stand in formation, Spock moves forward and makes a protest. “Captain, allow me to enter the ship first.”

Kirk sighs. "As you've said; they're humans, and they're probably confused and in no shape to fight."

"There is a chance you could come to harm, and you must be safe from it."

Kirk can feel the Vulcan's dark gaze against the side of his face, but he refuses to give in and look back. "Your advice is duly noted. Just trust me, okay?"

He gives a thumbs-up to Scotty, who presses a button on a remote, and the door hisses open.

The interior of the ship is dim, and incomprehensibly cold. Kirk ducks his head and steps in, squinting his eyes to see around in the darkness. There is nothing remotely intriguing in this ship, Kirk knows by now it's only a metal circular container containing two sleeping human bodies. He calls for Spock, who enters carefully with a flashlight in his hand.

"What do you think?"

"Fascinating." Spock points his flashlight at the two metal blocks rising up from the cells. "These should be the cryogenic cells containing the two life forms."

"Let's get them out of there. Bones!"

"I'm coming, hold your horses," his friend gripes from the door. "Scoot over."

In the dark, Spock shuffles closer to him, and Kirk can feel the entirety of his First Officer's arm pressing into his own, right up to the bare backs of their hands. Against his own will, his fingers twitch, and gently they brush against Spock's own, and almost immediately Spock moves his arm behind his back.

He clears his throat. "Which one first?"

"Let's take the right one, first. Spock, can you break this open?"

"I believe I can, Doctor." Spock moves to kneel down on the dusty floor of the ship, and shines his torchlight onto the keypad on the block. He sweeps a careful hand over an engraving over the top, revealing a name. "She is Hanakawa Reika."

"Open it up then."

"I am, Doctor," Spock quietly hushes Bones as he connects Scotty's tricorder to the cryocell. "The programme will finish running – now."

The machine lets out a loud hiss, and the door slowly slides open. It reveals the body of a Japanese woman, covered by a thin sheet of clear plastic, deeply asleep still. Through it, however, Kirk can see the abnormally blue tinge to her skin. Hurriedly, Bones runs a medical tricorder scan on her and barks out for the nurses outside to prepare a hover-stretcher.

Gently, he reaches down to peel back the plastic sheet, and detaches the mask clamped onto her face, but still she doesn't react.

"Shit, we need to get her warmed up. Her mask malfunctioned when the programme ended." Bones bends down and quickly retrieves her from the cell and passes her cold body to the nurses waiting outside.

Kirk moves away from the open cell, and turns to the second one on his left, there is no time to lose. Retrieving Spock's fallen flashlight, he searches for a slight dent on the door, and rubs his shirtsleeve against it to clean away the dust. When he reads the name on the cell, he freezes.

"Holy shit. Shit, Spock, come here quick."

"Captain, what – " Spock's reads the name and his brows furrow. He snaps to action immediately, connecting the tricorder to the cell.

"Wait, do you think –?"

"As we have previously established, it most likely possible this ship came from an alternate universe. So yes, I believe so, Captain."

The tricorder beeps, and the door slides open. Without waiting for it to completely open, Spock reaches into the cell and rips the plastic off the awakening man.

"Oh my god," Kirk breathes, "its me."

Dazed, he watches as Spock lays a hand onto the side of his face and pats the other Kirk awake carefully. Under Spock's hand, his eyelids flutter, and slowly, he opens them by a fraction.

From the entrance of the door, he hears Bones swear.

His doctor friend barges in and shoves Spock to the side, effectively displacing his hand and squishing both of them against the wall. He scans over Kirk's doppelganger, and plucks off the mask as soon as the scans gave him the green light.

“Can you talk?”

The man in the cryocell stirs, and seems to be unable to process the sentence, until he shakes his head slowly side to side.

“Is your name James T. Kirk? Can I call you James?”

A nod.

“Good, you’re safe now. I’ll move you now, is that okay?”

A nod. Then suddenly, James makes eye contact with Spock, and his eyes opens wide. Weakly, he reaches out a hand to grab at him, and catches Spock by his end of his shirt. Spock blinks in shock, while James just smiles in an odd mixture of awe and relief.

Spock, he mouths, I’ve found you.

Sickbay – USS Enterprise (Stardate 2260.45)

Reika isn’t waking up.

James rolls onto his side to look at his fellow astronaut, who is still in a state of deep sleep. Not for the first time, he marvels at the technology present in this room; this is beyond anything he has ever dreamed of. When he woke up, a nurse was hovering an instrument over his crack lips, and said it was a dermal regenerator. True to her word, the bleeding skin had healed the second it had touched his mouth.

He had been too dazed to ask more, instead he fell right back into sleep.

Now, he’s left all alone in a single quiet room with Reika, and it’s driving James crazy. There is absolutely nothing to do in this room, and the fact that he hasn’t gotten any information to where he is not helping him in feeling any better. The nurses that come in to tend to both Reika and him don’t give him any information but look at him oddly and tell him ‘everything’s going to be fine’.

If he does have the energy to feel paranoid, he would. But how, even blinking takes effort, and James can't stay awake for more than ten minutes at a time. Still, he tries. He wants to see Spock again.

Not the one in his dreams; he can't see that one anymore. It feels strange to sleep uninterrupted by his vivid dreams, and James isn't sure whether he likes it better or not. But now, there is another Spock, or at least an alien/man who looks exactly like the one he's dreamt up, and James wants so badly to see him again, to know he's real.

He's not even sure if the person he saw was even real, or just another hallucination he experienced during his weakened state, but he just wants to see Spock again. The dreams are gone, and James misses him.

His eyelids feel heavy again, and he allows himself to be dragged under once again by the waves of sleep.

Right outside the wards, however, Kirk paces the floor of Bones' office anxiously. Spock is sitting on one of the doctor's chairs watching him, while Bones reads out the reports on their two newest visitors.

"Hanakawa Reika, aged 24, a woman of Japanese descent. The lack of oxygen during her hibernation caused some damage to her brain, and now we're putting her in sleep to let the micro-surgeon do its job. She'll probably be awake at the end of this week."

"The other me -"

"Before you ask; I compared his DNA to yours, and yes, it's a 99.34% match, congratulations. Anyway, James T. Kirk is well on the road to recovery. He's still weak due to his prolonged state of rest, and he can't take in solid foods yet, so we're working him up from a drip."

"Well, okay. Is he healthy, mentally?"

"It's too early to tell. Why?"

"Did you see what happened inside that ship? He grabbed Spock like he knew him, and he smiled."

"I admit," Spock says, "I am somewhat curious as to how he knows me. Given the lack of warp capability on the *ITS Enterprise*, it is highly unlikely his Earth would have had contact with Vulcan. He is a rather fascinating individual."

Kirk swallows down his bitter anger at Spock's last sentence. *What does he have that I don't?* he thinks.

"Yeah, okay. When's the soonest we can get some information out of them?"

"Woah, woah," Bones looks up from his PADD. "Hold your horses there. They're in no condition to even be awake, let alone talking. What's gotten your panties in a twist, anyway? You're not usually this snappy."

"I'm not snappy." He is. Something doesn't feel right with James around, and Kirk wants him gone as soon as possible.

"Sure, kid. Anyway, James has been asking around for Spock the past few days. I was thinking we should let Spock talk to your double."

"What for? I thought you said we couldn't get information from them yet!"

"Yeah, I did say that. But the difference here is that Spock is going to speak to him in order to make him feel comfortable, not going in to interrogate him."

"Why?"

"Because he's going absolutely crazy in there, Jim! I mean, you can't even stay on the biobed for half an hour; two days spent completely alone and sedentary would be too cruel."

"The doctor is right, Captain. Furthermore, I do not mind spending time with James, so I fail to see how there can be any objections."

