



But why, some say, the Moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may well ask, why climb the highest mountain? Why, 35 years ago, fly the Atlantic? ... We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard.

—President John F. Kennedy, 1962

And, to boldly go where no man has gone before.

— The White House, et al (1958) The Introduction to Outer Space

KiScon 2019

Edited & Compiled by Holly “Carleen” Brown

KISCON 2019 – Official Zine

Seattle, Washington

November 2019

A heartfelt thank you to the contributing authors for their editing skills and support. To the generations of writers, readers, and fans who keep the spirit of IDIC and T'hy'la alive. This ezine is dedicated to you,

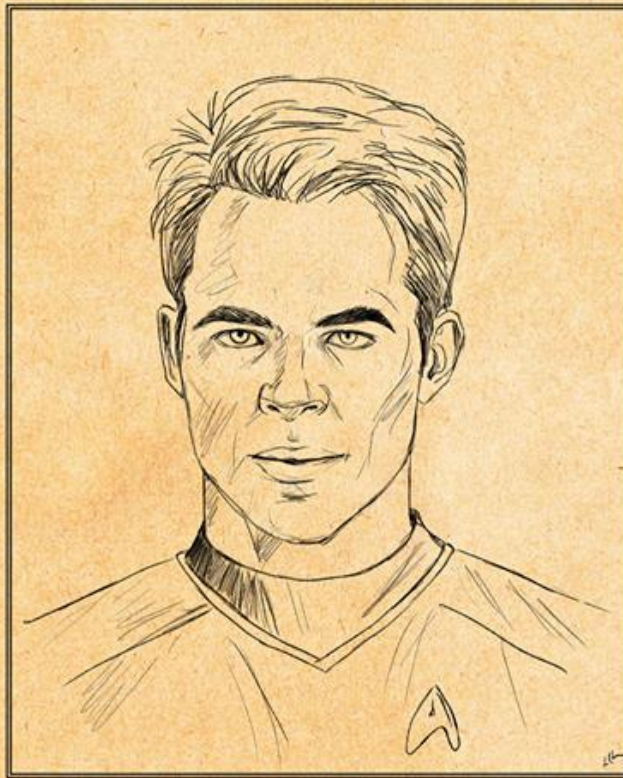
And a special thank you to Dovyā Blacque, who in 1992, responded to a nervous first-time writer, admonishing her gently about forgetting to send a self-addressed stamped envelope with her submission. Dovyā followed up with a 'What the hell,' accepted the story, and opened the gate to the adventurous path of becoming a storyteller.

—Holly "Carleen" Brown, November 2019

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WANTED!

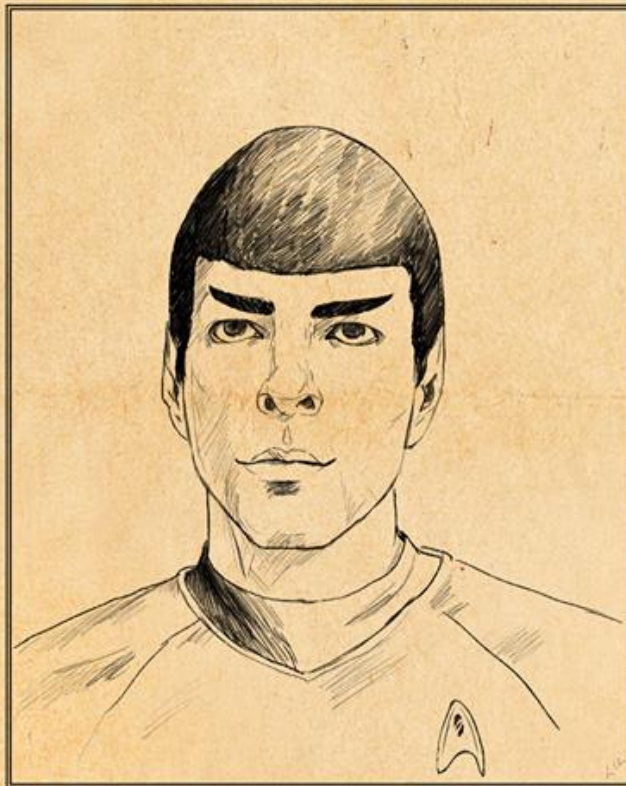


“Prettyboy” Jim Kirk

\$200,00 reward

Bank Robbing, Armed Robbery, and Chicken Swindling
Known Leader of the Enterprise Gang

WANTED!



Spock "Smiley McGee"

\$200,00 reward

Wanted for

Bank Robbing, Armed Robbery, and Drunk and Disorderly conduct
in the Presence of a Cow

Member of the Enterprise Gang

Just Breathe

Dovya Blacque

Just breathe my love
And all will be well
You tremble so
You touch my heart
I am moved to tears
As I watch you
Shudder and flinch
In the aftermath of passion
In this our refuge from the world
From duty and
Rank and obligation

Just breathe my captain
And all will be well
You calm as
We lie here amid
The detritus of the heat
We shared so beautifully
Like you
Beautiful
As you cool in
The evening air
Recover from your exertions

Just breathe my Jim
Relax with me
As you can with
No other
Be calm and breathe
You have taken me
Within you and
Have been within me
We are one
From now until
the end of time
But for now...

Just breathe.

Not Even Close

Doctor Beth

“Captain, I love you!”

Kirk heaved Spock up again. The Vulcan was a dead weight, but they had to move. “No, you don’t. It’s the drugs.”

“Of course I do.”

“No. This isn’t you. Now. Move. Your. Legs!”

Spock looked down at his legs throwing off Kirk’s balance. “My feet are agoing, agoing, a pitter, a patter. Oh, feet rhymes with teeth.” He took a deep breath.

Oh god, the Vulcan was going to start singing again. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be the one about Bilbo Baggins. That was awful. “Shh. We have to be quiet.”

“All I want for Christmas are my two front teeth. My two front teeth,” Spock warbled, loudly and badly.

“Spock, be quiet!” Kirk whispered.

Kirk propped Spock up against a tree and did the only thing he could. He pressed his hand over Spock’s mouth, trying to get him to stop singing.

Spock apparently did the only thing he could do and bit down on Kirk’s hand. Hard.

“Ow!” Kirk pulled his hand back, his hand bleeding.

The sound apparently got through to the drugged Vulcan who then said, “Are you injured? Did they hurt you?” He abruptly stood up and shouted. “Don’t worry, I’ll get them.”

“Spock! Wait!”

He took off before Kirk could stop him, staggering from tree to tree, shouting, “Where are you? How dare you hurt my captain!”

Kirk tackled him and they fell into the underbrush. Kirk pushed Spock down, but Spock struggled to get free.

“Let me go! My captain is hurt, and I have to go save him!” Spock roared into Kirk’s ear.

“I am the captain!” Kirk had to practically sit on Spock to keep him down. But he could tell the Vulcan was weakening because he wasn’t immediately thrown off.

Spock struggled to get up. “You’re heavy!”

“I know! That’s the point! Keep quiet!” Kirk whispered in Spock’s ear.

Spock finally stopped struggling when he heard Kirk’s voice. He lifted his head and grinned as if thrilled to see his friend. “Hey there, Jim!”

“Spock?” Kirk said uncertainly, momentarily stunned at this sudden transformation.

“Hiya!” Spock was still smiling. He was so high on whatever drug those guys gave him.

Kirk tried to check on Spock’s pupils to see how dilated they were when the singing started again.

“In the middle of the Earth, in the land of the Shire...”¹

“Hey! Shh, shh!” Kirk hushed urgently. He was definitely going to ask why the Vulcan was singing about Bilbo Baggins. Later.

“...Bilbo, Bilbo! Bilbo Baggins...”¹ He stopped singing, finally, then asked, “Why do we have to be quiet?”

“Because the bad guys are after us. That’s why!”

“Oh yeah!” Spock collapsed back, giggling.

“All right, we should try to get these restraints off.” Spock’s hands were still tied loosely together. They had left rather hastily, and Kirk had not had a chance to remove them.

Kirk had not even finished his sentence when Spock looked at his hands. “Oh, you mean these?” He pulled them apart, ripping the bonds, and handed the pieces to Kirk, then lay back and closed his eyes, giggling softly.

“Uh, yeah. That’s better.” Kirk looked around but didn’t hear their pursuers. “We need to put more distance...” Kirk stopped when he realized Spock had started snoring. This was ridiculous. He pulled Spock’s arm over his shoulder and pulled the Vulcan upright. He was a dead weight and extremely heavy.

Spock blinked when he realized Kirk was picking him up. “You’re strong,” he slurred, leaning heavily on Kirk. “No. Don’t. I can stand.” Spock pushed Kirk away and then fell back to the ground.

Kirk sighed and hauled Spock up again. Kirk managed to carry, well, drag Spock through the forest. He wanted to put as much distance between them and the city as possible. He only had to buy some time. They were due to check in soon and when they were late, the Enterprise would find them.

“I cannot believe you. Why would you do something like that?” He halfway expected Spock to not respond at all, but he was surprised.

“Jim, they were going to kill you. Again.”

“Spock, this may come as a surprise, but I can take care of myself. You could have gotten killed!”

“It’s my duty to protect you.”

“No. It isn’t!” Kirk hissed. “All right, maybe it is, a little... but not like this!”

Kirk was running out of steam. Spock was heavy, and dragging him through the woods was not easy. He stopped. “I have to rest a minute.” He eased Spock down and Spock proceeded to lounge bonelessly against a log. God. Kirk wished he could feel that relaxed.

“Okeydokey,” Spock said as he leaned his head way back and seemed to contemplate the darkening sky as if he didn’t have a care in the world. Again, Kirk wished he could feel that relaxed, but he was tense with worry. It was getting dark and it was going to be cold.

Spock looked up from his log and suddenly said, “You know what I wanted more than anything when I was growing up?”

Kirk wasn’t really listening to Spock. He was trying to listen for their pursuers, but the wind whistling through the forest was masking sounds.

“You have to guess.”

Kirk glanced at Spock. “Uh... snow?” It was the first thing that came to mind. Night was falling, and it was getting cold, and it might actually snow or freeze. Luckily the drugged Vulcan didn’t seem to be feeling anything right now.

“Nope. Not even close.”

“Okay, I give up.” Kirk was still not really listening.

"I wanted to escape that stifling, domineering, repressive planet," he said bitterly, then sighed. "And now I want it back, more than anything."

"That's nice," Kirk said, not really listening.

"Nice?" Spock said in disbelief. "I had no friends. My father was disappointed in me. The other children taunted me. My mother tried to protect me, but she was not able to because of Vulcan customs."

Kirk finally really listened to what Spock was saying and heard the anguish in his voice. "What about when you joined Star Fleet Academy? Was it better?"

"It was just school," Spock said dismissively. "More lessons, then I started teaching, but there was no challenge. I was still treated as an outsider."

Kirk almost wished Spock would go back to the awful singing from earlier. This was almost too much honesty.

Spock peered at Kirk through bleary eyes. "Do you know what I thought when I first saw you?"

"No, what?"

"I thought you were an arrogant prick."

"What?"

"Yeah, you showed up on the bridge, all pompous and brash. You were so different from Captain Pike. I tried to like you, but..."

"Uh, okay." Kirk was trying not to get angry, but this was getting to be a little too much."

"But you know something? You grew on me! You respected me. I liked you. I really liked you. Then you started sleeping with all the women."

"What?" This was getting worse by second.

"First, Deela, then the ambassador's wife from Aboopsh. You would have slept with Edith if you could have gotten away with it. You even got Miramancee pregnant!" Spock listed off the women from Kirk's past one by one.

Kirk was stunned. That was going too far. "You don't know what you're saying," he said quietly, seething inside.

"Yes, I do. The great Captain Kirk! All the women wanted you, and all you had to do was snap your fingers, and they came running." His voice was hoarse, and he was slurring his words.

“This isn’t you talking. It’s the drugs.”

“No. It’s... not. Every mission, I always wonder if you’re going to do it again.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Even today! This was all your fault!”

“All I did was talk to the girl. How was I supposed to know she was the King’s daughter?”

The Vulcan was obviously getting worked up. “You should have! Didn’t you see all the suitors?”

“I did, but she tripped, and all I did was help her up. I didn’t know it was going to lead to... this!”

“You know nothing about wooing women. They need attention, not conquest.”

“Spock! Stop it!” This had gone on long enough. It was cold, dark and they were being chased by the enemy through dank woods and here he was arguing with a drugged Vulcan.

“You know nothing about love.”

“Yeah, and how did you come to know so much?”

“I know enough, especially when it’s right in front of me,” Spock shouted.

The sound of crashing sent a shiver up Kirk’s spine. “SHHH!”

“No! I will not ‘Shhh!’ I have a right to say this,” Spock said, swaying.

Kirk grabbed his arm to pull him down behind a bush, but the stubborn Vulcan resisted. “Get down! They’re going to find us!”

“I need to say this!”

“Okay, okay, just say it quietly. And. Get. Down.” He forcefully pulled the Vulcan down undercover.

Spock intoned dreamily.

*"We are star-met.
We are joined.
We are blessed.
We who have found each other.
We are the dream of the ages.
We are the hope, the desire.
We are love."* ²

Kirk was stunned. He opened his mouth to speak but found he couldn't breathe. He didn't know whether to be touched or flabbergasted. It was so awful, the song about Bilbo Baggins was better than this.

Then he recovered and said. "Where did you learn such... interesting poetry?"

Spock grinned. "One of the greatest poets Earth has ever seen. Unrecognized in his time. He was a master of words. His imagery was beyond imagination. He had a few devoted followers. He could..." Spock continued to list all the astounding qualities of this poet.

Kirk was definitely going to have to look the poem up later. Finally, when Spock paused to take a breath, Kirk interrupted, "He sounds wonderful, but perhaps now is not the time." This was a side of Spock Kirk never thought he would see. Never really wanted to see. It was weird.

The crashing got louder. They were going to get caught. Just then, Kirk's communicator beeped. Thank God, Kirk thought. In more ways than one.

Kirk pulled out his communicator. "Scotty here, Captain."

"Scotty, beam us up, quickly. And get Dr. McCoy."

"No! Wait!" Spock shouted.

"Captain?" Scotty asked anxiously.

"Never mind, Scotty. Just get us out of here!"

Spock pulled down Kirk's hand. "I just wanted to tell you, Jim. I- "

The transporter beamed them to the *Enterprise*.

1. Grean, Charles. "Bilbo Baggins." *Space Odyssey*, Pickwick Records (1972) Song: Leonard Nimoy
2. Nimoy, Leonard. (2005) (first published May 15, 2002) *A Lifetime of Love: Poems on the Passages of Life (Love)*. Blue Mountain Arts

The Epilog of this story will appear in the Star Trek Fanzine "Let Me Help" published in 2019 by Ashton Press.

Alayne, this is your fault. I put the blame entirely on you. —Beth



Mudd's Action

Amedia

(Episode tag for ST: TAS "Mudd's Passion.")

Spock found McCoy in the medical lab, conducting an analysis on some alien substance. "Good morning, Doctor," he said. "I apologize for the interruption."

McCoy looked up from his instruments. "Not at all, Mr. Spock. Let me have about two minutes, and you can be the first to hear what I've learned." He moved the sample he was studying to look at it from a different angle, and Spock recognized the all-too-familiar shimmer of one of those... unfortunate crystals. Spock had steeled himself to talk to Dr. McCoy about their effects, but his resolution was rapidly waning.

He waited patiently, wondering—more like dreading—that what McCoy was learning through analysis was something he already learned through experience. Dread, of course, was an emotion, and he refused to permit himself to feel it. Indeed, he denied himself permission repeatedly in the short time it took McCoy to complete his task and write down the results.

When McCoy looked up, however, his face was shining with the joy of scientific discovery. Spock found himself touched that McCoy was happy to share it with him, a sensation that temporarily banished the dread. And so he was able to ask his question calmly. "What have you found, Doctor?"

McCoy pulled up a 3-dimensional molecular image on the lab's wall-mounted screen and pointed. "I've been examining the structure of the so-called 'love crystals' that Harry Mudd was peddling last week. There are some peculiarities at the molecular level, but wait until you see the subatomic variations." He waved at the screen, and it zoomed in continuously until McCoy stopped it with another gesture.

Spock leaned forward to look at the image more closely. "Fascinating," he said and meant it. Beneath the vibrations that clearly inspired the temporary, fraudulent sensations of affection to which the crew had been subjected, there was another, steadier pulse whose beat was barely visible. "What significance do you ascribe to this anomaly?"

McCoy picked up the pad and studied his notes. "It would take a long time to explain, and I'd be happy to go over the details later, but to cut a long story short, the crystals actually work in two different ways. They can cause random people who are not in love to experience symptoms as if they were. But they can also cause people with the unrealized potential to be in love to actualize that phenomenon." He regarded Spock closely. "Have you observed any cases on board the Enterprise

of people for whom the effects have not worn off?"

Spock took a deep breath and tried to decide what to say. This was what he had come to talk to McCoy about, but now that the moment had come, he could not seem to frame the correct words. All he knew was that while the brief flare of attraction he had felt for Jim Kirk while under the crystal's influence had faded, it had left in its place a steadily smoldering warmth that refused to be dislodged by any mental disciplines.

McCoy allowed a moment to pass and then continued. "In such a case, the crystal would serve not as a cause, but a catalyst, releasing genuine feelings that had existed all along. There might be a brief moment of irritation as the immediate, artificial influence wore off, but it would be followed by a longer period of ... well, I suppose you'd call it real love."

Spock managed to find his voice. "How much longer, Doctor?"

McCoy smiled. "That depends on the individuals in question. As near as I can tell, it only happens between people who already love each other and don't realize it." He put a hand on Spock's shoulder. "Perhaps you should ask Jim."

Spock reflected a moment and nodded. "That, Doctor, is an outstandingly intelligent idea."

Anchor

Dovya Blacque

Hold tight and be my love, tell me that we're forever and damned be those who don't understand, those who can't see beyond the outward differences to the molten core below, those who say they know duty and honor but have no idea what those words mean.

Hold tight to me, no matter what, no matter the taunts or strange looks from people who've never understood either of us, who have preconceived notions and that's all they have, who are narrow and small and insignificant in all ways.

Hold tight, don't be afraid of what you feel or who you are; this is who you are, this is who we are, and that's good enough for me, good enough for you, too, if you'll admit it, if you'll see past the prejudices you still hold in your heart.

Hold tight because this is what's important, not what 'should' be or 'shouldn't' be, not what your father or my superiors think we should or shouldn't do or feel or want or need.

Hold tight. Be true to yourself and in doing so you'll be true to me without effort or even conscious thought; we are what and who we are and I thought you'd know that by now, thought you knew that about yourself, about me... about us.

Hold tight even when I'm being an insecure ass – for which I apologize – and we'll walk out the other side of this – and every – fight placed in our path; if we walk that path together nothing will stop us, nothing will make us turn from what we know to be right, what we know to be real and ever-lasting.

Hold tight to me because you know that, with me, anything is possible, with me our dreams can become reality, have become reality; don't let them take it away from us. Don't let fear overrule your heart or your mind.

Hold tight because if you don't, I'll fall away into the nothing of space, I'll disappear without you to anchor me and hold me up, to honor me, to love me. Just hold tight.

Not So Simple

LSpingles

(This story is set immediately after Star Trek: The Motion Picture ended. It incorporates dialogue from both the movie and, particularly, the book, which I find superior. Thank you, Alice West, for your suggestions and friendship.)

Jim flopped onto his bed and rolled his shoulders, relieved to be in his own quarters at last with time to consider the meaning of Spock's words and actions. It had taken all his will power to not request a private meeting as soon as they had reboarded the *Enterprise*. A shudder raced through his body at the thought of Spock disappearing again.

Spock's words after they had watched the merging of the Vejur probe, in the form of Ilia and Will, floated through his mind. *'It would seem to me, Captain, that the dimensions of creation make our future choices almost limitless.'*

Is it wishful thinking, or was Spock sending me a message? Whose choices did he mean? His and mine? The Federation's?

Jim curled his fingers into the palm of his hand, relishing again that joyful moment when Spock reached for him. He imagined the press of Spock's palm against his in sickbay. Heard in his mind his friend speak of *this simple feeling*.

How many times have I done this in the last six hours?

He allowed the memory to continue, experiencing again the surge of happiness he had felt when Spock had affirmed his nod of the feelings they were acknowledging to each other. Jim sighed, then muttered under his breath, "What were you acknowledging, Spock?"

Deep friendship? Something more? Have I misunderstood, again?

'Is this all that I am? Is there nothing more?' Spock's words replayed in his mind. While they had clasped hands, he had said those were the questions that Vejur was asking. But Jim knew that those questions resonated with his friend. Jim looked intently at the ceiling, as though if he stared hard enough, the mysteries of the universe, or of just one Vulcan, would reveal themselves. He shook his head from side to side as he recalled...the excitement he felt once before when Spock wrapped his long fingers around his then-smaller hand when he was trapped in Janice Lester's body.

It didn't mean a thing! A mocking voice in the back of his head scolded. *You made a fool of yourself at the end of the mission based on sixty seconds, imagined the protective gesture meant more than the other times he had touched you.*

Jim sat up abruptly, wrapping his arms around his knees. "No." His whispered denial reverberated around his empty quarters.

It was different. It wasn't a quick push or shove when I was in danger or a light tap to get my attention. Spock stood by my side, holding my hand, longer than was necessary, like he belonged there. The rational part of his brain objected. Face the facts, Spock left, and it was your declarations that drove him away.

A wishful voice in his head dissented again.

This time is different. Spock knows now how I would interpret his actions. He decided to reach out and clasp my arm, seek my hand, and press our palms together. When I added my other hand to tighten the grip, he didn't try and pull away, but affirmed my nod with the tip of his own head, his eyes never leaving mine.

'How important it is for a living thing to have needs.' And unbelievable were Spock's words as in spoke in rapture about the need to feel awe, delight, and beauty.

Suddenly, Jim became acutely aware that no sounds had emanated from Spock's cabin. After their brief jaunt to see what the ship could do, Spock had stayed behind, speaking with his replacement.

Where is he?

He moved blindly to his desk, a sense of panic sweeping over him.

Not again. Please, don't run.

"Commander Spock, contact me immediately." Typically, he refrained from using ship-wide communications to locate anyone for personal reasons, but this was an emergency. His heart thundered in his chest at the thought that Spock could already be on Earth, arranging transport away from him.

He squeezed his eyes shut, willing a response. A sigh of relief escaped when seconds later, the hail was answered. He opened his eyes and put it on visual, wishing to see Spock's calm gaze reflecting back at him, perhaps a raised eyebrow of interest. Instead, he was greeted by the scowling face of Doctor McCoy.

"What in blazes is going on? Spock's here and just entered a much-needed healing trance. I should've dragged him to sickbay directly after the crisis was over, but he had to follow you to the bridge and then be by your side as you ordered the *Enterprise* on an unauthorized test spin. Luckily, your sanity, or your desire to get the *Enterprise* back, kicked in. When I heard you quickly agree to return to orbit in a couple of hours, I told Spock that he could finish his shift before returning to sickbay."

The doctor leaned closer to the viewer. "He pushed himself too long for you and needs time to recover from the neurological trauma of the meld with Vejur. I'm not going to pull him..."

Jim held up his hand and smiled, unable to contain the relief that Spock wasn't going anywhere for the time being. "No. Don't drag him out of it. It's nothing."

The penetrating gaze of his friend met his. “Nothing, eh? Just such an all-powerful need to locate Spock that you didn’t have time to read my communication indicating I put him on medical leave for thirty-six hours before paging him ship-wide.”

Jim shrugged. “How long will he be in a trance?”

“Spock thought it might take about twenty-two hours.”

“So, around fifteen hundred hours tomorrow, he should be coming out of it.”

“I’ll need to run some tests once he’s awake before he’s cleared for duty.”

“I need to speak to him.” Jim felt like a specimen under Bones’ microscope. The blue eyes softened, and Jim knew that Bones understood that the conversation he wanted had nothing to do with the business of the *Enterprise*.

Bones nodded slowly. “Yes. I understand what *you* want. But Spock may need some time to himself, Jim, to meditate, assimilate everything. From what I could see, the encounter with Vejur was profound. His immediate reaction to what he experienced may differ from his ultimate interpretation of the experience.”

Jim heard the subtle warning in his friend’s voice, which was tinged with compassion.

Don’t expect too much. Don’t ask for more than he can give.

“You know, I couldn’t reach him when he went to Gol. My attempts at communication were blocked. He’s avoided being alone with me since he came back.” Jim twisted his hands together. “I can’t have him disappear back to Vulcan without a fight. He means too much to me.”

Bones shook his head slightly. “I don’t think he’ll go back to Vulcan, Jim. Remember, he said he failed to excise his human half after studying with the Masters at Gol. It was one of the reasons he came here. ‘It was my only hope of accomplishing what the Masters could not,’” Bones parroted.

Jim grimaced as the conversation the three of them had had the evening Spock returned to the ship came back to him. “I have not yet succeeded,” he whispered, shoulders slumping as what he said registered with the logical part of his brain. Perhaps Spock’s ultimate goal had not changed. And yet...

Why had Spock laughed in sickbay? The futility of searching for an answer to his problems from a machine. A realization that his long sought-after goal was the wrong solution. Had Spock finally found an answer on his own? Jim curled his fingers into the palm of his hand again.

Am I be part of the solution?

His heart rate surged back with hope, despite the protests of the rational part of his brain.

The sound of Bones' voice registered through a fog.

"Jim? Jim?"

"Sorry, Bones. Just thinking."

"Spock also said, 'My task on Vulcan is complete.' He's not going back."

Jim straightened, rolling his shoulders, feeling the tension momentarily ease. "That he did," he acknowledged, recollecting the conversation and the words Spock had spoken to Scotty.

Bones leaned towards his viewer. "Jim, why don't you drop by later for a drink?"

"I'll pass. I've reports to write before the debrief meetings, which start the day after tomorrow at thirteen hundred hours after the morning reception celebrating the mission. Anyway, I don't think I'd be good company. Too much on my mind."

"It might help to talk."

"No. I need some time to myself. Let me know when Spock is about to come out of the trance."

"Jim, let me speak to him in private first. I'll let you know when I've released him from sickbay."

"All right, Doctor. Take care of him."

Jim snapped off the viewer and circled his room. He was not in the mental state required for report writing just yet. He knew thoughts of Spock would inevitably interfere. He pulled a drawer open and changed into his work-out gear. *Physical activity will at least momentarily clear my head and perhaps give me inspiration on how to approach the most important conversation of my life tomorrow.*

Spock grabbed Doctor McCoy's wrist. "That should be sufficient, Doctor." His eyes quickly scanned the sickbay. Jim was not present.

Swallowing back the feeling of disappointment in his gut, Spock pushed himself upright to move off the bed, "If you will excuse me, I shall—"

Doctor McCoy stepped into his personal space, preventing him from leaving the bed without contact. "Not so fast. I've not discharged you. I've some tests I want to run before I authorize your release."

Spock pursed his lips. He knew from long experience that there was no point debating the doctor. The sooner he began his tests, the sooner he could escape the confines of sickbay and retreat to the sanctuary of his quarters. "Very well."

Doctor McCoy stepped back and turned towards the other room. "Christine, please load the simulation we created."

Doctor Chapel's voice answered back crisply. "I did so earlier, Leonard. It's already fed through to the computer."

The doctor motioned Spock towards a desk with a computer set up. "This should take you about an hour to complete. Once you're done, Doctor Chapel will run some diagnostics while I analyze the results. About thirty minutes after you complete the tests, I should be able to discuss the results with you."

Spock seated himself at the desk and looked up as Doctor Chapel entered. "Would you like something from the mess hall to eat while you do the tests? I could pick you up a soup and salad. You were out when the meals arrived."

"I would appreciate that. In the meantime, I should like to get started." Spock deliberately turned towards the viewer. He did not wish to engage in discussion with either of the doctors.

What I need is time to meditate.

He focused his attention on the devised tests, relieved that the doctors quickly departed. Twelve minutes later, he thanked Doctor Chapel for the vegetable soup and beet and carrot salad, then resumed his task. Forty-three minutes after that, he completed the simulation. Moments later, Doctor Chapel appeared to execute the scheduled diagnostic tests. Based on his own internal scan, he knew his body was functioning well within normal parameters, but he also knew Doctor McCoy would insist on external validation. Thankfully, Doctor Chapel did not attempt to engage him in a discussion. She departed, presumably to report the results to Doctor McCoy, as soon as the tests were completed.

Spock retrieved for himself a glass of water and sat. He glanced at the biobed he had laid upon when he woke from the mind-meld with Vejur and turned away quickly. He gripped his cup tighter as the feeling of emptiness he had sensed in Vejur and recognized in himself returned. The pain of such barrenness had been overwhelming.

Now is not the time to contemplate the path forward. I need the privacy of my quarters.

He sucked in his bottom lip, pulled it slowly over his lower teeth. Unbidden thoughts intruded. *How could I have believed that embracing logic would remove the pain of turning away from my t'hy'la? Fool. You thought you had succeeded, but it was self-deception.* He swallowed, remembering the epiphany that had come from the meld with Vejur.

Logic is barren. It does not offer me a solution. Vejur sought to connect with others.

When he had awoken from the meld, it was with an urgent need to acknowledge his own feelings rather than to bury them. Claspings Jim's hand had been instinctive. He hadn't even been aware of his unshielded state until he was enveloped by a sense of astonishment and joy.

But what has that selfish moment accomplished? I likely have only given Jim false hope. The reason I was compelled to leave remains valid.

A tremor ran up his spine. The prospect of removing himself entirely from Jim's life was untenable. *I will not follow that path again. There must be some way to go back to what we had before. Friendship will suffice for the time I have left. It is the only viable alternative,* the logical part of his brain insisted. He shifted in his chair as his heart raced faster in his side. *Will Jim still trust in my friendship after my method of departure? There is no certainty that Jim's immediate reaction to my recovery in sickbay means that Jim can forgive my actions.*

Spock closed his eyes to focus on calming himself. As he did so, Jim's hazel eyes appeared in his mind's eye as they had in sickbay. He tried to discern the message Jim was trying to convey. *Am I a fool to think that he still desires me? Can he be satisfied with what I can offer? Can there be more than friendship?* His human half wanted answers.

Abruptly, Spock became aware of Doctor McCoy looming over him. He jerked slightly, and the water he had forgotten he held in his hands spilled over his fingers.

Doctor McCoy thankfully refrained from comment. He simply took the glass and left it on the counter.

"Let's go to my office."

On route, the doctor got himself a cup of coffee. Spock declined the offer of a beverage. McCoy sat behind his desk and motioned Spock to do the same. As he seated himself, Spock noticed the doctor had engaged the privacy lock.

"Something on your mind, Spock?"

Spock allowed his eyebrow to climb as various acerbic remarks came to mind, starting with "my simulation results," instead, he asked a question. One which had troubled him since his review of Jim's activities, during his absence, on the trip from Vulcan. "Why did Jim accept the Admiralty position at Star Fleet?"

Doctor McCoy snorted into his coffee. "If only I knew. The position is not what I would have expected him to gravitate towards. It lacks adventure." The doctor replied with a shrug of his shoulders.

Spock felt compelled to keep speaking. To try and learn something from Doctor McCoy that would assist his later meditations.

I will not jeopardize Jim's happiness for my own. I must endeavour to understand, as best I can, how content he is in his life before I consider all the possibilities.

"Did he compromise his job position because of his relationship with Lori Ciani? Her experience would not have been sufficient to secure her a post on a fleet vessel."

"And how would you know that? Did you hack her files?"

Spock resisted the urge to move when the doctor caught him in an intense stare.

“You seem rather up-to-date on Jim’s private life. Clearly, you had some priority reading since you left the seclusion of Gol.”

The sarcasm in the doctor’s voice was evident, but Spock ignored it, as the observation was valid. As much as he had tried not to think about the captain when he was at Gol, he would occasionally succumb to ‘flights of fancy’ and imagine where he was located, who he was with and what activities he was engaged in. After obtaining transportation and ascertaining the location of the *Enterprise*, he immediately sought information, personal and professional, to assuage his curiosity. He wanted to know if Jim had settled into the life he had imagined for him.

The image he had retrieved of Lori Ciani confirmed her physical appearance aligned with that of females Jim had been attracted to in the past. The accomplishments and varied interests he had been able to discern by examining public and private records seemed sufficient to attract and retain Jim’s attention. Yet, he was aware they had not renewed their marriage contract and based on his own observation, Jim had not reacted strongly to her recent passing.

Why?

Spock clasped his hands together and rested his elbows on his thighs. “I had anticipated when I left for Vulcan that the captain, Jim, would settle into a permanent relationship. I envisioned him with a wife, raising a family, on an outpost of which he was in charge. That such a challenge would fill a void in his life. Bring him contentment.”

“You mean, the void left by your departure,” Doctor McCoy said sharply, swallowing some coffee.

“The void left by the loss of the *Enterprise*,” he clarified, but amended under Doctor McCoy’s relentless gaze, “My departure as well.” Spock averted his eyes from the accusatory look of the doctor. He felt compelled to add quietly, “A friend is not an adequate substitute for a mate.” It had been his prior conclusion. *Can it be enough?*

The doctor slammed his coffee mug on the table. His voice rose. “It didn’t quite work out the way you planned. Jim said it was her decision not to renew the contract, although he didn’t object. He told me Lori said, ‘I can’t compete with his ghost any longer.’”

Doctor McCoy sighed loudly as he crossed his legs, leaning back once again. “He was a wreck when you left. It was probably the only reason the marriage happened. He knew pretty early on the marriage contract had been a mistake, but he tried. He wanted to move on.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe you did that to him. Leaving with barely a word. He blamed himself for your departure, you know.”

The doctor’s eyes, which previously had flashed at him in anger, seemed to soften as he looked into them. Spock thought he saw compassion.

“I can guess what happened, of course. I saw enough glances between the two of you on the bridge, moments of anguish in sickbay while you each waited anxiously for your other half to recover. I’m guessing he finally told you the depth of his feelings. You just couldn’t see your way to loving him back. Against your Vulcan principles, and all that.” The final sentence was spoken quietly, almost a whisper.

Suddenly, Spock felt an inexplicable need to explain.

A result of the meld with Vejur?

“I did, do love, Jim.” He had hesitated on the word love, but once said out loud, there was an odd sense of relief in revealing the truth. He felt the tension in his shoulders ease.

Doctor McCoy’s eyes widened at his words. He motioned with his hand for him to continue. Spock swallowed. “That is why I let him go. I am not what he needs to be fulfilled.” He knew the pain he felt was openly visible but forced himself to maintain eye contact. “I wish it was otherwise.”

“Only Jim knows what he needs, Spock. Somehow his mind reached out to you over light-years of space.”

“Under stress, he may have reverted to past practice. That crisis has passed.”

The doctor stood deliberately, then leaned across the desk, his hands clenching the edge. “Not Jim’s personal crisis. Just after you entered the trance, Jim paged you ship-wide. Why? Because he was panicked you were going to leave without speaking to him. He would have been here when you woke from the trance if not for my intervention.”

Spock did not even bother to try to contain the small quirk at the corner of his mouth at that news. *That is why Jim was not here.*

The doctor continued to encroach on his personal space, fixing Spock with his gaze. “If you love someone, you don’t go away. Do not go gentle into that good night.”

Spock raised his eyebrow at the doctor’s intuition, even as he automatically replied, “Dylan Thomas.” How had the doctor surmised that he had determined while at Gol to allow himself to succumb to the blood fever during his next pon farr? Even now that remained a distinct possibility, although he hoped at least to treasure what time he had left in the company of friends. *I will not hold Jim hostage to my biology.*

“Rage, Spock. Have the courage to speak to Jim this time.”

Spock leaned forward to rest his chin on his steepled index fingers, and as he did, the doctor straightened. “It is not my intention to depart in the same manner as the last time. I do not intend to depart at all unless Jim asks it of me.”

“Glad to hear it. Otherwise, I would have confined you to sickbay until Jim got here.”

“May I be discharged?”

“Yes. The simulation results were fine, and the diagnostic tests Doctor Chapel performed revealed no issues. You just need to catch up on your rest so the medical leave time I originally ordered stands. You’re back on active duty in time for the celebratory reception tomorrow morning. Assuming you plan to join us this time.”

Spock ignored the jibe related to his absence at the last homecoming celebration as he had already stated that his intent was not to depart. He rose from his seat. "If you will excuse me, I would like to return to my quarters before the alpha shift ends."

The doctor stood as well. "Fine. Look, I promised Jim I'd let him know as soon as I released you. I'll suggest he give you at least a couple of hours to meditate, but I can't promise he'll listen."

Spock turned as the doors opened. "I appreciate your making such a request on my behalf." He was grateful to the doctor for recognizing his need to meditate. The emptiness in his soul was painful. Questions that had been percolating in the back of his mind immediately rose to the foreground as he left the office.

Do I have the right to decide for both of us the best path forward? Is there a way to give Jim enough information to make a decision yet ensure he takes sufficient time to process it?

Jim half-listened to the conversations going on around him in the mess hall. Scotty was waxing on to Pavel about the vast technology that Vejur had amassed. Nyota was discussing with Hikaru the planned entertainment at the celebratory party that was to occur before the debriefings started. He had not returned to his quarters after Bones had called to indicate Spock had been discharged as he wanted to resist the temptation of barging in on Spock too quickly. At least here he was separated by a few decks, rather than an adjoining door, and he had food and the company of others to distract him.

He glanced at the time. Seventeen minutes to go. He had committed to Bones that he would give Spock ninety minutes to himself. He pushed aside his barely touched salad and forced himself to engage with those around him.

"So, what are the details of this shindig you've got planned."

"I'm not planning it," Lieutenant Commander Uhura replied. "I've just been coordinating with Star Fleet headquarters. They're taking care of the festivities. I merely need to wrangle the bridge crew to the party so that appropriate press coverage of our arrival can be obtained. You know how successful missions help to fund other activities."

Jim shook his head. "Unfortunately, my time at Fleet headquarters has made me too well aware of the need to obtain funding for projects. Just let us all know where and when, and we'll do our best."

"Do you think Commander Spock will come? HQ is anxious that he makes an appearance. They haven't forgiven or forgotten that he skipped the celebration at the end of our five-year mission."

"Neither have I." Jim grimaced, the pain of that day coming back to him.

Nyota reached out and touched his hand. "I'm sorry. I spoke without thinking. I'm hopeful that whatever brought the Commander back to us will convince him to stay."

"Me too," Jim replied, rising abruptly from the table.

Time is up, Spock. I can't wait any longer.

"If you'll excuse me. I have someone I need to see." Jim strode from the mess hall, barely acknowledging the nods from his crew, and headed to the turbolift.

A few moments later, he stood in the corridor in front of Spock's quarters, taking a breath to center himself. *Not now*, he commanded himself, pushing aside the pain that Nyota's comment had stirred up. He pressed the announcer.

The doors swooshed open, accompanied by the timbre of Spock's deep voice. "Come."

As Jim entered, Spock rose fluidly from his meditation mat. He was wearing a luxurious, floor-length black meditation robe, knotted with a tie at the waist, over his Star Fleet black pants and undershirt. His hands were clasped behind his back.

Jim felt his heart clench as he took in the somber, closed-off visage. It was the expression Spock had worn when he unexpectedly arrived on the *Enterprise* from Vulcan. Spock's name had flown from his lips. Jim remembered repeating himself in the shock of the moment. Spock's eyes had touched his briefly before he turned towards the science console to speak with Will Decker. His lack of reaction had hurt.

Yet he wondered if that aloofness had been a façade, remembering now how Spock often retreated to the safety of math and science instead of confronting an emotional situation. Rather than acknowledging the welcome of others, Spock had spoken of the need to speak to 'the engineer' about fuel equations, not even calling Scotty by name. Jim also remembered the tiny halt in Spock's step as he called to him, how he cocked his head to the side but did not turn to face him, as he exited the bridge. And there was what followed later after the mind-meld with Vejur.

Jim shifted uneasily. "I need to speak to you. I couldn't wait any longer."

Spock unclasped his hands, then motioned to two cushioned chairs pulled out around a small round table. "I have been expecting you."

It seemed to Jim that the ambient temperature, although warm, was not set at Vulcan norms. Spock must have adjusted the temperature immediately upon returning to his quarters in anticipation of his arrival for the room to already be so comfortable for him.

"Would you care for a refreshment?"

Jim shook his head. "No. I'm fine," he said quietly, as he lowered himself into the chair. He licked his lips, immediately regretting his decision. *I should have at least requested water. My mouth is as dry as the Vulcan desert.*

Spock sat across from him, lightly clasping his hands on the desktop. A slightly raised eyebrow, a subtle sign of Spock's, urged him to commence.

“We haven’t had a chance to talk since you returned.” Knowing Spock’s penchant for accuracy, he quickly added, “other than concerning matters about Vejur.”

Jim blew out a breath as he attempted to dry his sweating palms by pushing them up his thighs. “I’ve not felt like this around you for a long time: scared of saying the wrong thing. I’ve missed you. I’ve wanted to speak to you since your return from Vulcan, but you’ve been deliberately holding all of us, me, at a distance.”

His hands balled into fists as he remembered his frustration regarding Spock’s behavior after he boarded. “I had to order you to come and speak with Bones and me. After all, we’ve gone through together. An order to have a conversation.”

Jim clenched his jaw, not daring to say anything further. *How did I start this conversation so badly?*

Spock looked over his shoulder as he spoke. “I had thought I was mentally prepared for my arrival on the *Enterprise* for my reactions upon seeing my former colleagues, you. My defenses were inadequate. I feared all that I had worked towards would be lost.”

“Are friends things you need to defend against? Am I?”

“I believed it to be so,” Spock replied quietly, his eyes darting towards his briefly.

Past tense.

Jim took a moment to look more closely at his friend. Spock’s Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed heavily. The loose grip he had started with seemed tighter now. His posture was impeccably straight.

He’s as nervous as I am.

With that realization, he was able to unfurl both his hands slightly. Jim rubbed his curled fingers into the palm of his right hand, drawing strength from that moment to carry on. “After the meld with Vejur, in sickbay, you seemed so different. Open. I’m terrified, Spock. Give me a sign. I want to talk about us, our feelings, but I don’t want to risk losing you entirely.” He ducked his head after his declaration waiting for Spock to respond.

“Jim.”

When it became apparent that Spock had no intention of speaking to the top of his head, Jim forced himself to raise his eyes. The dark coldness of before seemed to have been replaced with compassionate awareness.

“No matter the outcome of today’s conversation, that will not occur. I devoted 2.3 years of my life trying to eradicate you from my heart and mind. That ended in spectacular failure. I do not wish to resume such an unworthy endeavor.”

Despite the positive ending to Spock's statement, Jim could not contain the pain and anger of the last few years from spewing forth like a pyroclastic eruption. "Why did you ever want to eradicate me? Did my love offend you that much?"