Tiredly, Kirk sits down onto a chair. "I'm not objecting. I'm just worried he might be a security threat."

"I have three times the strength of a normal human being - "

"Okay, okay. You win; just let me be there with you when you go in first."

And that's how they found themselves standing outside the ward together later on in that day. James has just woken up from another nap, and it seems likely he would be awake for at least an interval of ten minutes this time.

Spock raps gently on the door with his knuckles, but he doesn't wait for any a confirmation before entering. Kirk stays close behind him. There are two biobeds in the room; the still-sleeping Reika occupies one, while his alternate form lies quietly

on the left. At their entrance, he looks up weakly, but Kirk hears the heart monitor attached to James rise in volume.

“Mr. James T. Kirk. Are your injuries healing at a satisfactory pace?”

Down on the bed, James cracks open a grin, his eyes oddly watery. Visibly, he struggles with opening his mouth and getting his vocal cords to work, but after an excruciating few seconds he replies with a soft, hoarse “yes”.

Spock moves forward to stand beside James head to make things easier for him, so he won't have to strain his head. Kirk stays at his position at the foot of James bed.

“Can I address you by Mr. James? It would to prevent any confusion, considering that there is another you onboard this ship that has your name.”

James's eyes had been so deeply focused on Spock's form that he didn't think to look at the other person that came into the room. Almost comically his eyes snap to it and widen when he sees himself staring back with almost startling blue eyes.

“What is happening?”

Besides the biobed, Spock observes the rapid spiking of James' heartbeat and he presses a reassuring hand onto his chest in an attempt to stop the wave of panic before it dissolves into an attack entirely.

“Please, do not worry. You are safe; no one is going to hurt you. The full story will have to wait until you are in a more stable condition, but know that this is the year 2260, and most likely this is not the universe you once lived in.”

Kirk manages to peel his gaze away from the harsh stance of his alternate self to look back at Spock, and he manages a rough smile at him, his grey eyes swimming with relief.

Then, a loud knocking rings out loud in the stale silence of the ward, the nurse behind the door reminding them that their time is coming to an end.

“Very well, I will leave you now to recuperate, Mr. James.”

They leave the room, much to the sleepy distress of the patient. As he leaves, Kirk glances at himself lying on a biobed, and for a moment he feels a bit of sympathy at the red-rimmed eyes gazing back into his own.

Outside, Doctor McCoy stands waiting for them. “How is he?”

“What an intriguing individual. Mr. James acts as if he is familiar with me, which is impossible, considering his circumstances.”

“Well, he sure got excited when he saw you, alright. His heart rate went completely off the charts, and I almost had to ask my nurses to cut your timing short.”

“I think that given the speed in which h is healing, it is permissible for me to visit him at least once daily.”

“Yeah. That might be useful in helping him get better, actually. Just come into my office before you go in to check on whether it’s a good time for you to visit, though.”

The next few weeks pass, and Kirk watches from a distance as his alternate self gets better from being able to lift himself up from the bed to walking short distances unaided. Meanwhile, his other astronaut friend just had the micro-surgeon implant in her head removed, and should be waking up in another few days.

Kirk didn’t know it was this possible to feel so at a loss with himself. He misses Spock, which he knows is a rather stupid thought to have since they see each other’s faces on the bridge for a few hours a day, but he knows it’s not the physical distance that’s actually the matter. He misses the simple connection they once had. Their chess games stopped entirely after the beginning of the mission, and he misses being able to sit with Spock for a few quiet hours, sharing a headspace together.

He tries not to be jealous of, well, himself, for having so much of Spock’s time that used to be his. Spock goes down to Sickbay almost all the time now, and he’s pretty sure the bridge crew is noticing how much he tenses up whenever his First Officer leaves the bridge.

Kirk is trying. He’s been offering so many olive branches that’s he’s literally tripping over for a chance to just sit down and have a proper meal with Spock again. He doesn’t want to seem whiny and desperate, but he *feels* whiny and desperate and just a little bit pathetic. He just wants Spock to accept his goddamn invitations and *not* go down to Sickbay to spend his time doing whatever it is he’s doing with James.

And so, after his shift he heads down to Sickbay to pay a visit to his other self. Remembering that he’s missed his physicals for the second week already, he studiously avoids Bones office and slips right into the ward.

On the right, the bed that Reika occupies is now empty and neatly made; she woke up some days earlier, and is probably undergoing a physical under Bones’ strict

supervision. Meanwhile, Spock has set up a table by the side of the bed, and is now teaching a grinning James how to play tridimensional chess.

Kirk resists the urge to flip the small table over. "Hello Spock, hello me."

Spock makes to rise. "Captain."

"No, no, sit. And we're off duty, call me Jim." Kirk almost spits the last part out. He wants so badly to hear Spock call him that again without prompting him to. It's an almost impossible task; saying Jim's name seems almost like torture to Spock. His First would politely look away and continue with whatever they were doing to unsightly change the subject.

From the biobed, James waves weakly at him. Fuck, even now Kirk still gets creeped out by how similar they look like. Apart from being a few inches shorter and having blue eyes, they could be twins. He understands now why Spock becomes so brusque when he talks about the old Ambassador Spock in front of him.

Kirk approaches the table and claps a hand onto Spock's shoulders, trying to look as natural as possible. "Spock, have you eaten?"

"I have not, sir."

"Good, I'm starving. Wanna go grab a bite together?"

Spock looks back onto the board. "I do not need nourishment at this time."

Kirk tries not to flinch at the obvious rejection. He keeps his face on his now clammy hand on Spock's shoulder and refuses to acknowledge James's gaze on his flushed face.

"Hey Spock," he says. "We should stop the game - I'm tired. Maybe you should go and eat something."

I don't need your pity, Kirk thinks viciously, equal parts embarrassment and anger coursing through him.

"If you are tired, I shall leave you to rest. Jim, I believe I shall accompany you after all."

As they make their way down to the mess hall, Kirk keeps his silence and as always, Spock walks one step behind him. It's high time for a talk between the both of them. Kirk is horrible at talking feelings, much less to say Spock, but something has gone sour between them, and Kirk needs to know before it drives him crazy.

They sit down with their food at a small table at the corner, far away from the chatter amongst the crew in the mess hall. Kirk watches as Spock chews a few spoonfulls of his fruit salad, ignoring his own plate of minced meat pie.

He sets down his cutlery. “Did I do something wrong?”

Spock pauses halfway through taking a bite, his mouth slightly ajar. “I beg your pardon?”

“Why are you ignoring me?”

Kirk winces at how petulant he sounds, and not all at like the 28-year-old Starfleet Captain that he is.

Spock carefully sets his spoon down, making soft ‘clink’ sound when the metal hits the plastic bowl. “I am not.”

“Yes, you are. Ever since I died, you’ve treated me like some stranger you’ve just met. We don’t talk, or eat, or play chess together anymore. Tell me what I’m doing wrong so I can stop. Please.”

Spock is looking at somewhere over his left eyebrow, and it’s a clear sign that he’s uncomfortable with what they’re discussing.

“You are not doing anything wrong, Capt – Jim. If you have been feeling neglected because of my actions, I duly apologize. There are some personal matters on my mind that I am dealing with.”

Shit, Kirk feels even worse now. He had been so awfully self-absorbed he didn’t think about what Spock could be possibly facing to be so withdrawn. He leans forward in his seat, forcing Spock to look into his eyes.

“Shit, are you okay? Is everything all right with your family?”

“My clan is well. I am adequate physically, Captain.”

“Emotionally, mentally?”

Spock visibly stiffens, his knuckles turning white around his spoon.

“Come on, Spock, I thought we were past this stage already. We both know you do feel. And we’re friends; friends tell each other their problems so we can help each other out.”

“I,” Spock starts, his voice faltering. “I cannot, Captain. Please forgive me.”

Kirk feels as if he’s been punched in the stomach at the denial of their friendship. He’d honestly thought that the both of them had already exceeded just being casual friends, but apparently it is a one-sided affair on his half. “I – Okay. It’s not a big deal; just take care of yourself, ok? I’ll support you.”

“Captain – “

“No, no, its fine, really. They’re called ‘personal matters’ for a reason, and I shouldn’t have pried.” His hands move of their own accord to grasp his fork numbly. “Eat up, Spock. I forgot I have a meeting with the Engineering heads later on, so I’ll be eating quickly and leaving. You take your time.”

He knows Spock is looking at him, but he resolutely keeps his head down and shoves mouthful after mouthful of pie into his mouth. He doesn’t think his heart can stand another rejection; he’s getting a pretty clear idea of how insignificant he is to Spock. Kirk only wishes that he could feel less for this man than he does, right now.

USS Enterprise – Transporter Room (Stardate 2260.97)

“He’s in love with you, you know.”

Spock and James are sitting around in the transporter room: Spock in a chair with a PADD in hand, and Kirk on the floor with various parts of the transporter lying all around him. At this abrupt conversation starter, the Vulcan raises one of his eyebrows.

“Pardon me?”

“Your Captain. He’s in love with you. And pass me that welder by your leg, won’t you?”

Spock elegantly kicks it over to James. “And that matters to me, because...?”

James looks up from the instruction manuals that Scotty had dumped on him when he had volunteered to work on the transporter sequence to send him home. “Well, because you feel for him too. Don’t you?”

Spock does not reply; he doesn't need to. He has told this Jim Kirk more things he has told anyone so far, even beyond what his own Captain knows. He enjoys taking liberties with his privacy with this more calm and transient version of his Jim by telling him about Vulcan customs and occasionally his own takes on certain matters.

James has been nothing but reciprocal in return. He returns the favour by telling him about his life on 21st century Earth, where he came from. He tells him about his Pike and his training and his dreams of another alternate him, which provided an absolutely intriguing look into another alternate timeline.

James is a fascinating individual. He has experienced such a different set of people in his life and environments growing up, but still he possesses the integral strength characteristic of what Spock now assumes is the defining feature of all James Kirks. Yet, the strength this Jim possesses is more sedate and steadfast, in contrast to his own Captain's burning and resolute one, and this makes Spock feel more at ease with James.

It's not that Spock finds Kirk repulsive, oh no, it is the complete opposite. His Captain burns so bright and warm, Spock feels almost compelled to gravitate ever closer to him. This is why he doesn't trust himself around Kirk anymore; the incident with Khan has proved that this one man is detrimental to his emotional control like no other being he has ever encountered.

And yet, he finds himself aching to fall within Kirk's gravity, like a moth to a flame. He aches to accept just one of the many invitations his Captain has extended to him, but he isn't sure if he could control himself not to accept more. Spock has spent countless nights after meditation just thinking of him in the safety of his bed and what this *wanting* could possibly be.

This goes against all the teachings of emotional control he's ever learnt, this yearning to lose oneself in another, and to his great shame, he is confused and absolutely terrified. He had thought once of leaving Starfleet to pursue Kohlinahr to rid himself of such burdening feelings, but leaving Kirk behind to face the universe alone had scared him so badly he vanquished it all together. Spock has seen his Captain die once, and he's not sure he himself can survive another instance.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Spock immediately snaps back from his tangent of thoughts back into present reality. Kirk is looking at him from the floor, his face stained with grease from the machinery. He looks back at his PADD loaded with equations, and does not return James' strange grey gaze.

“The Captain does not love me. You do not know, James.”

“Of course I do. I’m practically him, you know? I understand things like that. I’ve got my own Spock too, and I do know what I feel for him, even though I’ve never met him.” James slides underneath the transporter pad again, and when he speaks, his voice is muffled and interspersed by the clanging of metal. “How are your equations coming along?”

James is excited with the prospect of returning back to his timeline, and back to his Spock, which he now knows to exist for real. Spock knows he does; he feels a tenuous link binding both individuals together and it flashes weakly in his mind whenever James has a brief moment of contact with him. He is irrationally envious, but he squashes that thought before it can fully register with him when he feels it.

James brought a strange little plastic cube with him on this trip. He refused to let go of it when he was first loaded onto the Enterprise, and Spock now knows why. It was a farewell gift from his foster father Pike, given on the belief that they would never meet again. James opened the case on his behest, and inside were just three things: a photograph of Pike and James together, a packet of freeze-dried apple slices, and a recording.

Spock allowed James his privacy to eat the apple slices in peace, which Pike had written on the back of the photograph that he had included it so as Kirk didn’t go hungry on the journey. However, they listened to the tapes together, and Spock was surprised when it started to speak in Vulcan when he had been expecting a human speech from it.

Kirk revealed that this recording was the tape that Earth had received from an external source from space, and had been the thing to trigger his mission to space. Kirk was ecstatic when he found out that this message was sent by a member of Spock’s race, but had been less so when he understood the messages for what they were: a distress call.

Spock calls for a meeting not long after that. The task to get James and Reika back to their timelines is now made more pressing. Kirk is supportive of the idea, and acts strangely whenever James touches him on the shoulder to prove his point of how coincidental this entire thing was. Nevertheless, the important thing now is that they are working on a solution to get James back in time to provide aid to a besieged Vulcan, and the safest way would be to do it is by transporter.

“My equations are coming along adequately, James. Mr. Scott’s assistance and my other counterpart have been most helpful in composing this, as I am sure you are aware.”

“Yeah. You should really do something about your Captain, though.”

Spock feels a frisson of annoyance and desperation in his head. He wishes James would stop giving him hope like that. “He is not, and I am not going to ‘do something about it’.”

“Really? Because the Captain just looks ready to tear me apart whenever you talk to me, and I would really appreciate getting home in one piece.”

Spock suppresses the rather pleasurable sensation of being wanted by Kirk. “You have no evidence on which you base your claim.”

“Come on, Spock, don’t play dumb. You’ve seen it too, haven’t you?”

Spock has. But he refuses to allow himself to think of it “Regardless.”

“Hey,” James voice is suddenly unexpectedly serious, and he looks up from his PADD to see that he has wheeled himself out from under the transporter to look at him. “Listen; you have to sort this thing out with him. We’re friends, and I want to see you happy after I leave.

“I –“

“I *know* you feel, Spock. I don’t buy into the whole ‘Vulcans don’t feel’ crap, considering how much you emote around me. I know for sure your aren’t happy, and I think it’s because of your Captain.”

“I am adequate, James.”

“But not happy. And you’re treating me like a replacement for your Kirk, and that isn’t right, is it?”

Spock cannot help flush at James’ accurate pinpointing of his feelings. He is unused to such a level of sensitivity from a Kirk. “I am sorry.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind being your sounding board for all the things you want to say to him, as long as you do say it to Kirk in the end, you know. You shouldn’t be afraid of reconciling your human emotions with your Vulcan sensibilities.”

Spock only wishes he knew how. He finds both sides of his genetics irreconcilable; he has been taught to obey the Vulcan way and doesn’t know how else to live his life.

“Hey, perform that fancy mind trick you can do on me. I’ll show you something.”

He is immediately cautious. “James, you do not know of what you ask.”

“I already have another Spock in my mind anyway, what’s another one? Come on, you wanted to know about the bond thing both he and I have, right?”