Jim saw Spock flinch but continued the verbal assault, voice elevated. "I've lost count of the number of nights I've woken rock-hard, remembering our final moments together. Did you ever think about it?"

A slight tinge of green darkening the tips of Spock's ears was his only answer.

He has thought of it, Jim thought triumphantly. He inhaled deeply and slowly exhaled, trying to calm himself. He had wanted a conversation. He had not wanted to make accusations, but the words had tumbled forth.

He closed his eyes, remembering a scene he had replayed countless times in his mind, trying to make sense of it. "I told you I loved you. That I wanted you to bond us. You were silent as I stepped into your space. I slid my hand to the base of your head. I paused. You let me tilt your head forward so our lips could meet."

Jim opened his eyes and focused on Spock, who sat rigidly in his chair. He ran his tongue around his mouth, trying to distribute what little moisture there was. "I'm certain it went from me tentatively kissing you to you kissing me." He leaned forward. "I recall feeling the imprint of your hand on my lower back. You pulled me tight against your body. Your tongue invaded my parted lips. I opened them in invitation, but it was your choice to deepen the kiss. As much as I wanted you, I wanted to allow you to pull away if you needed too."

Say something.

Frustration mounting, Jim continued. "Spock, if you had wanted me to stop, why didn't you put up any resistance?" The plaintive tone in his voice was contained with only marginal success. "I was prepared for that. As painful as it would have been, I was ready to leave things as they were. I wasn't prepared for you to vanish in the night with no more than a few impersonal words in a note."

Spock cleared his throat. "How could I resist that which I had desired for so long? Until that moment, I had convinced myself that my love was one-sided. Knowing it was unreciprocated enabled me to remain in your presence as a friend. You had withdrawn during the last six months of our mission. You dismissed my attempts to discuss what we would do after we returned from our five-year mission."

Jim nodded. It had been a difficult time. "I stayed away because it was getting more difficult to keep my feelings hidden. I was both scared that my love might drive you away because you did not return the feeling, and I also worried it would drive you away because you might feel compelled to leave, knowing the policies about relationships between officers due to the risk of compromised command decisions. I rationalized my behavior, telling myself it was only six months and then we could have a lifetime of happiness.

Your methods were effective. When you repeatedly declined invitations to meals, chess, workouts, I determined you were communicating a decision on your part that our future interactions would be strictly in a professional capacity when we returned from our mission.”

Spock leaned forward slightly in his seat. “Your declaration and kiss shattered my defenses. I was completely unprepared. I had been mourning the inexplicable loss of your friendship when you offered everything. I was overwhelmed at that moment and lost control. The summons from the bridge for the unexpected call with Admiral Nogura allowed me to come to my senses. I had to go because what I could offer you in the way of love would never suffice. I regret that I could not take sufficient time to compose an appropriate message that conveyed the depth of my regard, but I had to leave before I caused harm.”

“You think you prevented harm?” Jim gasped, incredulous. “You are the architect of my pain!” Jim caught the flicker of pain in Spock’s eyes before he closed them, and regretted the harshness of his tone. It was clear he had not suffered alone, but he was no closer now than before to understanding Spock’s actions. When Spock opened his eyes again, Jim asked quietly. “Why did you run?”

Spock rested his chin on the tips of his steepled fingers. As he spoke, Jim lost eye contact as Spock looked downwards. “We are not as compatible as you believe. I sought to cast out my feelings.”

Is he ashamed of his feelings?

To Jim’s surprise, Spock lifted his head again. His eyes shone with intensity. “If I achieved the Kolinhar rituals at Gol, I would have purged my emotions...my love...my pain. I believed that you would find purpose and fulfillment with another who would make a better match.”

Jim nodded, a sardonic smile on his lips. “I tried to make a relationship with Lori Ciani. I didn’t realize when I signed the marriage contract that I wasn’t as committed as I thought I was. She realized before I did that you were hanging between us. My love never died, Spock.”

“Nor mine,” said Spock quietly, his gaze drifting over to his meditation area.

Jim had assumed he would feel euphoria if he ever got Spock to admit his love when he planned for this meeting. Instead, he only felt confusion. *Why doesn’t Spock believe our love can sustain a relationship? Doesn’t he want a physical relationship? Did I misinterpret his response two years ago?*

“Spock, I don’t want any misunderstandings between us. Look at me, please.”

When Spock’s eyes settled on him, Jim felt as though all the air had been sucked out of his lungs. He inhaled deeply. “Do you object to my physical touch?”

“Negative.”

Jim twisted his hands together, reconsidering his question. Not objecting is not the same thing as wanting. “Do you desire my physical touch? Not my hand on your shoulder, but in a sexual manner.” *Be explicit.* He squeezed his palms together. “My hand around your shaft, my cock buried inside you.”

Spock's eyes seem to light into flame, as he answered hoarsely, "Affirmative, in spite of my attempts to curb such desires."

Spock unclasped his hands and straightened in his chair. It was unlike Spock to fidget during any conversation. *Clearly, it's difficult for him to admit what he wants, but he's still participating. I just need to keep him talking.*

"Do you desire to touch me intimately as well?"

"Affirmative."

Jim resisted the urge to sigh as Spock's eyes averted his gaze once again. *What's he ashamed of? Are male pairings not suitable on Vulcan, no procreation?*

Spock shifted again in his seat. Swallowed, while Jim waited. Eventually, Spock glanced up at him, and he sprung his next question.

"Do you desire me as a bondmate?"

Spock closed his eyes quickly, but Jim had seen the flash of desire. His heart soared. *He wants me as much as I want him!*

After a moment, Spock opened his eyes again, acknowledging what he had glimpsed. "Jim, what I desire is irrelevant."

Why? Is it a cultural matter that's holding him back?

"Are male pairings acceptable on Vulcan? They're not thought of as illogical."

"Warrior pairings have been revered on Vulcan since ancient times."

Taking a page from Spock's book, Jim raised an eyebrow in question, asking for an explanation.

Spock answered, his unvoiced entreaty. "The simple fact is you will not be content as my bondmate. It is why I left. Our friendship will need to suffice."

Jim leaned forward on the table, reaching for Spock's hand, but he pulled it away. "This makes no sense. If you desire me, why settle for friendship, when there can be so much more. You want it. I want it." Jim's voice rose slightly. "Why are you afraid of my touch? In sickbay, it felt so right. Your palm pressed against mine."

"I was not myself."

"It felt right. Good. Admit it."

Spock let out a little huff of air.

The sound brought back memories of when they had discussed pon farr together. *He's as agitated now as he was back then*, Jim thought.

"The meld with Vejur awakened certain needs." Spock huffed some air again before whispering, almost to himself, reverently. "Your touch."

Spock straightened stiffly in his chair. "But my needs do not take precedence over your welfare."

Jim had to move then; otherwise, he thought he would explode. He got out of his chair, swept his hand through his hair, and started to pace. "Spock, what about my welfare are you concerned about? Is it something to do with pon farr? I'm not that fragile. I've been penetrated before."

"Negative. I should have sufficient control to not injure you during my time."

"Is it sexual positions? Would you insist on being on the top or the bottom all the time? Do you believe I have a preference?"

"It is not a matter as sexual positions. I am agreeable to different sexual positions outside of pon farr."

Despite the tension, that answer made Jim smile. "Me too. I've fantasized about different positions with you. Is it some sort of fetish or kink? Something you think I won't be able to accept about you?"

"Not as I understand the term."

Jim stopped pacing in front of Spock. He leaned forward slightly. "You're going to have to tell me."

Spock quirked the corner of his mouth, "If you seat yourself again, I will attempt to do so." Jim straightened, rubbed his lower back to ease the tension, and went back to his seat.

"I have surmised that your satisfaction in any sexual encounter is a combination of two factors: your own physical release during orgasm, creating a euphoric sensation, and the pride you obtain from pleasuring your partners. That bringing your partner to orgasm is important to you. Am I correct?"

"I won't deny that I've had sex where the focus is exclusively on me, particularly with the occasionally paid companion. But my preference is for what you described."

Spock steepled his fingers and leaned forward slightly, resting his lips on the tips of his index fingers. "Would you see that as an essential element for a long-term relationship?"

"I've never thought about it before. I mean, my partners have never objected to my wanting to bring them to orgasm. But, yes, I do. I need to know that my partner is enjoying our activities as much as I am. It wouldn't feel right otherwise. I think it would weigh on me after a while if I didn't feel I satisfied them. It would be an unequal partnership and eventually doomed to failure."

Jim watched as Spock nodded solemnly. He had a premonition that he had been caught in a neatly laid trap. Dread washed over him before Spock's next words left his mouth.

“I will not ejaculate during our sexual encounters, outside of pon farr. By avoiding ejaculation, I should be able to prevent orgasm. During pon farr, there will be a biological imperative to ejaculate. Any resulting orgasm will not be the result of your initiative. I cannot provide you the mutually satisfying encounter you desire in a long-term relationship.”

Jim sat, stunned for a moment.

“Are you saying that Vulcans only come to completion during pon farr? It’s a matter of biology.”

“Negative.”

Jim took a breath and replayed Spock’s words in his mind.

Will. Not.

“It’s a personal choice?”

“Affirmative. Vulcans only engage in coitus during pon farr. As a society, we choose not to be ruled by our passions, to not give up control for fleeting pleasure.”

Fleeting pleasure? Is that what he thinks? Has he never?

“Spock, what you’re giving up is far more than fleeting pleasure.” Jim reached out with his right hand and squeezed Spock’s forearm through his robe. “If you would let me, I could show—” Jim felt the muscles in Spock’s arm contract in tension.

“Do not treat me as though I am a child.”

Jim remembered Spock pulling away from his touch earlier and forced his fingers to release him. His hand fisted in tension before he clasped his hands together in his lap to try and prevent himself from reaching out again.

“Do you think I have never experienced the euphoric sensation that orgasm releases in the body? When I left Vulcan, I was determined to explore which direction to take my life. During my time at Star Fleet Academy, I had several sexual encounters with females and males. While my experience is limited compared to yours, it was sufficient for me to determine by the time I left the Academy that I felt more comfortable avoiding sexual liaisons, to live my life as a Vulcan until the time I was compelled to mate with T’Pol.”

During my tenure on the *Enterprise*, I managed to do so except for two encounters, where external forces intervened. I would not deny that I experienced pleasure in those moments, but the regret I felt afterward, at my loss of control, at my failure to behave as a Vulcan, was much greater.”

Jim couldn’t help exploding, “But you’re half-human!”

“Irrelevant. I strive to live my life as a Vulcan. You know that. Vulcans do not engage in sexual activity outside of pon farr. For Vulcans, physical contact, even between mates, is kept to a bare minimum to avoid such temptation. I have admitted my failings in this regard, but I can go no

farther. To give up my mind's control over my body is to give up everything that it means to be a Vulcan. I cannot and maintain my identity."

Jim pictured Spock's mother, Amanda in his mind. Smiling. Touching fingers with Sarek. "I've met your mother. Amanda doesn't seem like someone who would be satisfied with a life of abstinence. She's human, after all."

Spock raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry. I guess that's rather personal."

"Indeed."

Spock shifted in his seat, crossing his arms and sliding each of his hands inside the full sleeves of his robe. Jim guessed the momentary silence meant Spock was considering his response or whether to respond at all.

"After your declaration, when I returned home, I forced myself to encroach on my mother's privacy. I surmised that, given the different attitudes regarding sexual intimacy in Vulcan and human culture, it was a matter my parents had to address before they joined. I spoke to her, hoping there was a solution for us that my parents had found. However, our situation is not the same. She is asexual."

"But pon farr," Jim blurted. Inwardly, he groaned. *Did I just say that?*

"There is a difference between not having active sexual desires and being repulsed by sex. Pon farr is a matter of survival."

"I do know that. Forgive me. Your explanation has taken me by surprise. I need a moment before I say anything else that is offensive." He paused, trying to assimilate what Spock was trying to tell him. "Affection through physical contact must be allowed to some degree. I did observe your parents kiss, Vulcan style, on more than one occasion. Their affection for one another is obvious. And I've seen other Vulcan couples do the same."

"The ozh'esta is different than a human kiss. One can get a snapshot of the mental well-being of a bondmate from the light touch of fingers. *That* is its primary purpose, and it is the only touch acceptable in public. As you know, Vulcans do not casually touch."

"Because of your touch telepathy."

Spock removed his hands from his robe and clasped them lightly on the tabletop. Jim recognized the pose as one he often took when about to impart information. If he had been standing, he likely would have clasped his hands behind his back.

"In part. It is what we wish others to believe; however, mental shielding is typically more than adequate to combat possible breaches of privacy from inadvertent skin to skin contact. It requires focus and intent to discern beyond basic emotions. In truth, casual touch is avoided to reduce the attachment to physical sensation, so that greater dependence does not develop."

Although it seemed impossible, the intensity in Spock's eyes increased as he continued his dry dissertation. *There must be a reason he is telling me this. Focus,* Jim said to himself.

"In private, the el'ru'esta accommodates the need for physical sensation and emotional connection between bondmates. It increases the intensity of a meld. Touch beyond the el'ru'esta is avoided."

Jim's brow creased, trying to imagine something more awe-inspiring than sharing Spock's unfiltered thoughts. "You and I have melded. That felt pretty intense to me."

Spock remained motionless other than sucking in his bottom lip so that it almost disappeared under the upper one, a characteristic Jim had witnessed when Spock was deep in thought, his pensive pose.

"As I have never been bonded, I can only convey what my father and others have imparted to me," he began after a pause. "Melds based exclusively on facial psi points, particularly between non-mates, such as the ones you and I experienced, are done for exchanges of information. Thoughts are exchanged. While there is awareness of the other, it is not as intimate as a meld in which the partners remain linked via the el'ru'esta."

"How do you link together for the el'ru'esta?"

"The palms of the hands are pressed together."

Jim held Spock's eyes as he curled his fingers into the palm of his hand again. "You clasped my hand palm to palm in sickbay."

Spock tipped his head in acknowledgment. "The meld with Vejur awakened certain needs in me. I felt empty. I needed to connect. I should not have acted in such a manner. It was a serious breach of custom. To do so in public... with one who is not your mate." Spock convulsively swallowed twice before continuing. "I not only touched your hand but your mind as well, as my shields were decimated by my contact with Vejur. Forgive me."

Jim couldn't help but smile. It warmed him to know that Spock had reached for him as if they were bondmates, that Spock instinctively desired the most intense meld possible with him. "I'm glad you reached for me."

Jim rubbed the back of his neck. *Something isn't making sense.*

His mind replayed what Spock had told him, his sixth sense insisting there was something in what Spock had conveyed that was worth investigating. Finally, a thought coalesced. Spock was being inconsistent. "You said Vulcans don't touch more intimately than the el'ru'esta outside of pon farr. But you indicated a desire to touch me and for me to touch you intimately. I did understand you correctly, didn't I?"

An uncharacteristic sigh emitted from Spock's lips. "My Human half has proven to be an inconvenience. Humans, as a species, are more tactile. Primates engage in grooming activities as a means of connection."

Jim laughed inwardly. Even at a time like this, the scientist in Spock came out in his explanations.

“Overall, Humans rely on touch to create unity with their mate. They rely on physical connections rather than mental ones as there is no ability to meld.” Spock began fingering the edge of the sleeve of his robe. “Despite my attempts to eliminate such a desire, I have been unable to quell this Human tendency for touch as it pertains to you. However, now that you understand, if you could restrict your contact in the future, it would help—”

Jim interjected. “No touching.”

Spock continued unabated. “—keep our relationship at the appropriate level for friendship. The more you touch, the more difficult it is for me to restrain a desire for more intimate contact.” He glanced up quickly, then looked down. “I request your assistance in this matter.”

Jim stared at his friend, who continued to play with his robe, deliberately avoiding his gaze. *If this is what he truly wants, why is he avoiding my eyes? Why the unusual fidgeting? What am I missing? I know Spock desires my touch, but he is asking for the opposite.* Jim couldn’t make such a promise while his gut instinct was rebelling at the thought.

“I need some time to think over all that you’ve said.” He paused. “A talk with Bones might help.”

At last Spock’s hands came to rest back in his lap. “You are at liberty to do so.” He looked up, a small quirk at the side of his mouth. “I have learned to trust Doctor McCoy’s discretion.”

Jim pushed himself out of his chair. Spock rose as well. “I’m glad we had this talk and appreciate your candor. I wish it had been two years ago, but at least it gives me the opportunity to understand your perspective.”

As the doors slid shut, Spock lifted his eyebrow. With Jim’s essence gone, his room seemed disproportionately empty. *Was there ever a time when I did not feel that way?* He deliberately did not turn his mind to investigate that question. Instead, he crossed the room and lit the incense he had brought with him from Vulcan.

He positioned himself on his mat on the floor and breathed deeply. Although he did not know what the outcome of their discussion would be, he felt satisfied that he had given Jim sufficient information that his mind would be able to discern the possibilities.

The fact that Jim had confirmed he was going to seek the guidance of Doctor McCoy, as he had anticipated, was comforting. It gave Spock additional assurance that Jim would properly explore his own needs in a thoughtful manner. Spock knew from painful experience that Doctor McCoy was a master of getting to the heart of a matter.

What will Jim decide? I must prepare myself to accept any decision with equanimity. He took another deep breath. The woodland-scented incense from the trees of the L’langon mountains infiltrated his lungs. He pictured the stark mountains, then traveled up their peaks, through the mist to clear his mind.

Jim entered his quarters, sighing in frustration. He grabbed his PADD and noted an observation deck was available. He booked it for the next couple of hours, then contacted Doctor McCoy.

“Bones, I’ve booked Observation Deck One. Care to meet me for a drink in thirty minutes? I’ll bring the refreshments.”

“Sure. I’ll see you there,” McCoy said slowly.

Jim could almost see the cogs in Bones’ brain turning as he nodded and flicked off the viewscreen. He wasn’t prepared to talk yet.

He walked to his sleeping quarters, removing his uniform top as he went and tossing it on his bed. He pulled a dark green cotton jersey out of his drawer and put it on over his black undershirt. Comfortable, he grabbed two snifters and a bottle of Saurian brandy and headed for the door. Collapsing into one of the swivel armchairs when he arrived at the observation deck, he looked out at the stars, hoping their presence would work their customary magic and soothe his soul. Nothing happened. His heart was still galloping at an alarming rate.

Spock is willing to stay, but he needs me to back off. His heart constricted at the thought.

When I approached him two years ago about a relationship, I had been prepared to settle for friendship if that was all he wanted, he reminded himself. But that was before Spock confirmed his feelings were as deep as mine. I can’t settle for friendship, knowing the truth. I’ve got to have him.

He shook his head to clear it. *I need to stop this. Wait for Bones,* he commanded himself. *He has a clearer head.*

Jim took the stopper out of the bottle and poured two generous glasses of brandy. He held his up to the light, admiring the deep green color with ripples of amber. Bringing the glass under his nose, he inhaled deeply, absorbing the bouquet. Finally, he took a sip. He looked again at the stars and focused his mind. He began to name them, starting in the top left of the viewscreen as Spock had prompted one night seven years earlier.

Spock had come when he had retreated to the solitude of an observation deck, while Bones continued to treat the injured in sickbay. Four men and three women all under the age of 30 had been killed in a skirmish he should have found a way to avoid. It was his third month in command. Never before had he lost so many lives and accomplished nothing.

Spock had sat beside him in silence for at least an hour before pointing to the top left. Jim could almost hear his rich baritone now providing star names and details such as orbiting planets with the potential to sustain life, age of the star, mass, temperature, the astronomer who first discovered it. He had continued methodically until finally, not to be outdone; Jim had felt the need to add to the litany of information. They had gotten halfway through the exercise when Spock rose and indicated it was time for them to leave for alpha shift.

Later that day, after his shift was over, he had headed to sickbay to visit with some of the injured.

“How you doing, Jim?” Bones had asked in the privacy of his office after he had spent time with each of the survivors. “You look tired.”

“I didn’t get any sleep. Spent the night on the observation deck.”

“I wish I could’ve been there for you.”

“Spock came and kept me company.”

Bones’ eyes widened. “That must have been awkward. It’s not as though he would know how you would feel. What’d he say, anyway?”

“Nothing at first. Eventually, he started to share information about the stars.”

Bones sputtered. “Of all the cold-blooded—”

“I didn’t need to hear platitudes. I’m sure he knows better than any of us the correct phrases to use. We went through the same command training. I recited them myself when I was First Officer before I figured out they didn’t help.”

“They *can* mean something if you say them with feeling. But getting comfort from him would be like ‘getting blood from a stone.’”

“Bones, give him a chance. I think a more apt idiom as relates to Spock might be, ‘still waters run deep.’ In his own way, he reminded me why we’re out here, to explore life on all the planets orbiting those suns. His presence did comfort me. More than I would have thought.”

“Well, I’m glad for that. Perhaps you’re right about him. You have instinct about people. If there’d been money being wagered, I would’ve bet that Spock would have stayed hidden in his quarters or his labs last night. I never would’ve expected him to seek you out. It does surprise me.”

Doctor McCoy sat on the edge of his bed, rubbing his temples. It was evident to him that the conversation between Spock and Jim hadn’t gone in the direction Jim had wanted.

Once he’d been fool enough to think Jim would be better off with Spock out of his life, but that was no longer the case. And Spock, the raw pain he had witnessed in his eyes, made his head throb in sympathy. *Did you at least have the courage to admit your love to Jim? Why is Spock resisting what he clearly wants?*

He’d once believed Spock was simply a coward. Afraid to admit he wasn’t the perfect Vulcan, but that clearly wasn’t the case.