Hesitantly, he raises a hand to James’ face, who had unknowingly made his way to Spock’s side. This act is one of extreme intimacy, and he feels both apprehensive and excited to experience the mind of a Kirk, especially one that has a bond with another version of him. Slowly, he raises a hand to James’ face, his sensitive fingers brushing over the sparking psi points and he pushes in.

There is no resistance, only welcome. James’ mind wraps around his gently, and it feels very much like lying in a spot of sun on a lazy day. In the distance, he hears James laughing, and he feels a gentle hand pushing him towards his memories of Spock.

James gently guides him to where the bond between them is. Spock marvels, his entire soul washed in awe at something so entirely precious and beautiful. Now he knows; it is the t’hy’la bond, the most revered of bonds, tying both souls together through space and time.

See, James says, reaching out a hand to gently stroke at the golden rope, this is what you can have, if only you reach for it. It isn’t logical to deny yourself, is it?

He feels overwhelmed at this revelation. Could this really be his? Spock has never known fulfillment in his life, rejected by the both worlds he was born of. It is bereft in his head, the severing of billions of bonds still plague him with pain and suffering when he isn’t careful to keep his shields up. He drifts closer to the blazing brilliance of the rope.

James lets him. He encourages it in fact, and Spock feels him slowly pushing his essence closer and closer to the bond, and he raises one mental hand to reach out to touch it, and –

With a crash, they are snapped out of their meld. Spock feels their psyches detangling as he removes his hand from James’ face, and when he regains his vision, he sees his Captain staring at them from the doorway, his face and neck flushed an angry red. A piece of the transporter lies overturned on the ground next to his boots; that must have made the loud crashing sound just now.

Kirk's blue eyes are wide, and darting between both him and James. Spock then realizes how close the both of them have gotten during the meld, and makes to step away from him.

"Uh," Kirk stutters, his grip around the doorframe tightening. "I didn't mean to intrude."

Spock realizes immediately what this situation looks like. "Jim, I assure you –"

"No, its fine," Kirk says as he slowly backs out of the doorway, his eyes downcast. "Just – Sorry."

Kirk practically trips over himself to get away, and Spock is left standing in the room in a state of shock. He feels a nudging at his left shoulder, and he turns to face James, who is glaring at him insistently.

"What are you still doing here? Go and clear things up with him."

Spock does.

USS Enterprise – Captain's Quarters (Stardate 2260.97)

Kirk stumbles through the threshold of his room, his vision suspiciously blurry. He waits as the door hisses shut behind him to collapse against it. His heart feels like it's about to beat its way out of his chest; his breaths are coming up short, and his hands are trembling like never before.

Fuck, what is *wrong* with me? Kirk doesn't understand why he's so shaken over the sight of his First Officer and his alternate self entangled together. Wait – scratch that, he knows why. Because he's in love with Spock, and Spock obviously prefers another version of him enough to engage in mental intimacies with him.

Get a fucking grip, he tells himself sternly; *you're a Captain, not a goddamn teenage schoolgirl!* Even so, he can't help but feel bitter and absolutely crushed by Spock's blatant preference for James over him. Maybe this is Spock's 'personal matter'; his illogical feelings for his alternate self. That explains so much now: Spock had been avoiding him because he looks like James' who is leaving soon to go back to his universe.

Try as he may, Kirk doesn't understand why Spock wouldn't want him instead. Is he too impulsive, rash? Does Spock still hold him responsible for making him lose control on the bridge on the first Narada mission? Oh God, he's already ruined his chances before he could even start.

He buries his head in his hands, and grinds the heels of his palms into his eyes. It shouldn't hurt this much, Kirk thinks. He's never been in love, but he knows what he feels for Spock comes close to it. He wants to be close with him and look at him and touch him all the time, and honestly the intensity of his want scares him. He was willing to die for him once, and he would do it again if needed.

What about letting Spock go? A stab of ice passes through his heart at the mere thought of doing so, and it hurts so much that he wants to just curl up in a ball and never come out again. But he knows; he can't be selfish. Spock deserves to be happy, and Kirk wants Spock to be happy. And as much as he can't bear the thought of living in a universe without his First Officer with him, if Spock wants to be with James, Kirk would let him go.

He does not expect to hear a chime requesting entry, so when it does, Kirk jerks out from his reverie and turns absolutely stone still when Spock's voice sounds out from behind the door.

"Captain. Jim, will you let me in?"

He carefully unfurls himself from his fetal ball against the door to stand up, hoping that Spock will think he's not in and leave.

"Jim," Spock continues, undeterred. "I have checked with the computer locator systems; you are in your quarters. I wish to speak with you, if you will allow it." A pause. "Unless, you prefer that I leave, then I will – "

Before he realizes, the 'no' is out of his mouth, and Kirk can only stand in abject horror at his stupid, stupid mouth. Through the gap between the door and the deck, he sees two booted feet adjusting themselves, and he sighs in defeat. "Whatever. Come in, Spock."

The door slides open, revealing a very uncomfortable looking Spock, silhouetted by the light from the corridors. Hesitantly, he takes a step in, and the door slides shut behind him, leaving them both in Kirk's comparatively dark quarters.

"Hey," Jim starts, all false cheer and bravado. "What's up?"

“Jim, you must know that I have no romantic attachments towards your alternate self.”

“Um. Sure. But you don’t have to hide, I understand —“

“No. I am not interested in James. I am, however, interested in you.”

Kirk takes a moment to process what he just heard, and he’s sure his eyes are ridiculously wide right now. “Uh – I’m sorry?”

“I am not interested in James. I do, however, wish to pursue an intimate and romantic relationship with you. Will you allow me the privilege of courting you?”

Kirk feels warm and flushed all over, and he blatantly stares at Spock. His First is obviously getting more and more uncomfortable under his scrutiny. “Are you – sure?”

“Yes.”

“Because I don’t think you are. Wait, are you just replacing me for James, because I swear, if you want to leave, I’ll let you.” He swallows the lump in his throat. “I can at least do that much for you.”

He looks down at the ground, hands curling up into fists by his side. Kirk hears Spock’s footsteps getting closer and closer, until they’re standing right in each other’s spaces, and he can feel puffs of dry breaths against his ear. He doesn’t dare to lift his head. If he does, their faces will be much too close, and Kirk doesn’t know if he can control himself.

A gentle hand touches his shoulder, as if asking for permission to touch more. Kirk doesn’t move, and Spock then slowly slides his hand up to his neck, stopping briefly at his pulse point, and then coming up to his cheek. Neither of them dares to make so much as a sigh.

Kirk’s skin is on fire; everywhere Spock touches feels oversensitive. His First’s hands are colder than his, as per normal Vulcan temperature, and it feels like an ice brand on his overheated skin. He can’t help himself but press into the hand cupping his cheek, and when Spock tilts his face up, he doesn’t resist.

Their faces are mere inches apart. Kirk can hear every breath Spock takes, and he watches his long, dark eyelashes flutter as he blinks. His heart is beating at a hummingbird’s pace, and the air feels electrified.

“Jim,” Spock whispers. “I am, as you would say, serious about you.”

Shaking, Kirk laughs, and presses his lips gently to Spock's own open ones. For an electrifying moment, all he feels is Spock's cool lips against his, and the subtle strength of his hand on his cheek.

Kirk pulls away, and leans his forehead against Spock's. A laugh bubbles up from deep within his chest. He's so happy he could cry.

"Prove it to me then."

If his voice sounds a little watery, it doesn't matter, because Spock leans in again to seal the deal with another kiss.

Vulcan – House of Surak (Human Year 2015, 10 Months Later)

Spock runs down the endless corridors of his house, breath labored and heavy. His ears are ringing with the sound of phaser fire and his own heartbeat. He doesn't have much time left. He makes a sharp left turn and keeps on running.