‘I am not what he needs to be fulfilled’ Spock’s words came back to him. *Spock left because he thought it was in Jim’s best interest.*

He must be second-guessing his decision, otherwise why all those questions circling around whether Jim was satisfied with his life?

He applied more pressure to the sides of his head.

Think. Given the uncertainty of whether what is best for him, would be best for Jim, how would Spock approach such a problem? He'd never be direct. He wouldn't ask for what he needs. He's too afraid of hurting Jim.

His hands dropped to his side as his head lifted, a wry grin on his face. He'd leave a trail of breadcrumbs. I just hope Jim listened attentively to what he said, and I can help him decipher the message.

Jim was almost one third done naming the stars when he heard the doors swish open behind him. He'd made much faster progress than usual since Spock wasn't there with all his encyclopedic knowledge, but the exercise had achieved the desired result. It had kept his mind occupied and not running in fruitless circles until Bones arrived, and his heart was no longer racing.

"I see you started without me," Bones remarked, nodding towards the brandy as he slid into his chair, turning it to face Jim. "I guess this means you've had your talk with Spock."

Jim glanced over at his friend, making a half-hearted attempt at a smile. He dismissed the idea of small talk. He needed advice.

"Yes. The meeting went both better and worse than expected. Better because he didn't even bother trying to deny he has feelings for me. In fact, he admitted he loved me and desired me as a bondmate."

Bones silently raised his glass in his direction, as if in a toast.

Jim pushed down the bittersweet feeling in his gut before continuing. "Worse because he knew that when he left the first time. And insists, even now, for my own good, that we should be no more than friends." He sighed, remembering the flicker of desire he had seen in Spock's eyes.

Bones took a sip of his brandy slowly. "That's good stuff, Jim. Did he offer an explanation?"

Jim leaned over his drink that he cradled in his hands, glancing at his friend. "Nothing that made any sense."

"Try me. I've spent years decoding what Spock says and, more importantly, what's hidden in what he doesn't say."

Jim smiled ruefully. "Apart from the fact that I hate to drink alone, that's why you're here."

He took another small sip of his brandy, considering where to start. "I spent considerable time after Spock left imagining the various objections he might have as to why a relationship wasn't possible. He'd deny being capable of love, deny desiring me physically, would have concerns about my ability to withstand the rigors of pon farr or require a female for pon farr, Vulcan culture would not view same-sex couples as logical. You get the idea. I thought I had considered anything he might say and how I might respond, but it wasn't any of the things I imagined. The gist of it is he just refuses to get pleasure out of sex."

Bones straightened in his seat. “What?”

Although he tried to keep his frustration out his tone, Jim knew it was evident as he snapped, “It’s not the Vulcan way to orgasm. In fact, Vulcans abstain from sex other than during pon farr.”

“If Vulcans by nature are asexual, I don’t understand why you’re vexed with Spock.”

Jim shook his head. “It’s not a lack of desire. They control it. They avoid touch to try and curb such desires developing. Spock admitted that the pesky human genes in his biology have caused him difficulty in quelling his desire to touch me sexually. But instead of accepting his desire and allowing intimacy and all that it can mean between us, he turned around and asked me not to touch him!”

“Did he say why?”

Jim put down his drink and got out of his chair, unable to sit any longer. He paced towards the window and back again, rubbing his hands as he walked. “He twisted everything around so that it was all about me. That my pride would not allow me to be satisfied in a relationship where I doubted that my partner was sexually fulfilled.”

Bones grimaced. “Spock’s a better psychologist than I would have imagined.”

Jim waved a hand in the air. “You’re not listening. He’s perfectly capable of having an orgasm. He just refuses to come to completion and enjoy it. He’s drawn this silly line in the sand and refuses to cross it for a ‘fleeting pleasure.’” Jim made air quotes with his fingers.

Bones put his drink down firmly on the table. “The line isn’t silly to him, Jim,” replied Bones sternly. “He endured two years at Gol because of it. It’s not up to you to disregard that line. Sit down.”

Jim slumped into his chair as Bones glared at him. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He tried to push down the feeling of desperation that was overtaking him.

“Did he try to explain why this is important to him?”

Jim waited a moment. When he was confident he could speak somewhat calmly, he answered. “He said something about the loss of control that happens when you orgasm. Spock said it was unacceptable to him to give up his mind’s control over his body. That the few times he had orgasmed in the past, he regretted it afterward. It is unacceptable behavior for a Vulcan.”

Bones nodded at him but otherwise remained silent.

Jim closed his eyes and sighed. “It’s crazy. Surrendering to the moment is the best part.” *To white out and revel in sensation, forgetting all else. No burdens of command. Spock needs that too. A moment where he can let go of his control, accept his human needs, and forget about Vulcan expectations. I just need to show him it will be different with me.*

He sat up suddenly, an idea taking hold. “Bones, it wouldn’t take much to get him to go to bed with me.” Jim remembered the hungry look in Spock’s eyes. “He wants me, I know it. With his limited experience, his control is probably not that great. He probably won’t realize how close to the edge he is until I’ve helped coax him over it. If Spock sees that it’s all right to surrender with me, that it’s

alright, when you're with someone you love, then—"

Jim felt pressure on his wrist and realized Bones was shaking his arm. "Stop it, Jim! What you just described is akin to rape. Spock told you explicitly he does not want to orgasm. You can't get his informed consent, so now you're trying to maneuver the situation."

Jim wrenched his wrist free and buried his head in his hands. *How can I tell Spock I love him and then betray his trust? I need to get control over myself before I lose everything.* He sat up, took a couple of deep breathes through his nose, then took a sip of brandy, and swirled it around his mouth before swallowing.

A shudder raced through his body, as he considered again just where his desperation may have taken him. "Bones, I'm scared. I hope I never would have been able to act on what I just said but to have even thought it. I need your help."

"I agree, it isn't like you." Bones nudged Jim's knee quickly with his hand. "Also, what makes you think Spock didn't have feelings for the other people he had sex with? I doubt it was ever casual sex for Spock."

"You're right," Jim mumbled into the ground. "I just want him to have a moment when he forgets all about control, lays down that burden, gives in to his desires. He'd be safe with me. I won't judge him."

"Look at me."

Jim lifted his head to be met by the hard-edged glare of Bones, which was matched by the steel in his voice. "You *are* judging him. You're saying he's inadequate because he wants to retain a core element of what makes him Vulcan."

Am I? Have I been superimposing my desires onto him?

Bones looked pensive. "Can't you see he's accepted that he has human needs? You told me he said Vulcans abstain from sex and avoid touch, but that he admitted desiring your touch."

Jim added slowly. "And that he desired to touch me as well."

Bones' blue eyes seemed to dance with intensity as he leaned forward. "Jim, think how hard it would be for Spock to admit such a thing. To acknowledge a human need to touch, to himself, to you. You know how hard Spock has worked his entire life to be a paragon of all things Vulcan. He's accepted his human half. But to ask him to give up his control, it's too much. You can't expect him to give up his entire identity for you."

Bones reclined back, looked up for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "Answer me this, if the issue was purely biological, would it be a problem? If he simply couldn't ejaculate other than during pon farr, would you be here having this discussion with me?"

Jim looked at his friend and shook his head. "I don't think so. I guess it's his refusal to enjoy sex when he has the ability to do so, that has me so upset."

“Spock certainly had you pegged. Is the only evidence that will convince your male ego that you pleased your partner is his sperm on the sheets or up your ass? What makes you so confident he won’t be satisfied with what happens between you? Do you really believe the only way for males to enjoy sexual intimacy is to experience orgasm during ejaculation?”

“No. It’s just been my way.” Jim closed his eyes, trying to think as Bones continued to speak in the background.

“Until modern science advanced, couples had to deal with paralysis, later-life erectile dysfunction, and other issues. Do you think those couples didn’t derive pleasure from sexual intimacy?” Bones’ hand landed on his shoulder and gave a squeeze. “Did you even think to ask what Vulcans do in private?”

An electric jolt hit Jim, jerking him upright.

It has to be! Spock never speaks without a purpose. Orgasms are my way, and this must be his. Our bodies and minds can join together.

With his hope surging, Jim opened his eyes and grinned at his friend. “I didn’t ask. But he spoke to me of the el’ru’esta.”

“The what?”

Jim leaped up, placing what remained of his drink on the table. “Look it up. I’ve got to go. And thanks, Bones, you helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Jim’s heart was racing as he pushed the announcer to Spock’s quarters.

“Come.”

The door opened as Spock, still dressed in his meditation robe and sandals, rose from the floor. “I did not anticipate seeing you again this evening.”

“Can we resume our discussion?”

Spock clasped his hands behind his back as he tipped his head in affirmation.

Jim took a step closer to Spock, although he was still more than an arm’s length away. “My talk with Bones made me realize I left without asking some important questions.”

Spock raised his eyebrow. “Indeed.”

Jim took another step, squaring his shoulders. “You’re right. I take pride in pleasuring my partners. Our relationship will fail if I’m not sure you’re satisfied.” He fixed his eyes on Spock. “What will satisfy you sexually, Spock?”

Jim heard the intake of Spock's breath, then its slow release. "To feel the touch of your hands, your lips, your body as we are entwined in bed together. For you to penetrate me and me to penetrate you. To know your thoughts and desires and for you to know mine. To bring you to orgasm and to have you bring me close to completion, but not over."

The butterflies in his gut wanted to be set free. Jim took a final step and held out his hand, palm open, and saw the tension in Spock's shoulders melt away as he released the grip of his hands. One hand fell to his side, and the other was brought forward to grasp his own. When Spock's hand encircled his, Jim raised it and clutched it, just as he had done in sickbay. Their palms pressed together perfectly like fitted puzzle pieces.

"You said the el'ru'esta was the most intimate bond." *Intimate. It seemed so obvious now. It had to be a deliberate word choice.*

Moment of truth. "If we were bonded, could I use it to sense your satisfaction when we make love?"

Spock swallowed, then raised his other hand to join both their hands even more firmly together. The firm pressure spiked Jim's pulse. "Affirmative. That bond allows a free exchange of emotion versus information. Our thoughts, our love, our satisfaction will flow readily. There will be no doubt for either of us."

"Why couldn't you have just told me this?"

The tilt of Spock's head told Jim his question was less than precise, but he kept silent, figuring Spock would decide how much of his thought processes he wanted to explain.

"Let us be seated for this discussion," Spock stated as his top hand dropped from the pile. The pressure from his other hand remained firm, so Jim assumed he did not feel the need to separate completely.

Jim started towards the table, where they had talked earlier, but Spock did not budge. Instead, Spock tugged him towards his sleeping alcove. Jim lurched forward awkwardly before righting himself. Spock sat on the edge of the middle of the bed. Jim sat beside him, making a quarter-turn of his body to face Spock, who had done the same. On the opposite wall, incense burned, giving the room a faint woodland scent.

"Understand that when I left for Vulcan, it was not with the intention of never returning. I was overwhelmed. As I mentioned earlier, I thought my mother might offer a solution or that with time and space a solution might present itself to me."

The lines around Spock's eyes tightened. "When that did not occur, I made my most grievous error. I determined that I knew what was best for you. That you would be better off with another. For my own welfare, I determined to remove all emotional attachments, including mine to you."

Jim gave Spock's hand a squeeze of encouragement. "So, you went to Gol to immerse yourself in the Kholinahr. Why did you come back? Did you realize you had made a mistake?"

"When your mind reached mine from a distance of 16.3 light-years, I realized I was a fool to believe

I could excise my attachment to you. I left Gol because I thought I could help save Earth, and the consciousness I had felt might offer me a path forward. I assumed you had moved on with another. As I left, I still firmly believed I had made the correct choice for you.

On the journey from Vulcan, I researched your life after my departure, and the seeds of doubt sprouted. I began to question whether the presumption that I knew what was best for you had been a fallacy. When I came aboard, your welcome..." Spock swallowed. "I had to leave the bridge."

I was right! Spock was impacted by my welcome.

"Whenever we interacted, I could see the pain that I had caused in your eyes, but in their depths, when I allowed myself the luxury of looking closely, I thought love remained. However, it was not until after the meld with Vejur that I truly understood that separating our lives served no purpose. That it was deep connections with others that made life worth living. After the healing trance, I spoke with Doctor McCoy. His words 'Only Jim knows what he needs' confirmed the fatal error I made before. I resolved to talk to you, that I would not leave again unless you desired it, and that you would choose the form of our future partnership."

"Why didn't you just tell me straight up what the issue was and the possible solution?"

"I feared the competitive nature in you. That your desire to win at all costs would lead you to make a decision without appropriate forethought. A rushed decision could have unfortunate consequences for us both. I had two concerns. You might quickly agree to my conditions so that we could bond and be together, while secretly succumbing to my own mistake of thinking you knew better than I, what I wanted. You might believe that you could teach me to enjoy orgasms, as you have taught me to accept other aspects of my human half."

Jim grimaced, remembering how he had started to move down that path.

"Alternatively, you might quickly agree that the el'ru'esta is sufficient to only later realize that tangible physical evidence of my satisfaction is necessary for you."

"So, you contrived a way to give me time to think through my decision." Jim smiled. One of the reasons he had fallen in love with Spock was so evident in the gesture.

"That was my intent. Although I thought it would take longer for you to decode my message, even with Doctor McCoy's assistance." Jim felt a slight tremor in Spock's hand as he shifted his body so that their knees were almost touching. "Are you certain you have taken the time you need to conclude that what I can offer in terms of combined physical and mental intimacy will suffice? The el'ru'esta is only possible after we have bonded and as you know, the bond is irrevocable."

His weathered face looked impassive, but Jim could see the tension in his companion, the too stiff posture. He didn't want Spock to wait for a second longer than was necessary for his response. Jim lifted his left hand and gripped Spock's shoulder. "Yes. I've been a greedy bastard. You've changed so much for me. It's my turn to adjust. In time, I believe I'll have confidence in your satisfaction, even if we don't meld with the el'ru'esta."

Spock shifted slightly so that their knees gently touched.

“I am certain of it. However, I cannot imagine a time that I won’t desire for you to know what is in my heart as intimately as my body.” As he spoke, Spock extended the two fingers of his right hand and gently touched Jim along his collarbone, up his neck, jawline, around his ear. Jim did not dare move, fearing that he would disturb this magic moment, but a sigh of satisfaction spontaneously escaped his lips.

How I have longed for your touch.

Spock paused in his exploration, his eyes crinkled around the edges. Jim felt the two fingers pause on the tip of his ear separate before Spock’s hand weaved into his hair. As Spock leaned towards him, Jim moved as well, sliding his hand from Spock’s shoulder to his back. He drew him close so their lips could connect faster as they both reclined on the bed.

Two years I’ve remembered this unique taste and texture. Slightly spicy. Dry but surprisingly supple.

Jim released the hand he had been holding and pushed Spock’s meditation robe aside enough to slip his hand inside. He could feel the pounding of Spock’s heart against his fingertips through his undershirt. Spock’s arms were wrapped about him, crushing them together. Jim felt hard in an instant as he groaned into Spock’s mouth. He shifted to rub his throbbing cock against Spock’s thigh. As he twisted, he brushed against Spock’s groin.

No. We can’t risk rushing this, or we may have regrets.

Jim forced himself to turn away from the lips and tongue, eagerly exploring his mouth. The sound of rapid breathing filled the room. He could feel warm puffs of air on his neck and turned towards Spock. The hungry look was rapidly being replaced with confusion.

Jim took a gulp of air and reached up to brush Spock’s cheek reassuringly. “Spock. I want you, but we need to pause for a moment. You need to tell me if there are signs I should watch for that suggest you are close to orgasm. I know my own body. I’ve been with humans, Orion, and Andorian males, and while there are similarities across humanoid species, there are differences too. I don’t know how your body reacts. I don’t want to presume. I need to know when to stop to respect your wishes.”

Spock nodded, his features relaxing when he comprehended why Jim had broken them apart. He breathed in deeply then exhaled slowly. Jim was pleased to feel a gentle caress along his side by his ribs as Spock took a moment to compose himself. “My actual experience is limited, most recently 4.2 years ago. My anatomy is primarily Vulcan.” Spock’s eyes drifted away from his as he lifted his head, looking towards the wall at the head of the bed. “Except that my genitals are exposed like a Human’s rather than being encased in a protected pouch until arousal draws them out. A difference which received unwarranted attention, once discovered, in my youth.”

I can only imagine.

Body contact with Spock was lost as Spock pushed himself up, pulled his hands free, and then lay back on the bed, facing the ceiling. Although he wished it was otherwise, Jim released his hold readily, understanding Spock needed space. His friend, soon to be lover, rested his hands on his midsection. Jim inwardly smiled, picturing Spock, hands clasped behind his back in lecture mode.

Jim listened attentively as Spock began to recite.

“The crown is similar in shape to the human penis, except that there is a second ridge and below that are the vigals, flaps of skin that expand. When fully aroused, the median length and circumference are 15.3 and 10.1 centimeters with variation, but nothing that extends beyond Human norms, based on my research. The hormonal response during pon farr will firm the phallus sufficiently for the male to penetrate the female. Insertion occurs before the phallus expands fully

because Vulcan females produce insufficient amounts of lubrication to coat the vaginal walls. This helps to prevent injury during coitus.”

Spock continued in a dry tone, the one typically reserved for scholarly discourse. “The primary differences with sexual intercourse with the other species you have encountered is likely the degree of motion and duration. The amount of movement will be reduced. My interactions suggest that humans tend to thrust prior to completion. A Vulcan may thrust, if necessary, to get into a satisfactory position for copulation during pon farr, but this is not the norm because of the smaller size of the phallus upon entry.”

Jim nodded to encourage Spock to continue, figuring he would see his movement with his peripheral vision.

“Once sheathed, one simply waits. There is little movement. The male cannot stop the production of sperm, which must be released. When release is imminent, the vigals flare to act as a stopper, and the phallus begins to vibrate, the speed and intensity will increase as ejaculation is imminent. During pon farr, this may be repeated several times in succession without withdrawal. The Vulcan male will remain in position for several hours before withdrawal. After an interval, the cycle resumes.”

Jim raised himself on his right elbow and leaned into Spock’s field of vision. As he did so, he rested his hand on Spock’s chest. “You’ve been speaking about Vulcans in general.” He smiled warmly to put Spock at ease. “I understand why you spoke about what happens during pon farr, given Vulcans avoid casual sex, and it will be relevant one day for us, but that’s not the information I need at this moment.” He tapped Spock on the chest where a human heart would be. “I need to know about you in particular.”

Hoping Spock would find the movement calming, Jim began massaging slowly with his fingers in small circular motions. “When have you orgasmed? Is it only when you’ve penetrated others, does being sheathed trigger a reaction?”

Spock glanced away and swallowed. Jim was comforted when Spock’s eyes focused on him again.

“Penetration is not necessary. Other than during pon farr, I believe that will be the least problematic position as I can control the pace and withdraw, if necessary. I struggle most when I am not in control of the extent of stimulation. In particular, oral or manual stimulation, frottage. I have never orgasmed when being penetrated by others unless it was accompanied by other stimulation.”

Jim licked his lips. He wasn’t sure what Spock needed from him. “Are you saying you would prefer if I didn’t touch you unnecessarily?”

Spock looked down at Jim's hand, which had slowly been drifting down his abdomen, then turned in his direction again. "Negative. I have already confessed that I desire your touch. I do not wish to pretend any longer I can go on without it."

Jim saw the open invitation in Spock's eyes and slid his hand down to palm the small bulge that was visible. "I'm glad because not touching you would've been a tall order."

Jim pressed into the heat. A small intake of breath from Spock was Jim's reward as he began to rub along the seam of Spock's pants.

"What about movement? If I thrust, will that bother you?"

"Negative. I have found the friction stimulating."

"Really?" Jim teased. He continued to touch Spock, sensing that the shaft was becoming firmer. His own member was throbbing in sympathetic response.

Jim paused his activity when Spock closed his eyes, and he heard Spock's breathing begin to accelerate. *Stop it*, he admonished himself, *get the information you need before proceeding*. When Spock refocused his eyes on him, he said, "Let's focus on how to prevent your orgasm before it's too late." Jim slid his hand back up Spock's chest and to the shoulder of his robe, which he slowly began to push off. "I'd like to see all of you."

The corner of Spock's eyes crinkled as he leaned on his elbows, allowing his robe to be pushed fully off his shoulders. "I believe it would be appropriate if we were equally divested of clothing and more expeditious if we each took care of ourselves."

Jim jumped at the opportunity. He rolled to a sitting position and quickly removed his boots and socks, then pulled his undershirt and top over his head. Spock stepped out of bed to hang his robe on a hook. Jim paused to watch as Spock slid pants and briefs off in one smooth motion, putting them in the recycler.

When Spock turned towards him, Jim inhaled deeply, noting a slightly musky scent. Spock's shaft was tinged a slightly deeper green than the rest of him. It appeared to have stiffened slightly, protruding a bit from the mass of dark curls of hair, but it had obviously not expanded fully. Jim couldn't help pausing a moment to admire Spock's long and lean frame.

"You're beautiful."

Spock's eyes captured his, and it jolted Jim back to action. He stood, pushed down his own pants and briefs, stepping out of them quickly. His member sprung free, halfway to an erection. He beckoned, and Spock stepped towards him. Jim wanted to crush Spock against him, but pushed down the urge, knowing Spock depended on him. *I still need more information*.

Jim put his arm around Spock's lower back and stepped towards the bed. "Let me explore you a little while we continue our conversation."