The bottoms of his robes are caked with red dust, and his face is streaked with dirt. Over his shoulder, the bag laden with family artifacts slides down, and Spock hefts it up again. A particularly loud bang rings above his head; another level is collapsing under the heavy Romulan fire. Everyone has already been evacuated, only one person is left in his estate.

Through their familial bond, Spock bangs on the shielded mind of his mother. Her shields are slowly sliding down, revealing her disjointed thoughts. Her stress and despair is quickly bleeding through to his mind, and he scrambles to decipher her thoughts to gain knowledge of where she is.

In his mind's eye, he sees a picture of his father, and of a heavy desk covered with dust. *His father's study*. Quickly, he takes the nearest turn and heads to the 3rd level.

When he bursts into the study, his mother is kneeling around a mess of paperwork and various photographs. Her face is streaked with tears, and when she looks up into Spock's eyes, he sees her face twisted in fear and despair.

"Mother," he says, pulling on her forearm. "We have to leave now."

She clutches a photograph of Sarek and Spock to her chest. “I can’t leave, Spock. I can’t leave this place. Sarek - ”

“You must. This is not the time for sentimental relapses, Mother.”

A heartrending howl rips out of his mother’s throat, and another explosion rings out from outside. Spock looks up at the dust falling from the ceiling, helpless against the fear and panic ebbing at his emotional controls.

“You can’t make me leave this place – this is all I’ve ever known – ”

He snaps. “Mother,” he snarls. “We either leave now, or die here!”

Amanda heaves against the floor, her hair falling from her previously neat hairstyle. Her hands tighten against the photo frame. “I don’t think I can walk, Spock.”

Spock doesn’t reply. Instead, he scoops his mother off from the floor and runs.

There is an armored hovercar outside their house when Spock runs out from their house for the very last time. He stashes his mother in before getting inside himself. The Vulcan in the driver’s seat nods to him. Spock offers a shaking ta’al back.

From the windows, Spock can see the Romulan warbirds descending onto the burning Vulcan cityscape. Shi’Kahr is no more; the buildings that had made up its cityscape are reduced to debris amongst the fires still raging. In the distance, whole fleets of armored cars are speeding away from the wreck, evacuating as many Vulcan citizens as possible. But nevertheless, it will be inevitable that some will be left behind. His mind is filled with the anguished screams of those that have been. Quickly, he raises his shields.

His mother is curled into his side, her tears staining the sleeves of his shirt. This blatant display of emotion would have been scandalous if this was any other day, but now the driver doesn’t even deign them a look. His hands are curled up into fists against the control panels, looking resolutely away from the wreckage of Shi’Kahr.

They are all hurting. Now, Spock envies his mother’s humanity. Vulcans do not have tear ducts, he cannot cry even if he wishes to.

The hovercar brings them to the underground bunker of the Vulcan High Council. Spock gets out and instructs the driver to bring his mother to his own safety spot deep beneath the sands of Vulcan. Everyone in the bunker is up in arms, and

even though the bunker is large enough to occupy 500 people, the amount of activity happening makes it even more claustrophobic.

The minute he steps in, a Vulcan attendant rushes to his side to usher him down the corridors into the very heart of the bunker, 2 kilometers into the ground. The elders are all already seated around a table, heatedly discussing. He smooths down his robes and sits down at one of the empty seats.

“Councilor Spock, how is the wellbeing of your clan?”

Spock nods in reply to Stakh, one of the older Councilors. At the age of 168, he has seen many things, including the birth of the first human-Vulcan hybrid child. Spock owes his existence to him; if not for this vote, he might have never been born.

“I ensured their evacuation before heading here. And yours, Councilor Stakh?”

Stakh’s tired eyes turn absolutely brittle. “All three of them, yes.”

Before Spock can reply, a slamming from in front of the room snaps everyone to attention. Councilor Storak clears his throat, and speaks.

“Councilors, we simply cannot delay any further. The people need a solid action plan, before we lose any more to the Romulans!”

Someone shouts from next to Spock. “We cannot do anything, our resources are limited and we have been besieged for months now!”

There is an uproar following his words. It is true; the rations carefully stacked up over a course of 10 years have gone dangerously low. Spock knows if something is not done soon, they will all starve, and defeat will be inevitable.

Another voice pipes out from amidst the chaos. “What about our contact with the humans?”

The crowd falls silent, and Spock feels the weight of everyone’s stares on him as they turn to look at him. He suddenly feels hot, the collar of his robes too tight around his throat. “Councilors,” he starts. “Even though we have been conscientiously sending out replies to the messages received by the VSI, with great regret I say there has been no reply as of yet.”

Immediately, the noise breaks out again, and this time Spock is the main focus of it all.

“Councilor Spock,” Storak intonates imperiously from the opposite side of the room. “Were you not the one to convince the Council of the benefits of contacting Earth?”

“Yes, Councilor Storak.”

“So much manpower has been put into this project of yours; manpower that could have helped with other more vital projects. And yet you have no returns?”

“Councilor – “

“Responsibility must be taken, Councilor Spock.”

All eyes are on him; he cannot say otherwise. “Yes.”

“Find us a solution by the end of the month, or you lose your Council seat.”

“You ask too much,” Spock stands up abruptly, his chair skidding backwards. “This seat has belonged to the House of Surak for generations, you cannot take away what is rightfully – “

“ - This seat is rightfully given to the House of Surak by the Vulcan people. Councilor Spock, if there is no one to govern, your seat is for naught.” Storak leans back in his chair. “Councilors in this house, is it logical today to ask that the Councilor Spock take responsibility for his actions?”

A murmur of agreement passes through the house.

“Let us do a simple vote. Those who are in favour of Councilor Spock finding a solution, raise your hand.”

Unsurprisingly, most of the hands do. Spock tries not to show how close he is to bashing Storak’s head in with his bare fists. He is tasked with the impossible, and everyone in the room knows that. Spock can see the petty spite in their eyes; this is merely a civilized formality to strip the half-breed bastard and his house of their title.

Rigidly, he sits back down in his chair. “So it shall be.”

The councilors move on to another topic, as if they hadn’t just striped the noblest of houses of their esteemed seat on the Council. Spock’s blood burns. He should not have to suffer this indignity. He is young and of half human heritage, but he does not deserve to suffer at the hands of those meant to be his peers. His hands turn into fists and from his seat he –

A hand claps him on the shoulder, and Spock almost snarls at the councilor who had dared touch him so daringly. When his green-tinged vision registers the wizened visage of Councilor Stukh, his anger quickly loses steam.

“Councilor Stukh, I apologize for my loss of control.”

“It is of no consequence. I should offer my condolences; they have asked you to perform a miracle which as I am sure you cannot.”

Mutely, Spock nods. “I am aware.”

“I only wish you the best of luck, as illogical as that is.”

“My many thanks, Councilor Stukh.”

Spock does not contribute to discussions for the rest of the meeting. Instead, he sits silently and contemplates what is the wisest course of action from here. He supposes now his only choices are to contact either the Tellarites or Andorians to provide aid.

When he reaches his own bunker, the sky is dark. But still, he can smell the acrid stench of smoke in the freezing night air. He walks past chambers with his other clansmen deep down to the central room where he knows his mother is. It is deadly quiet, almost as if everyone is waiting for the next bomb to drop.

He keys in his combination code, and the doors to his and his mother’s quarters slide open. The lights are switched off. This bunker has been unused for several years; the air still smells dank, despite the ventilation system currently working. He shuffles to the bed pressed up against a corner of the room. His ears pick up a soft snoring from the lump of the bed. His mother is already asleep.

His mother is wearing one of his father’s old robes, a heavy grey affair that looks much too big on her. The tear tracks on her face are fresh. She probably fell asleep not a while ago. Spock leans in forward and carefully untucks the blankets from the pallet and pulls it over her trembling form.