Spock nodded and lay down on his back. Jim sat facing Spock by his hips. He enclosed the base of

Spock's shaft with his right hand. As he leaned closer to inspect, he felt Spock's hand slowly sliding up his thigh. Jim could see the extra skin just below the second ridge. As he moved up the shaft, his thumb slid across the vigals, which fluttered briefly in response, then across the two ridges and crown. *I wonder what the vigals will feel like in my mouth? How will your semen taste?*

Jim looked at Spock. "You said when ejaculation was imminent, your penis will start to vibrate. By the time it's vibrating will it be too late?"

Spock's fingers were gently kneading his thigh, as he replied, "Affirmative."

Jim brushed the vigals again, watching them ripple. He kept the movements slow, not wanting to fully arouse Spock. "What about when the vigals flare? Is that before or after?"

"Before." Spock's eyes twinkled as he continued. "I am reticent to rely on that as a predictor because you may not always be in a position to make the necessary observation."

Jim laughed. It was wonderful to see Spock's wry sense of humour resurfacing. It had been decidedly absent when he returned from Gol. "Absolutely correct, Commander. Other ideas?"

Jim was dismayed as Spock lifted his hand from his thigh, but delighted again as he felt the buzz of connection as Spock's fingertips ghosted over his psi points. "Before the vigals flare, I become inarticulate as my mind becomes unfocused or perhaps, I should say singularly focused, and awareness of all else fades. If we were in a meld, you would be conscious of my loss of focus even sooner, not needing to rely strictly on verbal cues."

"I can see how a meld would help," he said slowly, hand stilling in its exploration. *Will I be able to do this in the heat of the moment?*

Spock's fingers fluttered over the creases in his forehead. He then turned on his side, raising himself on his elbow, and dropped his hand to stroke the space beside him on the bed. "Jim lay beside me." Jim reclined, twisting his body to mirror Spock's so that they were facing. Spock's gaze was intent upon him. Jim swallowed self-consciously under the inspection. Spock's hand, which had been resting on his hip, slid down, and he felt a pair of fingers exploring his testicles, gliding along his cock, which thrummed with excitement.

"Although your body shows signs of arousal, you seem hesitant. What is your concern?"

"Spock, you do understand that even with a meld, I may fail to pick up on the correct cues."

"I do. Perfection is rarely achieved in any task." Spock remained silent for a moment then continued.

"We are in this together. I am equally accountable, if not more so. I will to the extent possible alert you if I sense a need for you to stop any activity." Spock's hand encircled his cock now, and Jim spoke quickly before the needs of his body overtook him.

"What if we fail?" The pressure of not wanting to fail Spock weighed on him. He wanted to make their first time together perfect, not something they would look on with regret.

Spock's lips curled up at the corner. "I am not that fragile. I have lived with my mistakes in the past.

With the el'ru'esta, we will have better access to each other's emotions. If we fail, I will know with certainty that you did not bring me to completion deliberately in an attempt to have me behave like a human or because you are not satisfied with my response. It is *that* which I could not bear.

You will know that even if I acknowledge disappointment in my failure to control that there is no blame cast."

"But I thought the el'ru'esta was only possible *after* we have bonded. What about today?"

Spock's hand deserted his cock to pull their bodies together. His eyes shone with intensity now, full of want and desire. "If you are agreeable, I do not wish to wait to bond."

Jim smiled in joy.

"I, S'chn T'gai Spock, cherish thee, James Tiberius Kirk. Wouldst thou be my bondmate?"

With those words, Jim felt his desire, which he had willfully contained, surge. He moved towards Spock, claiming his mouth and moving his body to cover Spock's, who welcomed his advances with open mouth and parted thighs.

Spock's arms wrapped around his back, pressing them closer, closer. Jim closed his eyes as fine silken hair caressed his body. *So much softer than I imagined.*

Suddenly, Spock's hungry lips tore away, and his mind registered the cool press of fingertips on his left cheek and forehead. He opened his eyes again and nodded quickly to grant permission for the meld.

Spock said the traditional words that started each meld, then like magic, they were together. As always, it felt right. *I am home*, Jim thought.

"You are certain?"

There was no doubt what Spock was asking. Jim had never been more certain of any decision in his life. *"I, James Tiberius Kirk, cherish thee, S'chn T'gai Spock. Make us one."*

It was as if a flash of lightning had gone off in his brain, all the neurons exploding at once.

"Jim, open your eyes." Spock coaxed him gently.

"I don't remember closing them," Jim thought as he obeyed the command.

Spock was lying beneath him right hand at this side.

"You're not touching me," he realized in surprise.

"It is done."

"Amazing." He had thought it would take longer or be accompanied by Vulcan ritual words. Spock moved his right hand to take Jim's left in possession. When their palms met, Jim groaned,

inundated by the emotions that washed over him. He was aware of Spock's joy and contentment that they were bonded, but overwhelming that was a fierce need to be claimed by his mate.

Jim ground his pelvis down. *"I want you."*

Spock began to move against him, creating a wonderful friction. Jim knew his cock was rapidly moving towards being fully erect.

"Slow down, or I'll come before I get inside you. We need to get you prepared."

Jim felt Spock's hand at the base of his skull as he was pulled in for a kiss. *"Negative. I can control sufficiently to allow penetration."*

Jim felt inflamed by Spock's desire in his mind, which had made him erect in record time. He reached down and took some of the pre-cum leaking from the head and distributed it around his shaft. Then ceased his movements. Spock instinctively did as well, releasing Jim from his embrace. Spock's legs fell open further, and Jim could see the green puckered entrance to his body as he pushed back a bit. Spock's rapid breathing mirrored his own.

As he lined himself into position, Jim looked into Spock's eyes, brown now obliterated by dilated black irises. "I love you," he said out loud and felt a response deep in his soul, although no words were shared verbally or in his mind. The el'ru'esta, he realized. Jim pushed forward expecting resistance, despite Spock's words of assurance, but none was encountered. He slid home easily then felt the muscles around the anal wall contract around him.

"Move, t'by'la. Find release."

With those words, Jim looked down, trying to ascertain the state of Spock's arousal. Guilt momentarily assailed him as he realized he had momentarily forgotten his responsibility to his mate.

"You have no cause for regret. You can see I am fine. Move."

Jim leaned forward to kiss Spock, and Spock's tongue plunged into his mouth. Jim withdrew and pushed forward cautiously, but Spock soon coaxed him into a faster rhythm with his darting tongue and hips that moved in unison. Spock's thoughts and feelings rushed through him, urging him to find release. It wasn't long before he shouted, "I'm coming," and collapsed into Spock's waiting arms.

When the momentary high passed, Jim became aware of Spock's shaft pinned between their bodies. He was certain it was firmer and larger than before. *Firm enough to enter me now.* His eager anticipation flowing through via the el'ru'esta.

Indeed. I intend to enter you from behind and hold you flush against me for hours. The possessive feeling that accompanied the words excited Jim.

Smiling, Jim looked into Spock's eyes. "Hours? Can't you be more precise than that Science Officer?"

“I have not previously performed field testing with such a desirable subject,” Spock replied, with a relaxed quirk at the corner of his mouth.

Jim leaned forward. The kiss they shared this time was slow and tender. The sense of urgency had passed. When they broke apart, Jim remarked. “Can you give me a bit more time to recover? I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“I have infinite patience. Rest awhile.”

Jim lay his head down on Spock’s chest and began to imagine all the ways he and Spock could press their palms together while making love.

Doctor McCoy reclined in his chair and sipped his drink slowly. After a long while, he glanced at the computer terminal in the corner of the room. *I’ll be up all night if I don’t look.* He pushed himself from his chair.

‘El’ru’esta’ he keyed in quickly. Vulcan hand embrace involving the touching of palms. Interesting, but it didn’t precisely explain why Jim raced out like a bat out of hell. It was a longshot, but Doctor McCoy knew Doctor M’Benga had returned to Kenya. He contacted the bridge, and moments later, he was connected.

“Geoff, glad to see your face again. I won’t keep you long from your hospital duties. I’ve got an itch, I’ve got to scratch. What can you tell me about the el’ru’esta?”

“Leonard, nice to see you as well. I hadn’t heard you were back in service.”
“It’s a long story for another day.”

Geoff leaned back in his chair. “Your question certainly does come out of left field. I’m surprised you ever heard the term. It’s a hand embrace that is only used in private between bonded couples.”

“What’s its purpose?”

“What I understand is that it’s important during pon farr. It allows a freer exchange of emotions, allowing the partner not impacted by the blood fever to assess the emotional state of their partner and to offer comfort, reassurance, and support.”

Doctor McCoy smiled. “A happiness barometer.”

“I doubt a Vulcan would ever put it quite that way.”

“Why would they need it? Aren’t bonded pairs already in mental touch with one another?”

“I was told once in no uncertain terms that ‘all melds are not created equal.’ They have varying degrees of intimacy. I understand this is the most open and intense form of exchange as shielding is virtually impossible. That’s really all I know. Hope it helps.”

“Thank, Geoff. Your answer solved a mystery. Take care.”

Doctor McCoy stood, then looked out amongst the stars, and raised what remained of his brandy in a celebratory toast. He smiled inwardly, feeling privileged to have witnessed such a private hand embrace in sickbay.

He placed his empty glass on the table and picked up the bottle Jim had left behind. He figured Jim would be by tomorrow to retrieve it. He hoped Spock would join him. It would be nice to share a toast together to the start of their new relationship.

Do not go gentle into that good night
—Dylan Thomas, 1914-1953

“Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Space (between us)

AK Ford

The clock ticked away.

There were four days left of the Enterprise's 5-year mission. Boxes lined the corridors, the conference rooms were packed full of personal belongings and decorations that had made homes while aboard the ship. The crew milled about, depositing their meager possessions where they would be collected by Yeomen and Ensigns to be beamed down once they got to port. Jim's own room was untouched by this excitement and frenzy.

Jim didn't agonize. Unless you were talking about his Mirror self, and then yes, he was sure he got pretty good use out of the verb. But Jim in this universe was not accustomed to the emotional state of agonizing. Difficult command choices may have required him to invest more of his emotional capacity than he preferred at times, but that came with the territory. That's what command was all about. Making difficult choices.

Luckily, his choices usually had deadlines. Short deadlines. Agonizing, by definition, asked for large amounts of time to dwell on a particular topic. Thus, as a Captain, agonizing wasn't exactly routine. His choices were made quickly, not lasting longer than a few days at a time. Hardly a comfortable period to agonize in.

But three and half years was quite a long time to think about something, especially something of the magnitude which this particular issue certainly was. There was no need to rush things. And if he got busy with the mission, conversing with kindly aliens, patrolling borders, protecting the Federation from the Klingons and deadly space diseases, or discovering new oddities the Universe had to offer, well, that could hardly be helped, could it? The Captain was a busy man. Thinking about personal matters (tall, dark, and logical issues, that is) was not a luxury commonly granted aboard a starship.

And... in those small moments of respite, when things were quiet and peaceful, and the time was filled with games of chess and conversation, and wrestling matches were to be had in the rec room, and the silence was shared with good books and paperwork, what was there to be said? But now, Jim could not ignore that looming clock, ticking away. It had followed him down the halls, into his quarters; it was ever-present on the bridge. It beamed down with him to the surface of planets. It stood next to him when they greeted the Admiralty, or when they welcomed special guests aboard the ship. It ticked away when danger presented itself in its various forms on their escapades. It was still ticking at 0300 ship's time when he stayed up much later than he should ever find himself, chess pieces forgotten, partaking in conversation that he was too engaged in to insist on sleep.

Jim made his way to the bridge. He had already left for the day, and the Beta shift was on now. He had no real business there at the moment, but when the turbolift doors opened on the circular room, no one questioned his presence. Ensign Greaves gave him a nod from communications, which Jim returned stiffly. Lt. Sulu sat in the command chair, and at the sound of the turbolift, he swiveled around. Jim waved his hand when the lieutenant started to rise out of the chair, motioning for him to stay where he was. Lt. Wethern paid diligent attention to her post at the helm. As they

came closer to the Sol system, the navigation through the busy space required more care.

The Science officer's station was occupied by a junior lieutenant whose name slipped Jim's mind. The Captain continued around the bridge, chatting with Officer Kyle at the Engineering station, with an unnecessary eye on some of the monitors on the panels around him. His crew knew what they were doing. They were well trained and accustomed to the ebbs and flows of their jobs aboard the ship. Jim was reminded once again (it felt like the hundredth time) that his crew was due for promotion.

Once it was clear that the Captain was only providing moral support and that his presence on the bridge was entirely extraneous, he found himself approaching sickbay. Dr. McCoy was at his desk in the back laboring over mounds of PADD work. His eyelids were drooping, and his hair looked like he'd run his hands through it about a hundred times.

"Jim," he said, looking up from tedious paperwork, a relieved smile blossoming on his face. "Well, if you're not a sight for sore eyes. What can I do you for?" Bones looked grateful for an opportunity to do something other than fill in boxes and write notes in tiny spaces. Jim was happy to oblige.

"Oh, I'm not in the market for anything in particular. Figured you might be bored of physicals and checkups." Jim sat down in the chair across from his friend. Bones' eyes widened in exasperated countenance.

"Jim, if I have to do one more check up on a perfectly healthy specimen, I might fall asleep at my post." Bones got up from his chair and grabbed a tall bottle of something green and two glasses from a cabinet on the wall behind his desk. He poured a healthy amount of the strong-smelling liquid in each glass and then deposited one in front of the Captain. He held it up in a toast, and they drank. Heavy sighs of satisfaction left both men as they swallowed their drinks.

"I thought doctors were supposed to be happy that their patients were healthy," Jim said, smiling.

"Yeah, well, me too." Bones said grumpily. "But the sheer amount of paperwork they're giving me at this 'end of mission' stuff is absurd. How many ways can I write 'healthy' on a form?" The doctor tossed back his drink and then poured himself a new one. "And what about you, Captain?"

Jim looked over at the use of his title and settled his drink back down on the desktop. "What about me?" Jim said. He made eye contact with the doctor for a split second but knew his friend was too close to him for him to be able to play stupid. The Doctor gave him his look. He stayed quiet for another minute, forcing his gaze away and to the far wall of his office. "I know we've never talked about it, Jim, but..." Bones glanced again at his friend. At this, Jim's eyes moved to Bones', and in a quick movement, he picked up his glass and knocked back the rest of his own drink. "You know, we're almost outta here. Time is running out."

Jim said nothing. He'd never experienced this feeling with another person before. Not with Carol, not with any of the women he'd met in his space travels. Not with Edith. This fear was all-encompassing. He had never dealt with this kind of fear; other kinds, of course. He'd dealt with so many life and death situations that the fear of them wore off after a while. He still felt fear, but it was backlit with a warmth of confidence and another presence at his side. He was never alone when he dealt with those fears.

But the 5-year mission was ending. His crew would be parting. He would be waiting for his new orders on the ground. He was recommending all his senior officers for promotion, and he expected they would receive them. And that's what he was scared of. More than that the little group of people who had been his companions for the past five years would not be so close anymore, proximity or otherwise, but that individual members of his crew would be moving on.

Certain members of his crew.

"Thanks, Bones. I'll keep that in mind," Jim said, finally. He gave a half-smile, and the doctor didn't pretend he had comforted his friend in any way.

"All right, Jim-boy," McCoy said, sitting up from his comfortable position leaning back against his chair. "I've got more sanity to lose here, and I'm sure there are some things you've got to finish up elsewhere." At this last comment, the doctor gave him another pointed look.

Jim met the look, and even after his friend had focused back down on his PADD and started to fill in boxes and make more comments, Jim gave a fond smile. He knew one thing, at the very least. Wherever the good doctor ended up, he would not be so far away from Jim that their friendship would be lost. Perhaps in need of a dusting off once in a while, but always ready to be picked up where it was left off. Jim exited Sickbay comforted in this thought. Heading down the hall, towards the turbolift, Jim bumped into his first officer.

"Spock!" Jim said, a fluttering in his chest, making the sound of his voice the minutest bit higher than usual. The anxiety coiling in his stomach gave rest as Spock looked down at him.

"Captain," Spock said. "I was just coming to collect you for our chess match this evening."

Jim's smile grew wider. "Why, Mr. Spock, that's very courteous of you. How about a meal first?" Spock gave a nod, and they both started down the hall, walking in comfortable silence. Jim looked at his First Officer. Spock was staring straight ahead, walking and looking unencumbered by the ticking noise Jim heard now.

They got into the turbolift at the end of the hall, and Jim peeled his eyes away from the impassive features of his Vulcan first officer. The doors to the turbolift re-opened, and both officers headed straight for the replicators. Jim ordered his meal unenthusiastically, the smell of reconstituted steak less than mouthwatering. Spock followed him to a table with his tray of greens and soup.

The entire meal was a relatively quiet affair. Jim was entirely too wrapped up in his own thoughts to be a good conversationalist. Spock was content to let his Captain cogitate on matters that were troubling him.

Captains were not customarily given confirmation on whether their recommendations were approved, and so they had no way of knowing (bar asking) where their crew ended up. Jim was too sure that the answer would be one he disliked no matter what that he hadn't asked Spock yet. Jim knew that in the past, Spock had been vocal about his lack of desire for a command of his own. Surely some station on a science vessel would be a highly appealing offer. There was still so much to discover out here in space. And besides, what other options were there?

Stay with me. Well, that option wasn't quite realistic. To ask Spock to give up whatever he had planned next for something as unknown as Jim's next post was selfish, and he abhorred the thought.

The Admiralty had been less than forthcoming with their orders for Jim post-mission. Their transmissions for him had been short and never left any room to ask direct questions. Jim wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answers anyway. After the quiet dinner, they both made their way towards Spock's quarters. They were nearly there when Spock broke their silence.

"Captain," he started, and Jim looked up sharply. "There is a Terran colloquialism that is designed to encourage communication through payment when one finds..."

"Penny for your thoughts,' Spock?" Jim chuckled. Spock gave a short nod.

They entered into Spock's quarters then, and Jim sat down in the seat across from Spock's. Their chessboard—although Jim knew it was Spock's, he had come to think of it as theirs, was set up neatly and ready to be played. Spock took a moment to center the board between them on the desk and made a point of looking at his Captain with an eyebrow raised.

"Yes, well," Jim said. There wasn't a whole lot of room for hedging. "I've been thinking about plans after the mission ends." Spock's eyes drifted back down to the chessboard in the time it took Jim to say the words and stayed there after the words were out.

"The Admiralty has not been explicit with your next assignment?" Spock said, at last, seemingly content with the neatness of the pieces on the board, and motioning for Jim to make his move first.

"No, no, they haven't," Jim said, moving a pawn forward. Spock opened with a knight. "I am unsurprised they have not clarified their plans." Spock studied the board as Jim moved out a bishop from its safe haven.

"Oh?" Jim said, watching Spock decide on his next move. "Why is that, Mr. Spock?"

The Commander glanced up at his name, and leaned forward, moving his knight once more. Then Spock steepled his fingers and leaned his elbows on the desktop, fingertips resting against his mouth. Jim stared at his mouth for a few seconds, and then his gaze traveled up to make eye contact, shaking his head.

Spock spoke, and his eyes met Jim's. "I believe Star Fleet has been very pleased with your Captaincy, and though I disapprove of some of the ways Star Fleet chooses to operate, it does not make it any less likely that they will do what is in their best interest and keep you close to their resources on the ground."

The Captain's shoulders sagged. He was hearing the fears that had been running around in his head, spoken aloud.

"Jim," Spock said quietly. The softness in the intonation made him look up from the chessboard sitting between them. Spock's eyes were warm when he met them, but after a second, Spock broke the eye contact in favor of staring at his king, sitting next to his queen. "I am honored to have had

the opportunity to serve as First Officer aboard the Enterprise. It has been a most gratifying experience, one that I believe has been made so largely by your presence.”

Spock continued to look at his chess pieces but did not make a move. Jim couldn’t remember whose turn it was. All he could do was stare at his first officer.

“Thank you, Mr. Spock.” Jim figured it must be his move now, and he threw forward a random pawn. Spock retreated back into himself after his comment. The warm softness that Jim was accustomed to seeing on nights like this was gone, and in its place was a stony exterior. Jim’s heart was not in the game. He carelessly moved pieces around, each one being picked off by his opponent until there was nothing left to guard his King. Their set was much shorter and much more subdued than their usual matches. There was no more conversation, and the silence was not wholly comfortable. There was a tension in the air that chilled the usually stifling room.

When Spock tipped Jim’s king over, he didn’t wait to be dismissed. He stood up from his chair and walked to Spock’s door. He knew the Vulcan was following behind him politely, seeing him out of his quarters. As the door opened onto the slumberous hallway, Jim turned around and put his hand on the doorframe. He wanted to say something, wanted to reach out to Spock. But Spock stood far enough away from the Captain for that.

Jim opened his mouth, and Spock’s face became even stonier if it was possible. Jim looked at him, and he was sure that his face was open, probably too open. Jim closed his mouth and looked down.

“Goodnight, Spock.”

“Sleep well, Captain.” He did not.

Two Days Til End of Mission

“We will be pulling up to ze Jupiter Station in thirty-six hours, Keptin,” Chekov announced.

Jim nodded and looked back down at his PADD where he was slowly working his way through recommendations for his crew. Jupiter Station was their first stop. They’d be unloading half the crew there, mostly Science Officers and equipment. The Senior Officers and the other half of the crew would continue on to Earth and disembark the following day.

Jim could still hear the ticking. He heard it while he punched information into forms, while he signed PADDs from department heads, and authored final reports of the five-year mission. He heard it while he completed the unfinished reports from the last missions on various planets.