He does not take up the other pallet in the room to rest. Spock is exhausted, he has never remembered being so tired in his life. His body needs to rest, but he knows he cannot. Instead, he shuffles over to a small desk in the corner, where he will work at contacting the Andorian ambassadors for aid.

It is unproductive as expected. Spock nods away halfway through a message, and wakes up later than he usually does the next day. He blinks wearily into the crook of his arm as slowly his body adjusts to being awake. He sits up, and something

slips off his shoulders as he does so. Spock picks it off from the ground, recognizing it as the robe his mother had worn to sleep last night. He looks to the pallet, but he finds it empty.

He finishes his message and sends it, before leaving the bunker to his ancestral house. Spock can sense his mother's emotions through the bond; she must be there.

When Spock arrives, he understands why his mother felt what she did. The previously towering estate is bombed to pieces. He takes one step into the rubble, passing by a stone hand that used to part of a statue of Surak. Spock feels his heart clench at the sight.

There is nothing left. A few steps in, he find his mother kneeling down amidst shards of glass and rock.

"Good morning, Spock," his mother greets him upon hearing the crunch of his footsteps.

"What are you doing here, mother?"

A dry laugh. Spock watches as his mother scoops up a handful of dust and sand from the ground. "I needed to see if this – our home – was really destroyed. I hoped that we would be spared. But everything is gone."

Spock feels her pain. Millennia of history destroyed in just a few scant minutes. Beyond that, this is the home he's grown up in. To see it razed to the ground hurts beyond almost anything he's ever known. He thinks of his father as he sweeps away a glass shard at his foot. Maybe it was for the best he died early on, he wouldn't have to see this. Sarek's death was clean cut too; a phaser shot execution style to the head. Painless. Spock envies him.

A crunching sound of footsteps comes from behind him, alerting him of another presence besides the two of them. His mother remains blissfully unaware, but the natural sensitivity of his ears picks up on them. Spock's hand slowly goes to the phaser in a holster in his robes.

"Mother," he whispers. "There is an unidentified person currently with us right now."

Another crunch. The person is getting closer. His mother goes absolutely stone still in front of him. "How far away are they from us?"

Another crunching sound. "I estimate them to be six point three six meters from us. However, they will reach us soon in two point eight five seconds."

His mother rises from her position in the ground and turns around to face him. Her hand, too, is in her robes where her phaser is. "Romulan?"

He listens again. "Unknown."

"How many of them?"

Another crunch. "One."

A figure appears from behind a fallen pillar, and both Spock and Amanda immediately raise their phasers.

"Identify yourself!"

The figure raises his hands, a sign that he is not brandishing a weapon. "I'm unarmed! I'm not a Romulan."

A brief sensation of familiarity washes by Spock when the figure spoke. "Reveal yourself."

As to not startle them, the figure raises both hands to his head, pushing back the hood he is wearing. Slowly, more and more of the figure is revealed. A set of grey eyes, curved ears and rounded blond eyebrows. Besides him, Amanda gasps. A human.

"I'm James T. Kirk, from Earth. We're here in response to your distress calls."

United States of America – Riverside, Iowa. [10th January 2016]

As the sky lightens over the Iowan cornfields, two men stand together in a bedroom. One is looking out of the window, at the waving stalks of corn, while the other finishes zipping up his flight jumpsuit. The bed is unmade, white sheet rumpled with sleep and the previous night's activities.

Spock feels a warmth behind him, and two strong arms come around his waist. A chin rests against his shoulder, breaking Spock out of his curious gazing.

"Are you ready to go, Spock?"

James' hair tickles at his cheek. Spock turns around to face him, and James tucks his head under his chin. In his head, their link throbs with life.

Hesitantly, he reaches around to hug James back. This is all very new to him. He is not accustomed to such outpouring of positive emotions, and he does not know how to reciprocate.

"I can feel you worrying, you know."

Spock is worried. Earth is such a foreign place with foreign landscapes and foreign people, and ironically, he feels disorientated and alienated. He had alighted from a spacecraft way beyond what should be Earth's current technological capabilities. The reception had been mixed; some were elated, some were out for his blood. His mother had arrived on Earth back with him, and he supposes his half – human heritage had tipped the scales in his favour.

Amanda had cried when she set foot back onto Earth.

James had immediately moved them back to his Iowan home here, after talks and negotiations with people he knows are important. They had a few weeks before they were both scheduled to head back out into space again, carrying rations for the Vulcan people.

In the privacy of their own bedroom, James lovingly grasped Spock's hands in his, and told him about their mind – link and how he made his way to Spock.

He met alternate versions of both himself and Spock, in a much more advanced timeline. They worked together to get him and his colleague Reika back into this timeline, gave them basic blueprints of warp drives, and beamed them back to Earth. James laughs when he tells him how their alternate selves got together.

"T'hy'la," James whispered into his ear, kissing it.

Today, they are leaving to return to Vulcan, with a whole armada of warp equipped human ships. Amanda is staying behind with her parents, who thought her dead for the last thirty years. Spock is making his way back home alone, this time.

But it matters not. He's not returning alone; he has James beside him. Reika, their chief engineer, will be helming the newly remodeled ITS – Enterprise back into the stars.

"I'm ready, James." Spock breathes. "Let's go."

Beyond the Veil

SORALI79

Stonehenge 2265 Alternate timeline

Captain James T. Kirk watched as the old Vulcan stumbled. The pathway had given way to a grassed area and the cold night air had begun to frost the vegetation. Selek's gait was none too steady and his frame seemed frail to the young Captain.

The Enterprise command crew had been honoured guests at the inauguration of the New Kelvin Archive. It was now one of several repositories of the combined knowledge of the Federation members, a decision taken to ensure that the culture and biology of each world could not be lost should any member be subject to a planetary catastrophe. Ambassador Selek had been instrumental in developing the computing capacity for the undertaking.

Elder Selek had insisted that the administrators use the backdrop of one of the most famous monuments of Old England for the post inauguration gathering, which was why they were walking from the transporter station towards the great monolithic edifice, Stonehenge, Selek had called it.

Privately James Kirk was baffled at the choice of the location. He himself found greater attraction in the wonders of the Mediterranean civilisations though this was more an attraction to the idea of Greece as a foundation of philosophy and politics rather than the archaeology. Prehistoric civilisation and the preserver puzzle enthralled Spock more than he, though his First Officer would never have admitted to the notion of such an emotion.

Selek glanced skyward. The interplay of the great oceans and the gravitational pull of Luna Earth's satellite was an unpredictable quantity, yet on this night the sky was clear and the stars hung like the proverbial diamonds of a nursery rhyme his mother used to sing.

Jim used to sing a lot; mostly out of key, the reminiscence amused him.

"Lucy in the Sky with di..a...a..monds"

The old Vulcan followed the crowd towards the great monoliths, the moon, at perigee seemed to take up more of the sky than usual and formed a bright disk as it rose over the monument. A recent minor eruption in the Icelandic fire-field had modified the atmospheric refraction and Luna appeared reddened reminding him of

The Watcher, a lone remnant of a lost world endlessly orbiting Eridani 40 searching for a dead partner.

“Elder, please take care, the pathway is a little uneven.”

Grateful for the chance to rest, the older Vulcan stopped, allowing the command team to reach his position, gratefully accepting the hand proffered to him by Jim’s younger counterpart.

On the way to the monument they had been discussing the various theories about the structure’s utility. Selek recalled with amusement how surprised the young Captain had been to find that he did not hold with the astrological theories but believed that the metaphysical had more support.

“Ambassador, I am appalled, those theories are fanciful and there is no factual basis, no evidence to support your position.”