The ticking persisted after the Alpha shift ended, and Jim sat in his chair for a few minutes in silence. The clock ticked as he stared at the PADD in his lap, oblivious to the bridge sounds beeping all around him. A new transmission from the Admiralty stared back up at him from the screen. Tick. Tick. Tick. His new orders were the loudest ticking of all.

Jim left the bridge. It was the night before they would dock at the Jupiter Station. He wasn’t able to sleep much the night before; he had used the time to start packing up all his belongings in boxes.

There was still quite a lot to be done. He entered his quarters, his head swimming, and his ears ringing.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Commodore. They wanted to make him a Commodore. Of course, he shouldn't have been surprised. He'd known they would want to keep him grounded. He was a great asset for their publicity, to make Star Fleet look better. So, they made him a Commodore, and he would likely never Captain a ship again. They gave him the best ship, trusted him and his crew with the most challenging missions, gave him the finest crewmen available, and for five glorious years, he was in his element. And now, they were asking him to pay them back by playing the Good Little Commodore for the fleet.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Jim leaned against the wall inside his quarters. His breathing was heavy. The boxes all around him took up too much space. He should be out in the rec room, or the mess hall, conversing with his crew. There was so little time left.

But he didn't want to talk to his crew. He only wanted to speak to one person.

Spock.

He had been offered a position on the USS Titan. Captain Riker had notified Jim good-humoredly the previous morning that he was "going to try and poach that science officer of yours." Jim had gone stiff when he read the transmission. Spock had not said anything to Jim about it. In his bad mood, he skirted around Spock for the last day and a half. Not that it was hard to avoid the Commander, as Spock was not really making any effort to talk to him in the first place.

Now, with two nights left on board, Jim felt that deadline on top of him, heavy on his chest, making it hard for him to breathe. He couldn't have been the only one to feel it. Not if Bones knew it was there. Not if it was so tangible that Jim couldn't sleep, it was sitting beside him and keeping him awake at night. He couldn't fathom that it was just him.

But wasn't it? He knew that Spock held a deep regard for him. He knew that. He knew. But did his affection run as deep as Jim's did? Or was it merely Vulcan admiration? There must be some part of him, the human part, that could feel what Jim felt. There had to be. Otherwise, he didn't know anything. Jim pushed himself off the wall. His forehead was beaded with sweat. He paced. There was little room for it, but he made do, walking, back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

He paused. His leg shook impatiently. He wrapped his arms around himself, and a thumb pressed against his mouth as he stared at the door to their shared bathroom. He stepped toward it and then stepped back. Would Spock tell him about his plans if he asked? Would he tell Jim whether he planned to go to the Titan? If he wasn't going to go on the Titan, what would he do? And if he was, what would Jim do?

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Jim stepped forward again, and then again. The automatic door opened and he heard it close behind him with another step, but he just stared ahead of him at the opposite door.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

He stepped forward, one step and then another. Another step. And then the door opened, revealing Spock, slightly startled for the smallest second, but then his regular impassive facade was back in place.

“Captain,” Spock said. “I apologize. The sensors must not have registered the use of the facilities.”

“That’s fine, Spock,” Jim said quickly. There was a lump in his throat at the sight of the Commander. He was dressed in his Star Fleet regulation sleepwear, and he held an open box. Jim realized he must be packing up some of his toiletries. He smiled weakly. “Actually, would you mind if...” Jim finished by motioning towards Spock’s quarters. A slight hesitation, and then a nod, and Jim was admitted.

Entering Spock’s living quarters through the bathroom was not something Jim had done frequently. They usually respected that unspoken boundary and entered through the hallway. It had happened maybe a handful of times, the rare nights that Jim had stayed up late with his First Officer, and he had been drinking, and they had been discussing difficult topics or missions, and Jim had found himself growing too tired to be entirely proper. On those nights, when it was very late, he had used this passage. But it felt very intimate. Now, Jim walked forward into the intimate alcove of Spock’s office area. He knew the Vulcan had followed behind him, but he was silent. Jim turned slowly, and in the heat of Spock’s higher-temperature room, he felt himself flush.

“Captain, was there something you needed?” Spock asked after a moment of silence too long. Jim looked up at him. Spock’s face was a carefully constructed work of sculpture, all sharp angles, and delicate touches.

“Yes, Spock.” The Captain swallowed and tried to compose himself. He half-turned and played with a chess piece from the three-dimensional board sitting next to the empty box that was waiting for it. “I know that Captain Riker has offered you a position on his ship.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Spock nod once. He offered no other comment when Jim looked at him. He only stared back at his Captain, a tension tightening his features. Jim wanted to see his features soften like they usually did when they were alone, but they did not. He couldn’t have been imagining those soft moments when the Vulcan had let his guard drop. With him.

“Yes, well,” Jim said again. He turned towards the desk now. He walked around it so that it separated him from Spock. He still fiddled with the chess piece. “It seems we were correct when we guessed at what the Admiralty had in store for me.”

Jim could not look up at him now. He could feel his heart rate rising, and his breathing was gradually quickening. There was no movement in the corner of his eyes. No reaction. “Commodore,” he laughed. “I figure I could fight it, like Decker,” he said. He looked up now, and Spock was still just staring at his Captain as if nothing he was saying had any effect on him at all. Jim could feel a lump forming in his throat at the sight of him, the tight black undershirt hugging his frame, the long gray

pants. He had put down the box he held upon entering the room, and now his hands were at his sides. He was still. Nothing.

“Spock, do you... Do you...?” he cut off, unable to finish the question. Spock's expression remained solid, unmovable, completely blank. He did not attempt to give an answer, nor even inquire that Jim completed his question. Jim stepped closer, running his hands through his hair in a rare show of anxiety, acutely aware of Spock's eyes on him. Clearly, he was going to make him come out and say it. He tried to laugh it off. Give Spock a way out. The attempt lodged in his throat.

“I mean, tell me if I'm wrong. If I've imagined this.” He gestured at the small space that remained between them.

Jim watched Spock say nothing, and stand so still. His eyes searched Spock's, but they did nothing except stare directly back at him. “Tell me it's just me...” he said one more time. Spock said nothing.

Jim raised his hand slowly. He was not breathing as his fingertips made contact with Spock's cheek, his jawbone. He waited for Spock to lean into the touch, press his face closer. Even his retreat would be enough. But he was still, and Jim thought he might never move, and the result would be his own heartbreak.

He let his hand fall past Spock's face, and touched his neck gently, stepping those scant few inches closer, till the toes of his boots met Spock's toes, and there were only centimeters between their bodies, their faces. He stared at Spock's lips, not for the first time, and he tilted his head up to look in Spock's eyes, dark and harder to read than ever, but so familiar and so close.

He tilted his head more, and he moved closer, and he couldn't bear to watch Spock's eyes, but couldn't close his own.

At first, Jim's lips on Spock's was the only thing he could feel. Spock's lips were soft and warm and... still. Jim pulled back so that their mouths were no longer touching, his nose brushing against Spock's, and he finally closed his eyes. Spock didn't move. Jim's forehead was wrinkled with his distress.

Resignedly, Jim pressed his lips close once more, in a chaste, soft, a goodbye kiss. His hand moved to the back of Spock's neck, and his other hand found a place on Spock's arm. At least he had tried to reach his friend. Perhaps it was better this way. Jim felt his heart shatter as five years of friendship came to an end. He prepared to pull back, pull away, retreat to his quarters.

But there were hands on him, gripping him closer, and the lips pressed into his sparked alive. The fever-hot mouth moved against him, urgent and needy. An eagerness returned to Jim's movements, and grasping fingers wandered over torsos, always bringing closer, and closer, and more intimate. The hands traveled up around necks, embracing shoulder blades and strong, muscular backs.

There was little sound in the room. They only gasped, soft and quiet, as if to keep everything they shared between the two of them. Jim searched blindly for a path to a horizontal world, pushing back against the lithe body that pushed and pulled his, finding the steps to Spock's bed. The back of Spock's knees met the edge of their destination, and Jim pushed them back against the dark Vulcan sheets, which puffed around them in admittance. Moments or hours after, the two laid on their sides,

facing each other.

Jim forced himself to accept Spock's silence and did not try to speak because he knew that nothing would change the Vulcan's mind. It was easier to lie there and savor what had been given and what had been taken for one night than admit that it could only be one night.

Vulcan kisses pressed on every inch of flesh that was open to the balmy air. Golden fingers caressed flushed green skin. Eyes, black and hazel, worshipped the temples they'd paid sacrifice to, each of their sacrifices costly. Spock could have left the ship behind without ever having said a word. He could have forced it down somewhere deep inside his Katra. He could have gone and not looked back. These alien feelings inside him, fostered by this soft man he laid with, would never have been confronted, and he could have perpetuated his Vulcan image; emotionless.

But he'd clobbered his controls with pleasure and passion and blunt-force abandon. The pieces of his walls were scattered around him, and soon he would be forced out of this moment and without his walls, he would not know what to do with himself. Instead, Spock reveled in what he could for the moment, the loss he had just suffered so deliciously. There was nothing like this lack of control that had ever undone him so completely. He allowed himself the pleasure of the grief, the mourning for his composure. But he knew. He felt it creeping up his spine, as the gentle touches and the sweet caresses went on. He could hear the ground parting where his buried restraints all clamored to the surface to breathe life again. But for now, he let himself caress this man he'd longed to touch for so long and permitted the reciprocation of affection. For now, Jim could have all of him that he wanted. Tomorrow, Spock would have none to give him.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Jim woke to the alarm going off from his communicator, lost in the tumult of discarded clothing. He fumbled around for the device to shut off the incessant ringing and then sat back and ran his hands over his face.

In the vast emptiness of the bed, he could not tell himself that Spock had just gone to the bathroom or to the replicator for food. He knew from the sick feeling in his stomach that Spock left with no intention of returning. The lack of boxes in the room could have had something to do with his confidence on the matter.

Still, the amount of space left in the bed with only his naked body was jarring. Dreamlike. If he just went back to bed, everything could be fine. He'd wake up again and the whole of yesterday would have played out differently.

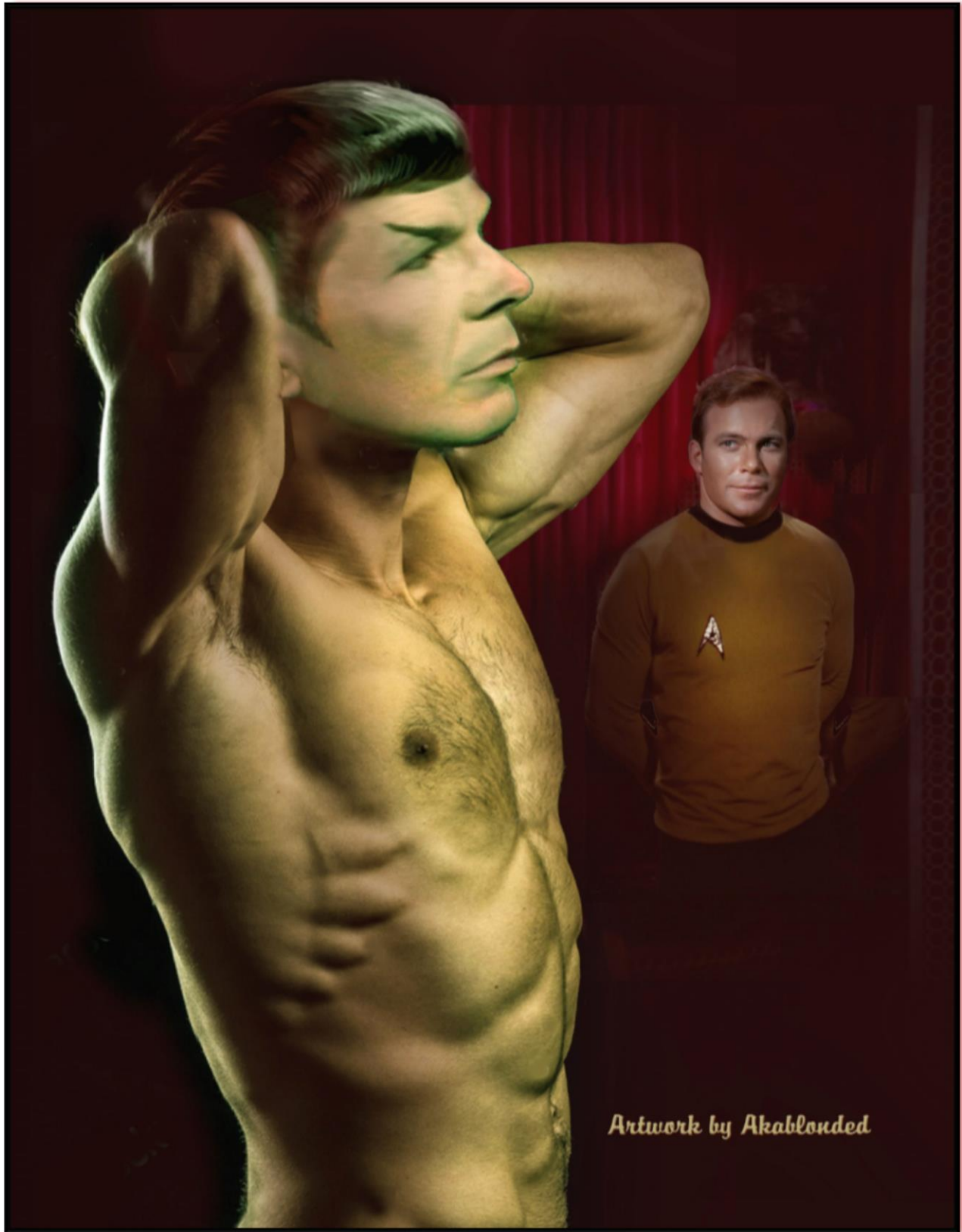
But here he was. He'd done too many things that he could not take back. He could not take back his actions or his adoration. He could not take back every minute he's spent in the past three and a half years waiting to lie in that bed. If he could have taken it back, he would have. Anything that could have kept some semblance of what had been before, he would have done it.

But the clock did not tick backward, only forward, and there was not a single thing he could do about anything now. He'd made his decision.

Later he would find out that Spock had left with the other Science crew members at the Jupiter

station at 0600. The other Senior Officers would laugh and smile like it was all just normal Spock, trying to get away from the warm reception waiting for them in San Francisco, and Jim would think to himself how true it was.

He would think to himself, and he would notice that his head ached where his meld points were, and they had never ached that way before.



Artwork by Akablonded

One Guy, Two Guys, Redshirt, Blueshirt

Trekker (with apologies to Dr. Seuss)

One guy, two guys, red shirt, blue shirt
Black shirt, gold shirt, old guy, new guy

This one has a golden pip
That one has a speeding ship

Say! What a lot of guys there are
Yes. Some are red, and some are blue
Some are gold and some are new

Spock is sad, while Jim can be glad
And Nero is very, very bad

Why are they sad and glad and bad?
I do not know, but we can guess
Perhaps the old one loves the gold one
While the gold one loves the blue one
What a mess

Some are thin, and some are fat
The fat one has a yellow shirt
Does the blue one love the gold one?
We do not know, it is a test.
Does the grumpy one love the rest?

From there to here
From here to there
Funny things are everywhere

Here are some who like to run
They run for fun in the hot, hot sun
To win the Academy Marathon

Oh me! Oh my! Oh me! Oh my!
What a lot of funny guys go by
It is a landing party, you see
They watch us and we watch thee

Some have two feet and some have forehead bumps
Some have pointy ears and some have pretty rumps
Where do they come from? I can't say
But I bet they have come a long, long way

We see them come, we see them go
Some are fast, some are slow
Some are shy, some do blow
Not one of them is like another
Don't ask us why, go find your brother

But the Word Is Love

Alice West

“Come.” Jim Kirk looked up from the data he had been perusing on his computer monitor, knowing it would be Spock at the door. He always knew. It wasn’t that Spock was the only crew member who came to his quarters to speak directly to him—he wasn’t, although Spock came more frequently than anyone else. And it wasn’t as though he had any idea who else might be paying him a visit—he didn’t, but he always knew when it was Spock. Always.

The door hissed open and Spock stepped into the room, hands clasped behind his back. He stopped several feet from Kirk’s desk. Jim sat back, studying the grave face for any clues about the nature of this particular visit. He noted Spock’s gaze uncharacteristically fixed on the desk. Something was up. Usually, they locked gazes and didn’t look away.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Spock?” Kirk leaned forward, clasping his hands in front of him on the desk, his way of mirroring Spock’s stance. Spock finally looked up.

“Captain. I request that the Enterprise divert to Vulcan.”

Kirk hesitated. “Isn’t it a little soon, Spock? It’s only been three years since your encounter with T’Pring. Our encounter,” he amended grimly.

Spock shook his head and glanced down again. “I am not experiencing pon farr. But it is a personal matter. I understand I have no right to ask this.”

“What is it, Spock?” Kirk was concerned, his tone softening. He hoped that this time the confession would be easier for Spock and that his own obvious worry would be a comfort to his friend instead of an obstacle. In the three years since they had fought on the sands of Vulcan, and he had seen the joy on Spock’s face upon seeing him alive, they had settled into a kind of unstated recognition—Kirk sometimes thought of it as a platonic relationship—that they held between them, sacred and safe for being unacknowledged openly.

Spock swallowed. “It has to do with my family.”

Kirk nodded, wondering if he meant his parents or the entire clan.

“My father could make a request through official channels, but he has asked me to approach you first.”

“I appreciate that.” Kirk waited, knowing the Vulcan wouldn’t be hurried in presenting his case.

Spock’s clasped hands broke apart; he moved toward the chair on his side of the desk and sat down carefully, continuing to avoid Kirk’s eyes. “My mother is...ill.”

“Ill? Do you know the nature of her illness?”

“My father will not tell me.” Spock looked up, seeking Kirk’s gaze. “Jim, I am not certain he himself knows.”

Kirk saw the apprehension in Spock’s dark eyes. Frustration too, he imagined, from not having enough information to reach any kind of conclusion. They were alike in that, driven to collect facts and solve mysteries, work ceaselessly at a problem until the answer came, logically or on a hunch. “Is he asking for you or is the Enterprise part of his request? Did he tell you anything more? Does he think her illness is...?”

“Fatal?” Spock finished for him. A quick shake of his head. “I do not know. My father did not convey a sense of urgency.”

“But then, he wouldn’t,” Kirk concluded.

“No,” Spock agreed. “As to your first question, my father asked that you and Dr. McCoy beam down with me.”

“Oh? How long will this detour take? Do you have any idea?”

Spock looked uncomfortable. “I have given you all the facts as I know them. I cannot be more specific.”

Kirk pulled in a breath. “Well, Mr. Spock, I’ll see what I can shift around.” Kirk managed a small smile for the benefit of his friend. He recognized an echoing light in Spock’s eyes. Spock nodded and stood, and Kirk stood with him, wanting to reassure him somehow. He resisted the urge to embrace him, an impulse—a desire if he were honest with himself—that he often squelched. “I’ll let you know as soon as I can.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Spock moved toward the door, which swished open and closed behind him.

After a few thoughtful seconds, Kirk turned back to the computer. Thumbing a switch, he said, “Uhura, contact Admiral Nogura and pipe it down to my office.”

Kirk was able to wangle 48 hours from Star Fleet Command to divert to Vulcan before continuing on their mission to make first contact with the inhabitants of the misty world of Ketubey 18. When he, Spock, and McCoy emerged on the transporter pads at a travel center near the western edge of Shi Kahr close to Spock’s ancestral home, Sarek was waiting for them. To Kirk, he had not aged at all; in fact, Spock’s father appeared to be in better health, younger even, than when they had last seen him after his heart surgery on the ship.

The older man, clad in deep blue robes, lifted his hand in the shape of the ta’al, his demeanor unchanging. It was disconcerting to elicit no response at all upon arrival. Kirk realized the

extent to which Spock had changed in the years they had known each other; how relatively expressive he had become, how easily Kirk could read Spock's features, no matter how minute the change.

"Welcome to Vulcan, Captain, Dr. McCoy. Spock." Sarek's eyes rested for several seconds on his son, who raised his hand to mirror his father's. Before they could acknowledge his greeting, Sarek added, "Please follow me. It is a short walk to my home. I have informed my wife of your arrival. We shall see if she is expecting you."

Kirk traded glances with Spock, who raised his eyebrow, then he looked at the doctor, who was trying hard, he could see, to keep from bursting out with a question, if not a series of them. McCoy approached Sarek, turning with him to exit the transportation facility. Kirk took a quick look around; in the large, vaulted building, Vulcans and a few visitors walked quickly, intent on their destinations. No one cared who he was or what he was doing. It was refreshing to be anonymous here. Spock fell in beside him as he followed Sarek and McCoy.

"Ambassador Sarek, I assume I'm here to help Amanda if I can," McCoy said. "It would be useful if you could tell me everything you know. Symptoms of the disease, date of onset, that sort of thing."

"Doctor, as you may know, we Vulcans pride ourselves on our abilities to restore both the body and the mind to health. I called in the finest healers to examine my wife before contacting Spock and asking you here. If the illness with which Amanda is afflicted were known to us, we would have been able to diagnose it and treat it. The illness does not present itself as a physical one, although its source may indeed be biological. My wife does not complain of pain or discomfort of any kind. Indeed, she appears unaware that anything is wrong, even when she displays unusual behavior. Those are the moments when it is most obvious to me that she is suffering from a serious disability."

"She's suffering, but not in pain?"

"She is adversely affected by a condition, but we do not know what it is. You must observe her for yourself before I can speak of it further."