“I see your bondmate’s personality has infiltrated your mind far more extensively than I thought possible,” rejoined the Ambassador.

“Come on Spock, help me out here.”

“I concur with the Ambassador.”

“What?!!”

“Whilst there is no doubt the monument is engineered with astronavigational precision, perhaps previous thinking has been too ‘three’ dimensional.

Ambassador Selek smiled inwardly; Amanda’s loss had changed their father. Sarek’s mind-set had not been so rigidly Vulcan in this universe and knowing the love of his father had enabled his counterpart to embrace the duality of his heritage much earlier.

As they neared the observation area, Selek slowed and indicated a bench. “My health is not what it was; if you do not mind I will wait here. Please go and watch the Samhain ceremony, I have seen it before and it would be unfair to take up a seat that another could use.”

He nodded towards Dr McCoy who had caught up with the party and watched the trio moving purposefully towards the observation area. Kirk’s voiced carried over. “I still think it looks a little like the “Place of Bonding, on New Vulcan.”

Spock settled himself and began the preparatory steps for his final meditation, his mind caught in a memory of the first time he had seen the structure.

Stonehenge 2237 Original timeline

“Spock, attend.”

Sarek’s sonorous voice carried across the central area of the monument. It was a rare privilege to be permitted to walk amongst the stones, especially if one was not engaged in the druidic rituals that marked the summer and winter solstice celebration. Spock’s father, as Vulcan Ambassador to Earth, and a direct descendant of Solkar, the Captain of the T’Planna Hath, was guest of honour at the First Contact remembrance. That year the Astronavigation Department of the University of Cambridge had hosted the occasion. The final ceremony had been at the monument and the invitation had also been extended to accompanying guests.

Spock walked with purpose towards the point at which his father stood, knowing that he would be expected to demonstrate his knowledge of the origins of the megaliths and the theories which had been suggested to explain the construction and purpose of the structure. He was not anxious, as he was confident that his studies had been adequate. However he had found the structure strangely disconcerting.

As they walked back towards the waiting transport his mother hung back a little.

“What do you really think, Spock?”

His mother had always been able to pick up the undercurrent of his emotions no matter how hard he had tried to suppress it. As a linguist she was skilled not just in the nuances of the spoken word but also in the postures and expressions that accompanied the same. Her son was not responding with awe as she had expected. She wished to know what troubled him. Holding out her fingers in the embrace of family, she attempted to convey to her son that he could speak without censure.

“It reminds me of the ancestral grounds..... the place of Koon-ut-Kalifee.”

The pause conveyed much, a brief shadow had passed over his mother’s face. Sometimes his mother forgot that children have ears and those of Vulcan children are exquisitely sensitive. He already knew that his mother had not wished the childhood bonding that was to take place on their return. It was the Vulcan way, there was no other option.

Choice was not a word that entered his vocabulary until much later, after V'ger.....

Stonehenge 2271 Original timeline

He had not returned to the monument until his 41st year.

He and Kirk had been newly bonded. They had elected to mark their bonding with a simple ceremony at the Vulcan Embassy in San Francisco. Neither man desired to return to the place of Koon-ut-kalifée. Some would have suggested the response was illogical, that logic cast out fear, but ignoring fear was also foolish. Jim had spoken of tempting fate. Spock rationalised the decision on the basis that since Starfleet had drawn them together it was more fitting to celebrate their union in that city. In truth, he too did not want the occasion marred by the recollection of how close he had come to causing the demise of the man that even then he had named T'hy'la.

Practically, it had also made sense; a journey to Vulcan would have left them with little time for a Honeymoon. He recalled with humour how he had asked Dr McCoy to clarify the meaning of the idiom and how his friend's embarrassment had given way to ire when he realised that Spock knew exactly what a honeymoon entailed.

His Jim had been intrigued by the theories surrounding the building of the stone circle. Kirk had always had a breadth of thought and analytic ability that had enabled connections that left others running to keep up. It was only later in life that Spock would see these intuitive leaps as a unique brand of logic that he had labelled, "Kirkian heuristics," a discipline that he delved into frequently when standard logic failed.

It has been during that brief visit that Jim suggested temporal physics might hold the explanation for the ley line concept so beloved of druidic worshippers. Perhaps, Kirk had mused, the unique magnetic core of the planet might create a space time vortex at certain geographical points and times in the planet's rotation.

The idea that the solstice was a time when the "Veil" between dimensions was thin - a time when the living and the "Gone before" might communicate - appealed to Kirk's sense of the poetic. However it was anthropology that the Admiral had drawn on to further the argument, citing several cultures both on Earth and on other worlds that spoke of communing with the dead on certain celebratory occasions.

“Maybe that is the nature of the Guardian porthole; perhaps there are vortices or nexus phenomena throughout the Galaxy, perhaps civilisations have always built structures at those points.”

How strangely prophetic.

Stonehenge 2293 Original timeline

The visit they had made together after their bonding had been at the summer solstice; a time of light, of renewal and of the sense of a life together that would go on for many years. The last visit had been the nadir.

Over the previous year Admiral Kirk had become forgetful....

At first Dr. McCoy had brushed it aside, Spock's worries blaming the pressures of the final months of the last mission, their incarceration on Rura Penthe and the events at Khitomer. In retrospect, Jim's behaviour during the final mission had been unusually petulant and his emotional control less tight than normal, his anger towards the Klingons untempered by his usual ability to focus on the possible good in all.

They had completed the post mission debriefing and looked ahead to a period of extended leave before decisions would have to be made about future postings and roles. There was just the final formal dinner to get through.

Spock had exited the sonic, vacating the bathroom for Kirk. Their dress uniforms hung ready for wear. It would be the last time that Spock would wear such formal dress; as Federation Ambassador in future he would dress in the formal wear of his home planet. Smoothing the jacket down, he brushed it over with a soft clothes brush. Jim had often teased him about such fastidious neatness.

Turning to brush his bondmate's jacket he noticed immediately that the medals had been placed out of sequence. Jim exited the shower and watched pensively as Spock neatly re-pinned the awards. A simple touch between them, conveyed what they both knew, the deterioration could no longer be ignored.

The neural scan before their departure on leave confirmed the re-emergence of the micro-tangles that had been detected on the scan McCoy had taken as part of the medical workup following the fateful mission to Gamma Hydra IV. A genetic predisposition which would have had little effect had he lived his life on Earth, had

been triggered by exposure to Berthold rays on Omicron Ceti III. The rays had initiated protein disruption that would reach critical damage levels as he aged.

A veritable sword of Damocles.

The memory of that last visit with his bondmate pained Spock not just because of the impending deterioration, but because he had so nearly lost Jim to another as his bondmate struggled to come to terms with the realisation that his life would be cut short.

At the end of their second deep space mission Admiral Kirk had taken a leave of absence as a result of his mother's terminal decline. Spock had not been on Earth at the time Kirk's mother had died; a secret mission to Hellgard had taken him off planet. A chance meeting at his mother's funeral confirmed that the deterioration of mental capacity he had experienced after Gamma Hydra IV was no fluke but represented a genuine future the 'Berthold Dementia Effect', Dr. Kalomi had called it. The realisation had as profound an effect on Kirk as Spock's abortive attempt to burn away his love in the fiery hell of Gol. They had parted for three long years as Kirk came to terms with this demon. But for the intervention of Dr. McCoy, Jim would have wed Antonia, a woman he had met during that time apart; but that was another tale.

The last time they had travelled together to Stonehenge was for the Winter Solstice: a bittersweet occasion. Spock found that he could not recall the ceremony but there was one conversation that was indelibly written in his memory. As 'Sol Invictus' had risen, the two of them walked in silence towards the transportation hub. Jim had been pensive.

"Speak your mind."

"Spock, promise me this: when it's near your life's end, come here once again. If the legends about this place are true and humans have an eternal soul, I will be waiting."

He was here now to keep that a promise.

Yosemite 2387 Original timeline

A camping trip long ago had marked a time of confessions and sharing. Jim had quipped on an earlier trip that he, Spock, and McCoy were the surety against Kirkian demise. If they were present he was safe.

However it had been the second trip, the second campfire gathering, when Jim had exacted a promise from his bondmate and his friend.

“I’ve always known that I would die alone, but I didn’t understand why, not until I knew the events of Gamma Hydra IV would be my reality.

“Bones..... Spock,” Kirk had grasped both their hands in his. “You both know that my life is going to be limited by more than just my being a mere Earther. When I go, I don’t want to drift into senility I want to die making a difference. If either of you are there you will do everything you can to save me.

But when this time comes I want you: I need you to let me go.”

San Francisco 2293 Original timeline

Jim retired, taking the occasional command class at the academy as visiting lecturer until even the stabilising effect of regular melding could no longer ensure that he remained lucid for long enough. Though relatively well during daylight, Kirk’s frustration at his deteriorating mental capacity manifested itself in uncharacteristic violent outbursts especially during the sundown period. He did not sleep and paced endlessly when awake as if desperately trying to remember something.

More than once McCoy had suggested respite, but Spock would not leave. Jim had spoken about the surety that he would die alone; it was illogical, but it was as if being nearby, Spock imagined he would be able to delay his bondmate’s death. Maybe McCoy would find a cure before the inevitable time.

McCoy drew the line when a paranoid psychotic episode left Spock with a broken arm; Jim had smashed the bathroom door against his lover and had refused further melds.

Then Amanda had died

McCoy had insisted he travel to Vulcan for the memorial.

“Don’t worry, we will look after Jim, Scotty and Chekov are here. Spock you need the break, you are no use to Jim in the state you are in.”

“You will be back for the Launch”

Montgomery Scott watched as Admiral Kirk dropped from the sky, Spock would kill him. How had they both let themselves be conned into this. They had driven out to the old Kirk ranch in Iowa and then on to a bar near the Riverside Starfleet facility for a wee dram. How were they to know that it was next to an orbital drop facility and that Kirk had arranged to be transported up to a geosynchronous platform?

That was not the only activity, barrel rolling, climbing the mast of a square-rigger, skiing off piste whilst pissed: Babysitting the Admiral was becoming a nightmare. Yet the daredevil stunts seemed to be doing him some good; maybe it was the adrenaline rush Chekov mused recalling how he had avoided the ravages of aging. The Admiral was sleeping better and appeared to be less agitated. He even managed to record a holographic birthday greeting for Spock, though the brief period of lucidity had not improved his singing voice.

Losing Jim

The reception was marred by static, but he had managed to convey to McCoy that an ion storm would delay his arrival at Lunaport. Though he would get back to earth in time for the reception he would miss the inaugural launch flight of the Enterprise B. Scott and Chekov assured him that they would look after the Admiral. McCoy would meet the shuttle and they would join Scott and Pavel when the Enterprise re-docked.

The trouble started when they arrived on the bridge, Kirk was able to cope well when with friends and in a quiet familiar environment but Harriman, ever one to score some image points, had turned the event into a media circus.

Each step of the way Scott observed increased the captain’s agitation, his words became more terse then downright rude. Scott grimaced. He doubted that they would get through this media show with Kirk’s reputation intact, cursing the fact they had not pulled out the minute they knew Spock would not be there to stabilise the admiral’s mental state.

Jim was fazed, confused and did not recognise Demora. Only Chekov’s quick thinking managed to hide Kirk’s condition. At least he did not say something regrettable and in ear-shot when invited to “Give the order.”

Scott watched Jim pace as Harriman dithered, hoping that Kirk would not take the centre seat, yet when he did a remarkable sense of lucidity descended over the man whilst Harriman crumbled.

Scott thought that they were done-for. When Kirk vacated the chair for Harriman, an ineffectual captain, and a demented one, the odds of survival were slim. Scott prayed for a miracle but prepared for death.

When Spock finally arrived at Lunaport, McCoy ushered him away from the crowded concourse and instructed an ensign to transport the ambassador's bags to the embassy. Walking towards the officers' lounge he briefed Spock on the events taking place at 310 Mark 215.

"We will have to wait let us settle—" McCoy didn't finish the sentence as the Vulcan staggered, his eyes glazed and unseeing. McCoy had seen this reaction before in him, and Spock was aware it filled him with dread. Thinking fast, he hit the access point to a nearby private meeting room and dragged Spock within sealing the facility in the face of the posse of media employees. Spock sank to his knees, his mouth moving imperceptibly as if giving instructions.

It had happened twice before, both times when there was grave danger; a voice across space, an unmistakeable voice.

"Spock I need your help."

A panel lay open in front of Kirk, the control panel for the forward deflector array. A memory, Scott's supposition that a resonance burst from the main deflector dish might enable them to break free of the energy ribbon flashing through Kirk's mind.

"Spock, now would be a good time."

Spock's mind, Kirk's hands, the ship shuddered and shook as the quantum physics and Newtonian mechanics combined to force the Enterprise B free from danger. Spock slumped back on his heels. So close; he had come so close to losing Jim.

He could feel Kirk's exhilaration and then the tearing of metal met the tearing of a bond and a pain like nothing that he had ever known before ripped through every part of him. The last wisp of thought.

I always knew I would.....die.....alone.

Stonehenge 2485 Original timeline

The last time, he had visited the monument in his own universe he had travelled incognito. There was no logic in the decision, but there was an emotional need for the ancient stones to be a witness. What he was about to do would likely brand him as a traitor. But he would not live long enough to experience the consequences.

He had already behaved reprehensibly, an odd touch with shields lowered, a conversation overheard; the outcome of the debate was a foregone conclusion. The mission to Romulus was a gamble, the science untested, but if there was even a small chance that the effects of a supernova in the Romulan Star System could be averted, it would be worth it.

The debate was for show, for due process, but Spock had already known its outcome. The Federation perceived the red matter not as a force for good as he had intended, but as a weapon of awesome destructive power, and of course they feared the hijack of the red matter, and an altered balance of power, more than the effects of the supernova on the Romulan people.

Spock had made his decision; he would act without support. A Federation that would not sanction its use for good did not deserve to have Red Matter at all. He was half way to Romulus when the holo projector failed and the *Jellyfish*, docked at Vulcan Space Central, winked out exposing his theft.

The debate had wasted precious time, though he had managed to disrupt the nova sufficiently to restrict its destructive power, it was too late to prevent the loss of the Romulan home world, and his arrival was too late to maximise survival by evacuation. The pain of failure and the regret that he had not been able to execute this plan earlier was the last thought on his mind as the *Jellyfish* slid over the event horizon and into gravity well where he envisaged the red matter would rest trapped like a Titan.

However physics is not always predictable; there is always uncertainty.

Stonehenge 2265 Alternate timeline

The meditation was proving ineffective, and Spock stood intending to pace a while. He had taken up the habit after Jim's death, finding it soothing to the spirit. An irrational urge to touch one of the great stones entered his mind.

Strange, he found his joints freer than they had been for some time; he stepped toward the stone and saw him, at first like a mirage in interphase but then slowly forming, solidifying.

“Come”

“Where are we going, Jim?”

“The undiscovered country.”

They found Elder Spock’s body wrapped warmly slumped over, as if sleeping, the cloak that he had been carrying drawn around his shoulders.

Jim fingered the silver lettering remembering its meaning, another death, another time.