Kirk snuck a look at Spock, who appeared to be concentrating on the ground he was walking on. A muscle in his neck stood out, as though Spock were clenching his teeth. Kirk, reminded of his own tension, rolled his shoulders up and back until he heard a cascade of clicks. He wondered what Spock did to relax his body, other than meditation, but this didn't seem the appropriate moment to ask.

Kirk was relieved when they entered the spacious and well-ventilated house. He was already sweating, and his breathing was labored from the heat and the heavier gravity. The red Vulcan sky, the distant mountains, and its sere and suffocating climate reminded him uncomfortably of his first visit to this planet, especially the unforeseeable fight against Spock. He remembered crouching on the sand, struggling to catch his breath, as T'Pol intoned, "The air is the air, what can be done?" He remembered Spock's feral expression, the fear as well as the fascination it elicited in him. He

shivered in the cooler air once the front door opening sealed behind them.

“Sarek, where is my camera? Did you take it?” Kirk turned to see Amanda entering from another room, looking distraught. He recalled that she was reputed to be a skillful and creative photographer who used older Earth-style equipment to take pictures of Vulcan landscapes. Because Vulcans used cameras for scientific pursuits, not artistic ones, most of her work appeared in exhibits on Earth. Amanda’s gaze trailed from a metal bench toward the group of men. “I’ve looked for hours, but I can’t find it anywhere. Oh, Spock! What a surprise. Was the Enterprise in the area? How nice of you to stop by.” The handsome woman took her son’s hands and smiled up into his face.

“Mother—” he began, but Sarek interrupted him.

“Amanda, we spoke of his arrival only two hours ago, as well as yesterday.”

She turned to him. “Oh, Sarek, don’t be foolish. You haven’t mentioned Spock’s name in months.”

“That is not so, my wife. I—”

“And look,” she said, her gaze settling beyond her husband, “the orchid has bloomed.” She moved into the living room, where, among the long couches, on a low table near the large window, a potted plant displayed purple and white flowers above its green leaves. “I brought this all the way from Earth years ago, Spock,” she added as she lightly caressed the delicate petals.

“Yes, Mother, I know.” He had followed her into the room and now stood beside her, his hands clasped tightly behind his back.

As if she hadn’t heard him, she continued, “It’s astonishing that it’s survived all this time. And still bears flowers. Isn’t it lovely?”

While Spock attended to her, Sarek motioned Kirk and McCoy into the room she had entered from, which turned out to be Sarek’s office. Unlike the living room, which had art—mostly photographs—hung on the walls and a pleasant color scheme, this room was devoid of personal touches. Sarek remained standing in front of a wall of shelves that stored not only files of computer tapes but physical texts and scrolls. He motioned for them to sit down. Kirk took the desk chair, leaving the more comfortable armchair to the doctor.

“Did she not see us?” Kirk asked after he had sat. “Or was she ignoring us for some reason?” He felt completely at a loss as to how to explain Amanda’s behavior.

Sarek thought a moment. “As far as I have observed, she focuses on the object that most attracts her attention.”

“Or perhaps her vision has narrowed, in a sense,” McCoy said, “so that she may see, but she may not notice.”

Kirk swiveled his chair toward the doctor. “Explain.”

“Well, she said she’d been looking for her camera but couldn’t find it, despite searching everywhere. That suggests she’s not able to scan an area with the object in mind. She can only see it

if it's right in front of her."

"And not always then," said Sarek. "She repeatedly searches for an object she has misplaced, yet when I discover it where I know she has already looked and I point it out to her, she insists it wasn't there before. It's quite strange."

"Do you mean it's strange that she won't acknowledge not seeing it there before?" Kirk asked. "It also seems strange that she can't find it in the first place. I assume you've had her vision checked."

Sarek sniffed, offended. "Captain, the healers at the Science Academy are the best Vulcan possesses. They have tested for every known cause there is."

"Maybe it isn't logical," Kirk mused.

"Maybe it isn't Vulcan," McCoy said. "Amanda is human, of course. It's possible that whatever is wrong with her is genetic. Sarek, has anyone sent for her medical records from Earth?"

"That is one of the reasons I have summoned you here. My wife brought her medical records with her when she came to Vulcan to live. They reveal nothing. The healers theorized that a faulty recessive gene might be the culprit. I have requested that the medical archives of Amanda's ancestors from the past two hundred years be transmitted from Earth. The official procedures are taking more time than I am comfortable with. Your Terran bureaucracy can be most inefficient. As Amanda's husband, I have no direct claim to those records."

"But Spock does," Kirk concluded. "If there is a genetic component to her illness, as her son, he would have every right to see those records."

"Indeed." It was Spock's voice. They all turned toward him standing in the doorway. Kirk noted the frown lines on his forehead. "Mother has retired to her room to rest. I shall, if you permit me to use your computer, Father, contact the necessary administrative authorities on Earth to...cut through the red tape, I believe is the correct term."

"If it is, I've never heard of it," McCoy said. "But then, I'm a doctor, not a linguist. I do know that the Enterprise has gathered a lot of medical information that hasn't made it back to either Earth or Vulcan. I'll go back up and see what I can find."

"Before you leave," Sarek said, "I hope you will join us for dinner. Spock, your old bedroom is available for your use. I presume you wish to remain in close proximity to your mother while you are here. And Captain, I invite you to stay also, as a guest. A room has been prepared. At least allow us to provide you with the use of our home as recompense for diverting you to Vulcan."

Kirk let his mouth spread into a soft smile. "I would be delighted." The chance to get to know Sarek and Amanda a little better was tantalizing, and the unexpected opportunity to watch Spock living in his childhood home with his parents was one he couldn't pass up.

He put his hands on his knees and stood. "Well, we'll leave you to it, then, Spock."

Dinner was an elaborate meal of soup, vegetables, grains, and sauces that the cook served to them outside under the arbor, which was protected from the harsh environment by a force field while affording a broad view of the spires at the edge of the city and the jagged L-langon Mountains beyond the desert. Kirk had never been drawn to desert environments, on Earth or on other planets, but he had to admit that the twisted shapes of the mountains sculpted by eons of scorching wind had their own peculiar beauty. He admired, too, the Vulcan aesthetic that dictated that each structure blend in with its neighbors and its setting. The city of Shi Kahr appeared almost organically grown from the rocky planet itself. He regretted that on Earth no such care had been taken to integrate human life into its surroundings. He turned his attention to the conversation taking place at the oval table.

"I don't agree, Spock," McCoy was saying rather heatedly. "If the Halkans had not agreed to join, the Federation would have instituted a no-fly zone around the planet."

"Not for long," Spock insisted. "The Federation would have tried to re-open negotiations after some time had passed. Even after the Halkans' request to be left in peace. The Federation does not give up its objectives easily."

Kirk heard Spock's harsh certainty and wondered about his counterpart in the alternate universe. Had he forged an alliance with his Kirk, something like the partnership he himself had with his own first officer, or had the other Spock gotten rid of his captain? Maybe someday he would ask Spock for his hypothesis.

Sarek added, "History repeatedly shows that the Federation, despite its Prime Directive, is essentially a militaristic organization fond of pressuring new worlds to give it what it wants."

"On Earth, they used to call it imperialism," McCoy said. "But we moved past all that. Every Federation world holds its own sovereignty and self-determination. It's an alliance."

"And yet the Federation continues to be headquartered on Earth," Sarek said, "even as its territory spreads. For the center of operations to be located at the edge of the region comprising the allied planets is not logical."

McCoy slapped his hands on the arms of his chair and threw a beseeching look at Kirk, who smiled back at him and said nothing.

"As usual, Doctor," Spock said drily, "your human emotions have lost you your argument."

Kirk glanced at Amanda to share his amusement but saw that her attention was elsewhere. In fact, he realized, she had said very little during their dinner. Usually a lively and eloquent conversationalist, Amanda had spent most of the earlier discussion about Terran history, which had been her specialty as a university professor, slowly gathering and guiding each bite of food to her mouth. When Sarek had encouraged her to give her opinion, she had spoken haltingly, pausing several times as if she had to chase after her thoughts in order to offer a coherent answer. Eventually, she had given up altogether and was now looking into her empty bowl, apparently no

longer aware of her surroundings.

“Amanda,” Kirk said gently, touching her arm to attract her attention. “A penny for your thoughts.”

“Back to anachronistic idioms,” he heard McCoy grumble.

Amanda seemed to wrench herself from wherever she had been to turn her sociable smile toward McCoy. “I haven’t heard that expression in years, either. Do you even know what a penny looked like?”

“Well, I know it was a coin,” McCoy said cheerfully.

“But almost worthless,” Amanda said. “Why did you offer me only a penny, Captain?”

“I was merely using a figure of speech I thought you would enjoy. What were you thinking about a minute ago?”

“Thinking?” She looked troubled. “I don’t remember thinking about anything.” She glanced up at his face, trying on another smile.

“Is that unusual?” Kirk asked. He could feel the other men’s eyes on them.

“You’re asking me something... You want to...” Amanda lapsed into silence. “I don’t know,” she said then, defeated. She looked around the table. “There’s nothing wrong with me, all of you. I’m just getting older, that’s all.”

Clearly, she was not the same self-confident woman he had met almost three years ago. Kirk started to speak, then realized that trying to convince her that something was indeed very wrong would only agitate her more.

“We’re all getting older,” McCoy said. “Some of us more than others.”

“Doctor, that is a wholly illogical statement,” Spock said. “We age at the same rate.”

“I didn’t say some of us age faster. Although that gives me an idea. Sarek, Amanda, gentlemen, if you will excuse me, I think I’ll return to the ship now. I have some research to do.”

“I’ll walk you to the transportation center,” Amanda offered, suddenly serene. “It’s a lovely evening. There’s no need to use a vehicle.”

“I think it would be better if I accompanied him, Amanda,” Sarek said. “Do you remember what occurred the last time you went into the city on your own?”

Amanda looked blank. “No. Whatever could have happened?”

Sarek appeared distinctly uncomfortable. Kirk supposed that he was referring to an instance of her limitations to illustrate to his guests the symptoms of her illness, not to embarrass her.

Sarek glanced at his guests before speaking. “You became disoriented and were unable to find your way home. You wandered into a section of the city you had never been to, which made you believe you were on Earth. You forgot you could use your communicator to contact me or anyone else. Finally, a young woman and her daughter saw you sitting by the gate of an aircar parking complex, consulted your data bracelet, and drove you back. Do you remember now?” It sounded like a plea to Kirk’s ears.

“No, Sarek. I don’t remember any of that. Why don’t I remember?” Amanda looked from her husband to her son with tears in her eyes. Her anguish was palpable.

Spock was watching his mother with concern. “That is what we are here to discover,” he commented quietly.

If we can, Kirk thought but did not say aloud. As if he had heard him, Spock shifted his gaze to Kirk, who gave him a small smile. It seemed that Spock’s face softened and gave him a small smile back.

In the end, both Spock and Sarek accompanied McCoy to the transportation center, leaving Kirk and Amanda sitting with cups of ginger tea, a beverage both, it turned out, had a fondness for. Amanda appeared able to carry on a simple conversation, although she changed the subject at random. Kirk wondered if discussion with more than one or two people at a time was too much stimulation for her. Of course, he hardly knew her; it was impossible for him to discern what was normal and what wasn’t. When she told him she was tired and apologized for leaving him, he reassured her he would be fine. In fact, he was itching to be alone so he could have a look around.

Kirk was standing in the living room reading the introduction in a printed copy of *The Old Curiosity Shop* when Spock and his father returned. Sarek excused himself to work in his office before retiring. Spock approached Kirk.

“I waited up for you,” Kirk teased, resting his hand on Spock’s arm. From the way Spock stiffened, he realized he had misjudged the mood and withdrew his hand. “These are so distinctive,” he added, nodding to the arrangement of photographs on the wall opposite the window. His favorite of the landscapes was a dramatic shot up a mountain, its steep side plaited with steps hewn out of the stone. He replaced the book on the table where he had found it. “Did you grow up with them?”

Spock surveyed the photographs briefly. “I did not. My mother discovered her artistic leanings only after I left for Star Fleet Academy. I have not, in fact, seen these before. As you know, I had not stepped inside my father’s house since my departure for Earth, until today.”

“Yes...Spock, let’s sit down.”

“As you wish.”

“No, as *you* wish. This is your childhood home; we’re off duty right now. Would you like to have a seat and talk with me?”

“It is most strange,” Spock said as he approached a couch and sat down at one end of it, “to be here with you.” Kirk glanced over, surprised, then sat at the other end facing Spock, one arm stretched along its back. Spock’s gaze searched for his. “For so long, my family life and my work life have been separate and distinct. Jim, when my parents came aboard the Enterprise, I hadn’t even told you who they were. I regret that I caused you embarrassment upon their arrival.”

Kirk remembered his chagrin and his not inconsiderable anger at Spock for letting him stumble like that in front of the Ambassador. After the incident on Vulcan, when both had acknowledged the centrality of the other in his life, Spock had still kept basic secrets from him. Maybe ‘secrets’ was unfair. Maybe Spock had assumed that Kirk would guess the identity of the Vulcan/Human couple visiting the ship. But Spock’s withholding of personal information, especially about his family, had stung. More than Kirk cared to admit. “I got over it,” he said lightly. “But thank you for your apology. It means a lot.”

Spock nodded his acknowledgment. “At the time, I was...uncomfortable at the thought of seeing my father again after so many years. We had had no communication, except through my mother, since my departure for Star Fleet Academy. I did not know how he would react.”

“Or how you would,” Kirk added.

“Indeed.”

“And how does it feel this time?”

Spock turned his head to stare at one of his mother’s photographs. “The circumstances are, I must admit, exceedingly difficult. If anyone is to be here with me during this investigation of my mother’s illness, I am content that it is you. You are the link between my Vulcan life and my life aboard the ship.”

Moved by his friend’s words, Kirk wished he could reach out to Spock—touch him, hold him, give all that he had to give. But Spock refused to look back at him, denying him permission. Instead, Kirk said, “I was surprised your father asked you to go with him and McCoy. I was even more surprised when you accepted.”

“Our relationship has progressed even from the last time we encountered each other, on the Enterprise. Where my mother is concerned, he and I are in agreement.”

“I assume you and he spoke on the walk back, after seeing McCoy off?”

Spock nodded. “He related to me some of the more serious incidents that have occurred, which have put her or others in danger. They prove to him that she can no longer be left alone for long.”

“Such as?”

Spock rolled his lips inward. “She thought one of the heating elements she had been using in the food preparation room was inactive. She left a hand towel on it and went out to attend a meeting

at the library, leaving the house unattended. When my father arrived, the house was filled with smoke, and several cabinets were on fire.”

Kirk frowned. “That’s bad.”

“Indeed,” Spock said impassively. “Furthermore, my father has recently begun to see her encroaching breakdown as a pattern. There are certain areas in which she is failing. Memory, mostly short term. Executive function. Time sense. Her motor skills are untouched, but her coordination has been affected.”

“But what you’re describing is all over the place. What’s the pattern?”

“My father believes that she is undergoing deterioration due to the long-term effects of their bond. Because she was the first Human to bond with a Vulcan, she is the first to exhibit instabilities. He theorizes that she is experiencing a telepathic collapse syndrome. A kind of mental exhaustion, if you will.”

That wouldn’t bode well for future Human/Vulcan pairings. Kirk dismissed the thought. “I was going to ask you about their bond. I was wondering what Sarek has been experiencing through this whole period. Has he melded minds with her since the symptoms began?”

Spock nodded. “We did speak of their bond. My father was reluctant to violate the privacy of their marriage without her consent, but he felt it was necessary for her sake.”

“And I assume you asked his permission to share this information with McCoy and me.”

“Indeed. He told me that initially, he believed he could help her by using mind melds to strengthen connections and pathways in her thoughts that had become worn out. At that point, he discussed the changes he had noticed with her, and she was willing to participate in what she termed their ‘walks down memory lane.’ But gradually, he realized no progress was being made. The medical testing came to an end soon after, when the healers admitted that they could not help her. It was then that my father developed his theory. From what I can ascertain, he delayed a significant amount of time before contacting me. I am of the opinion that he hoped the condition would correct itself.

Also, it cost him some pride to ask for help. From me and from humans.”

Kirk smiled wryly. From his encounters with Vulcans other than Spock, he had always thought they considered Humans inferior because of their emotions. Yet how human it was of Sarek to deny the severity of his wife’s symptoms and to want to solve the problem on his own.

“What about their bond?” he asked. “As I understand it, Vulcans have a permanent kind of link even when they aren’t touching. Is that true of your parents?”

“It is. Of course, there are differences due to the fact that my mother has no telepathic abilities. On the other hand, she is an exceedingly perceptive person. She is able to sense the truth about other people without having access to their minds. That is, she *was* able to. It appears that trait has disappeared also. I observed it this afternoon when I was alone with her. She had no conception as to why I was here, or even curiosity. I had the strong sense that the woman I had known was no

longer present.” Spock lapsed into silence, looking away and swallowing. Kirk’s throat ached too.

“And how does Sarek perceive her through their bond?”

Spock raised his head. “At first, he experienced what I can only describe as scratches or small rips in the fabric of their bond. He told me that now the weave itself is loosening, threads are falling away. He has had to retreat from her, which is a painful process for a bonded Vulcan. He maintains a light touch in her mind. It is not ideal. But the anguish he was experiencing from the inexorable rending of their bond was worse.”

“I’m so sorry, Spock. For your father’s sake, for hers. I can’t imagine what you must be going through. I wish I could help.”

Spock’s posture straightened perceptibly. “You have helped, Captain, by coming here with me. That is all that is required.”

Kirk wasn’t sure which hurt more, the sudden withdrawal or Spock’s use of his title. He didn’t want to leave, but he didn’t know what else could be said, and it was late. He assumed Spock wanted to be alone, to meditate or simply rest. He stood, wished Spock a good night, and went to his guest room to try to sleep.

After the morning meal, Sarek left for the day; Amanda left with him to visit a friend. Spock and Kirk spent the next several hours in Sarek’s office, examining Amanda’s medical records, the healers’ files, Sarek’s notes, and Vulcan curative history for any clues the Vulcans might have missed. The task was one that Kirk might have enjoyed sharing with Spock in any other circumstances. But Spock had spoken little that day, and he carried out the assignment in near silence, breaking it only to report to Kirk his lack of findings.

McCoy showed up at the house mid-afternoon. Kirk and Spock were sitting under the arbor, indulging in strong cups of coffee and tea cultivated locally on Vulcan. Spock had adjusted the translucence of the force field to accommodate Kirk’s sensitivity to the bright sun.

“Spock. Jim. I’m afraid I’ve found an answer,” the doctor said after being welcomed inside and taking a seat at the table.

“Afraid, Bones? That doesn’t sound very hopeful.” He and Spock exchanged a glance.

McCoy sighed and waved away Kirk’s offer of coffee. “Jim, yesterday I said that the ship has a store of new medical information that hasn’t been sent yet to either Earth or Vulcan. I was thinking of our experience on Gamma Hydra IV.”

Kirk stared at him. “Refresh my memory.”

“Gamma Hydra IV,” Spock informed him, “was the planet on which we encountered a 28-year-old man who died of old age.”

“That’s right,” Kirk interrupted, feeling animated for the first time all morning. “The entire

landing party experienced the effects of the planet's radiation—except Chekov, because of the adrenalin his body produced. The rest of us aged incredibly fast. Bones had trouble with his memory. Scotty fell asleep. Your reactions slowed down. I became indecisive.” He turned back to McCoy. “Are you saying that what Amanda is going through is similar?”

“No. Our experience was of extreme old age. The body and mind naturally break down with time. What Amanda has is an entirely different phenomenon. It's a disease. But thinking about old age got me thinking about the past. So I researched Earth's medical history going back several centuries, and I consulted broader Earth history, and I finally found what I'm certain is the answer. Amanda has a form of dementia.”

“A form of what?” Kirk asked. Spock crossed his arms, his gaze riveted on the doctor.

“Dementia. The most common type was called Alzheimer's Disease. It was well on its way to becoming a plague of global proportions. They were never able to slow or stop it. But it was wiped out completely in the mid-21st century.”

“You mean all her symptoms—the memory loss, the confusion, the loss of abilities—could be reversed?”

“I mean there's a cure. At least, there was. But it won't work in Amanda's case. She's too far gone.”

Exasperated, Kirk leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table. “What is that supposed to mean, Doctor? Can't you replicate their treatment, try it out on her?”

McCoy shook his head. “No, Jim. It doesn't work that way. The medical establishment tried everything they could, but they couldn't save the millions of older adults whose symptoms had become pronounced.”

“Maybe she's within the window of opportunity,” Kirk pressed. There had to be an answer. “How do you know the treatment wouldn't work in her case?”

McCoy sat up, suddenly authoritative. “Captain, you're arguing with medical science. I've gone over their results repeatedly. All the archives conclusively prove that none of their efforts produced real results once the disease had begun to progress. It took decades to recognize how widespread the disorder was, decades more searching for a cure. The only medication that made any difference worked on people who tested positive but were years away from the onset of symptoms. It was a kind of vaccine, effective solely during latency, like the serum I was able to formulate on Miri's planet. The treatment was successful. No one contracted the disease after 2065.”

“But Amanda,” Kirk tried again, insisting.

McCoy glanced at Spock, hesitating, then looked back at Kirk. “She's in the same position as the millions who were already ill. According to the records, it was a cruel, excruciating disease for everyone involved. There was no clear-cut timetable or set of symptoms. But for each of the victims, it just went on, for years, slowly robbing them of their dignity, their humanity. It was humiliating for them, and bewildering, whether they were aware that they had dementia or not. They

lost abilities we take for granted, like how to plan, and then how to speak, and then how to swallow. Everything that made them independent wasted away. Eventually, their brains deteriorated so severely that they were completely unaware of their loved ones or their surroundings—marooned, so to speak. Many of them ended up warehoused in what were called nursing homes. They were simply bodies waiting to die.”

Kirk flinched, the description shocking him into silence.

“I’m sorry, Spock,” McCoy added.

Spock was stroking his lower lip with the side of his thumb thoughtfully. “If the disease was eradicated on Earth, then how did it become activated in my mother?”

McCoy shook his head, suddenly looking exhausted. “Who knows, Spock? Long-term exposure to the Vulcan air? Something in the water? It’s impossible to establish. I couldn’t locate the catalyzing agent of her disease any more than I could tell you where the Dimidian sea turtle hides its eggs.”

Spock was still pensive. “My father theorizes that her bond with him is causing the depletion of her mental faculties. He has limited their bond to its essentials, I believe in an attempt to restore her to her former self.”

“I’m afraid that’s wishful thinking on his part. Sarek may have doomed her to a wretched life by delaying so long in asking for help. But, based on my research, I highly doubt he caused her condition.”

Spock nodded. “I understand, Doctor.”

Kirk’s frustration had reached its limit. He struck his fists against the table, unable to keep from lashing out at Spock. “How can you be so damn logical? This is your mother we’re talking about!”

Slowly, Spock rose from his chair, his demeanor as severe as a Vulcan crag. “That is correct. My. Mother. I suggest you compose yourself before either of my parents returns home.” He turned and entered the house.

In the ensuing silence, Kirk dragged a hand over his face. He knew Spock was hurting. Yet his own sense of helplessness had caused him to attack his friend. “I don’t know, Bones. I don’t know what to do.”

Gently, McCoy said, “I think that’s the point, Jim. There *is* nothing to do. Now how about passing over some of that coffee?”

When the two men went back into the house, the cook informed them that Spock had left to walk the Ly’niya Meditation Trail and would be back before dinner. While they waited for Amanda to return, they discussed what to do with McCoy’s revelation. Both Kirk and the doctor agreed that Amanda should not be told about her disorder, at least not by either of them. They would leave it to Spock to tell Sarek. Father and son would decide how to handle the grave news.

There was no good reason for Kirk to remain at the house, but he had agreed to give Spock time with his parents until the following morning when the *Enterprise* was scheduled to leave for Ketubey 18, and he didn't want to return to the ship alone to wait for him. McCoy, on the other hand, was reluctant to overstay his welcome. After Amanda was driven home by her friend, the doctor said his goodbyes. Kirk admired his gallantry, so different from Kirk's own type of charm. The doctor's gentlemanly style was clearly a hit with Amanda. She asked if he couldn't stay longer, but he begged off, saying he had a backload of work to take care of on the ship. He assured her that he could navigate his way back to the transit center, and he told Kirk that he would contact him if he discovered any further information.

Amanda turned from the door as it sealed behind the doctor, catching Kirk's gaze with a smile. She appeared not to have heard or perhaps understood the nature of the information McCoy had referred to. Kirk wondered if in fact, she had forgotten why they were there, or if she had ever fully been told.

Amanda preceded Kirk into the living room. He was appreciating the sweep of her yellow gown from behind when he saw her camera on a low shelf near the doorway, sitting atop a set of metallic canisters. "Amanda," he called. He pointed when she turned around.

"Now why would I have left it there?" she asked, apparently thinking aloud. "I can't understand why I keep losing track of things." She retrieved the device and went to sit on one of the couches. Kirk sat on a padded stool across from her.

She looked at the apparatus in her hands, turning it over and frowning, then turning it over again. She began unscrewing what Kirk took to be the lens cap. He felt impatience watching her, wanting to snatch the camera out of her hands to pull off the cap himself. Clearly, she was no longer able to use the apparatus with the ease she must have had when she took the photographs on the walls. Kirk looked around at them, their precision and clarity, realizing again that Amanda had possessed a rare talent. Did she still have it, somewhere inside her? Or had it been erased, dropping from her mind like leaves from an autumn tree? He turned back to see her continuing to rotate the cap, trying to release it from the lens.

"I think you can just pull it off," he said quietly. When she didn't respond in any way, he sat beside her, gently disengaged the cap, and gave it back to her. She didn't seem to know what to do with it. He felt distinctly unnerved. On the *Enterprise*, more than two years earlier, Amanda had been an impressive presence: dignified, gracious, strong-willed. Now she was a shadow of herself, uncertain and perplexed. She placed the camera and lens cap beside her on the couch and stood. For several moments she simply remained there, as if waiting for something, and for the first time Kirk lacked the will to try to recollect her to herself. She turned and wandered toward the large window.

On impulse, Kirk picked up the camera, quickly surveyed its controls, and brought it up to his eyes. He saw the image of Amanda in the viewfinder and took the picture. "Amanda," he said, going to stand beside her at the window. It was easy to bring up the photograph on the camera's screen. In it, she was a silhouette, the vermillion sky framing her sculpted gray hair and the soft contours of her face.

"Captain, you're brilliant. I don't think I've ever known how to do that." She smiled up at

him.

“Of course you did,” Kirk said, wanting to present her with the evidence on her walls. But he wasn’t sure that would be the right thing to do. Even if she didn’t find the gulf between her past self and her present state heartbreaking, he did.

She returned her gaze to the window, her face troubled.

Kirk woke from his nap when he heard footsteps in the entrance room, even though they were almost noiseless. He knew it was Spock. Besides, who else would it be? Kirk wanted to go to him, but the stony veneer Spock had been presenting since they had arrived had pushed him away again and again. Since his own outburst earlier, he wondered if Spock would even speak to him. He wished Spock didn’t feel he had to prove himself properly Vulcan to his father. He wished Spock were more comfortable with humans’ emotions, especially anger and weakness. But he couldn’t change him. He couldn’t even wish him to change. Spock was Spock, and Kirk loved him the way he was. He longed to be with Spock right now, but he had no idea if Spock would want him.

Gradually, Kirk stretched and sat up, pulling on his boots. He left the guest room and walked down the curving hallway toward the living room, but he stopped after entering. Spock was standing in front of the window, observing something intently. Kirk glanced out and saw that Amanda was in the garden, walking slowly on the sandy path, reaching down to touch a leaf or a flower as she passed it. The expansive plot was covered by a variety of plants and shrubbery representatives of both Vulcan and Earth. Kirk saw for the first time that the plantings were not random at all but carefully planned.

On one side, dry-climate plants from Earth grew along a hillock—succulents, cacti, wildflowers—while on the opposite side, Vulcan tilash trees, ground cover, and a variety of spiky flowers spread out over the rocky soil and between large stones. Both types were mixed together in the middle, melding in swirls and spirals, creating a strange, imaginative landscape. The effect was surprisingly beautiful. Kirk wondered if this were Amanda’s work, or if Sarek and Amanda had created their garden together. He watched Amanda caress the thick, fleshy leaves of a cluster of blue chalk sticks. She appeared to be speaking to them. He wondered if she was repeating the names of the plants, trying to commit them to memory before she lost them completely.

Outside in the parched air, Amanda drew the hood of her gown up over her head so that Kirk couldn’t see her face anymore. His gaze returned to Spock, inside the house with him. The man in profile at the window hadn’t moved, barely seemed to be breathing. With a thud in his chest, Kirk saw that Spock’s face was wet. His impassive gaze remained in place, but a path of tears trickled down his cheek.

Kirk’s throat ached, and he felt tears fill his own eyes. He went to Spock then, stood beside him, and reached out his hand to hold Spock’s. Spock did not move, but he tightened his grip in Kirk’s.

“Go to her, Spock,” Kirk said after a moment, turning his head toward Spock. “Tell her what you never told her. Remember?”

Spock lowered his gaze and nodded. He squeezed Kirk's hand, let go, and left the room.

After dinner, Spock reminded his parents that he and the captain would be leaving at an early hour. Sarek suggested that Amanda remain asleep in the morning and say goodbye now. She protested at first, but when he insisted, she appeared grateful for his thoughtfulness. Kirk returned her warm embrace. Spock assented to a kiss on the cheek.

Later, after the house had become silent and dark, Kirk was turning over in his bed for the twentieth time when he sensed Spock's presence in the hall. There was a knock, and the door opened slightly. "Jim?"

"Yes, Spock. Come in." He propped himself up on his elbow.

Illuminated by the subdued lighting from the hall, Spock entered wearing a long robe, his feet bare. In the dimness, Kirk couldn't see his face well enough to read it. "I have been attempting to meditate," he said, standing by the door. "It is useless. I cannot—"

"Spock. Come here," Kirk said softly, lifting up the coverlet and shifting backward to make space beside him.

Noiselessly, Spock approached the side of the bed, then hesitated. Kirk could see his eyes now. Spock's gaze left Kirk's face to travel unhurriedly down his naked body. Having Spock so close churned Kirk's insides, a combination of anxiety and desire.

Spock opened his robe and let it fall to the floor. For an instant Kirk saw the lean, contoured body towering above him, its loveliness making him shudder. Then Spock bent and crawled into the bed with him.

At first, they were all knees and elbows, not knowing how to touch or where. "Turn over," Kirk suggested. "Let me spoon you."

"Spoon, Jim?" Spock asked as he rolled over to face away from Kirk.

"Like this." Kirk wrapped himself around the other man, one arm under his neck, the other over his side, his top leg thrown over both of Spock's. He pushed his body as close as he could, reaching to cover Spock's chest with both hands, and held Spock with all his strength. Spock clasped his own hands over Kirk's, fixing them in place. "I'm here," Kirk said, perhaps stating the obvious. He pressed his face to the silky hair at the nape of Spock's neck. "I'll always be here."

They lay together in silence, Kirk feeling the rise and fall of Spock's chest under his hands and inhaling the citrus scent of the other man.

Spock cleared his throat. "I asked Doctor McCoy not to inform my father that the disease

might have been reversed at an earlier stage. And my father and I have agreed not to tell my mother what her prognosis is. My father believes it would only add to her anxiety.” Spock drew in an audible breath. “I also had an opportunity to speak with my mother. Contrary to my father’s belief, she is well aware that she is undergoing some kind of change. It both bewilders and frightens her. But she doesn’t want my father to know that she has intervals of dread about the future.”

“They’re each trying to protect the other.”

“Yes.” Spock breathed in, deeper this time. “Jim, there’s something else. I have observed that my father has withdrawn from her in more ways than through their bond, whether by conscious decision or not. He no longer touches her. His attitude toward her resembles less that of a spouse and more that of an adult toward a child.”

Kirk was waiting for more when Spock began to shudder in his arms. Kirk didn’t know if Spock was trembling or weeping or both. It didn’t matter. He felt only his own love for this man coursing through him, filling him. Spock let out a harsh groan. Then he sobbed in earnest. Kirk held on, his eyes shut tight, thankful that Spock could finally allow his human side expression with him. After a time, as Spock’s shaking lessened, Kirk spoke. “I wish I could take your pain away.”

“You are not a touch telepath,” Spock answered, his voice low and unsteady. Kirk was puzzled by this remark. If he were capable of entering Spock’s mind, would he be able to directly share his sorrow, diffusing it somehow?

As Kirk became more aware of his own body pressed against the back of Spock’s, his penis twitched. Again, the crush of anxiety and desire filled him. Gradually, Spock released Kirk’s hands and turned over. Their touching was effortless now, natural. Kirk searched Spock’s eyes as he wiped tears from his face with his thumbs. He settled his arms around Spock’s shoulders.

“Jim.” Spock smiled gently, the skin around his eyes crinkling. He brought his hand up between them and placed two fingers on Kirk’s lips, sliding lightly across the skin. Now it was Kirk’s turn to shudder, a full-body jolt. He closed his eyes. Spock touched an eyelid, skimmed the tips of his fingers along Kirk’s forehead, his temple, soothing, caressing his face. Kirk let out a deep breath.

When he felt Spock’s lips on his, it was the softest, sweetest pressure. Swiftly, Spock moved above him, leaning over him, gently nipping his mouth against Kirk’s until both opened and their tongues met. Delicious, Kirk thought, excited by the wetness and smoky taste. He was half-hard already, his desire causing him to strain up against Spock’s body. Spock, too, was responding, his tongue curling urgently with Kirk’s. Kirk slid his hands over the hipbones to the muscled thighs, the taut ass, light brushing turning to kneading. As his fingers crept into the cleft to find the hidden opening and circle it, he felt Spock’s erection stiffen and grow heavy against his leg. Spock pulled away from their kiss, his breathing ragged.

“No, Jim. Let me, please.” His brow was furrowed, his lips parted.

Kirk had seen this helpless expression before, rarely, in moments of vulnerability. He found it intensely arousing. He peered into Spock’s black eyes and smiled slowly, his most seductive look. He let his arms fall open to either side of the bed. “Whatever you like,” he said.

Spock wasted no time in swirling his tongue down the side of his neck, over his abdomen, and along the groove of his hip, causing Kirk to moan. He looked down at Spock's sleek dark hair, the tips of his ears, his lips on Kirk's skin sending shivers of delight through him. He could hardly believe he was witnessing this, experiencing this.

Then a shudder made him close his eyes and turn his head aside.

Kneeling between Kirk's legs, one hand reaching up to tease a nipple, Spock fondled his balls, gently touching his perineum behind them. Kirk almost cried out, surprised by both Spock's dexterity and his own intense response. And Spock hadn't even touched him yet. At that moment, the warm mouth closed over the head of his cock. The sensation forced Kirk to rear up. Spock followed easily, removing his hand from Kirk's nipple and pinning him down by his hip.

His other hand gripped Kirk's shaft at its base as he began to tongue around the head, over the ridge, then slide his lips down from the head, filling his mouth. Kirk gasped. When he came not long after, jerking in frenzy and calling out Spock's name, he felt Spock suck hard and swallow his semen as if he were hungry for it.

Spock lay over him again, covering Kirk's damp body with his own, holding him as he recovered. Kirk distinctly felt Spock smile against his neck, and he reached up to tangle his fingers in Spock's hair, smiling too. It seemed that Spock was content now, or at least temporarily relieved of the weight of his family's situation. Kirk thought he understood: Spock wanted to feel he had power over some aspect of his life. That he could enjoy a moment of pleasure while the one stable, devoted individual who had supported him his entire life faded away.

Spock rolled off to settle beside him, his eyes closed. Kirk pulled up the coverlet, tucking it around Spock's slender body and his own. How strange—how right—to be cocooned together. Kirk watched Spock sleep, smiling. They could talk about the future in the days that followed.

"We are grateful for your visit," Sarek said, his manner as dry as ever. He stood facing Kirk and Spock in the entrance hall in full Vulcan regalia, his hands folded in front of him.

Although the sun was just appearing at the horizon and the sky outside the living room window was still a deep indigo, Admiral Nogura had communicated with Kirk twice in the past hour to ensure that the *Enterprise* would leave orbit at the agreed-upon hour. Not for the first time, Kirk's irritation flared at Star Fleet bureaucracy and the tendency of its officials to administrate solely by the book.

"I speak for my wife as well as myself," Sarek added. "I only regret that your time was wasted here."

"Hardly, sir," Kirk was quick to say, exchanging glances with Spock. "We discovered the source of her condition. And Spock had the rare opportunity to visit with both of you..." His sentence dribbled off as he remembered why that opportunity was so rare. When they were back on the ship, he would ask Spock whether he'd like to take regular leave on Vulcan in the future. Maybe

they could visit together.

“Father, I would like to say a private farewell to Mother.” Spock turned to Kirk. “It will only take a moment, Jim.” Kirk was aware that Spock had never used his given name in front of Sarek, and he wondered what the older man thought.

When Spock had disappeared down the hallway, Sarek turned his impassive visage back to Kirk. “After your departure, I shall employ an aide to look after my wife. I am too involved in my work to care for her myself.”

“Will she accompany you on ambassadorial missions? I hope that we’ll see the two of you back on the Enterprise one day.”

Sarek stared at him even more coldly, if that was possible. “I haven’t considered the matter. I will do what is logical.”

“Of course, sir.” Kirk sympathized with Sarek, who was incrementally losing his mate of the past forty years. Who was Kirk to judge him for turning away from the worst of it?

“If you’ll excuse me, Sarek, I’m going to find Spock. We have a schedule to keep.”

“Then I shall leave you, as I am expecting an incoming call from the Aldebaran system.” Kirk raised his eyebrows, surprised. “A war has broken out between two planets. They have agreed to a neutral mediator.”

Kirk supposed that Vulcans were popular ambassadors throughout the galaxy, given their dedication to reason. On the other hand, he knew from firsthand experience that warring factions often ignored logic in the heat of their own emotions. He wished Sarek well. As they exchanged the ta’al, Sarek said, “Live long and prosper, Kirk.”

The door at the end of the hall was open, but Kirk stopped short some feet away, reluctant to intrude on Spock’s privacy with his mother. He heard them speaking in low voices. He could imagine Spock sitting on the edge of his mother’s bed and Amanda under the coverlet, her hair messy on the pillow or maybe in a loose braid. He wondered if Spock could feel his own presence nearby, the way he could feel Spock’s and always had. They hadn’t had much chance to talk after waking up in bed together, but it didn’t seem to matter. They knew each other. Speaking, for the most part, was reserved for the details.

Kirk realized the voices had been silent for a while. Maybe Amanda had fallen back asleep. Then, just as he was considering entering, he heard Spock’s distinctive voice utter one word.

“Forget.”

A moment later, Spock appeared at the door, looking a little stunned.

Neither spoke until they had left the house and were crossing streets and plazas close to the transit center. Kirk passed those minutes first deciding whether to ask at all and then pondering how

to ask. He didn't know if there would be another chance.

"Spock, you're under no obligation to tell me, but what did you mean when you told Amanda to forget?"

Spock shuddered, the way an animal shakes itself off and turns to a new activity. "As you are aware, destruction is far simpler to carry out than creation or restoration. After my mother fell back asleep, I melded minds with her. I was able to locate numerous areas that are the basis of her fear and confusion. When she wakes, her awareness and her abilities will be further impaired. At the same time, she will be at peace. Perhaps, because of her nature, even happy."

"You can do that?"

"I have before."

Kirk waited for him to elaborate. When he didn't, Kirk asked, "What about Sarek? Won't he suspect?"

Spock nodded. "My father will understand what has occurred. I cannot guess his reaction. He may be...grateful that I accomplished what I suspect he was not capable of considering. Or he will not forgive me. In that case, we will return to our former lack of communication. Without my mother to mediate."

"Spock..." On the busy streets of Shi Kahr, Kirk restrained the impulse to touch him, even briefly. "You've risked—"

"Jim," Spock said, gripping Kirk's arm and stopping him so that they stood face to face. He spoke calmly. "The risks are over. Logically, *and* emotionally, the benefits outweigh the costs. Whatever happens now."

As he held Spock's gentle gaze, Kirk felt Spock's hand slide down his sleeve to take his own hand. Speechless, he clasped hard. They began walking again.

The View From Earth

Dovya Blacque

The view from the window is beautiful. Flat, barren land giving way to the low swelling peaks of foothills, foothills giving way to mountains. The colors are immense and varied; blue one moment, red the next and umber the next. The sky is as blue as an Argusian sea and as clear. The air as soft and as inflaming as that distant sea is harsh and cool.

Spock sits on the low windowsill, gazing out into the landscape that should have been familiar, would be familiar if other colors were present: red and ochre hills, a vermillion sky, distant mountains a foreboding purple. But this isn't Vulcan. Spock is sitting in the library at Star Fleet's Joshua Tree compound. He is looking out onto the California desert, a desert that was once nearly destroyed but had been reclaimed by conservationists centuries earlier.

It is dawn as Spock looks out onto the alien landscape, dawn with all its dazzling, quickly shifting hues. Distracting in their rapid shifting, the colors have drawn Spock's attention from the antique book he's been slowly reading during his stay. It's one Jim Kirk recommended early in their friendship, a book Spock has only now picked out from the vast library at the facility.

Lost Horizon seemed apropos when he'd seen the title on the shelf. The story of an exceptional man in exceptional circumstances. Hugh Conway was very much like Jim Kirk himself in many ways. Brave. Brilliant. Devoted. Loyal. Determined. Admirable.

But not even the tale of Shangri-La is keeping Spock's mind diverted from the alien desert laid out in front of him.

It's fall in the western hemisphere of Earth and, so, the desert is quite pleasant, especially at such an early hour. At dawn. When the other residents are still asleep and he the only semi-human being awake. Just him and the geckos, the rabbits and the quail.

A snake's trail is visible not far from the retaining wall of the compound, a sign that it had passed the day before as it was still too early in the day for any reptile to be about. Large rabbit tracks cross the snake's path, a lizard suns itself on a large rock. Spock sees all of these things but his mind is elsewhere.

Part of his thoughts are in Shangri-La; part in the cool library. But most of his thoughts are focused on the man with whom he'd made this trek. Not far from San Francisco by aircar, Joshua Tree has always been among Kirk's favorite rock climbing destinations. Spock has always found a reason to be elsewhere whenever his daring friend wanted to climb. But this time... this time is different.

The Enterprise is at the end of her five-year journey and is in spacedock for refitting and refurbishing. Her crew is in the midst of a three-months-long furlough and here he is, finally, with Kirk in the California desert. Though he is no closer to joining his friend in climbing rocks than he has ever been.

It has been a pleasant reprieve – from the reporters and their duties at Star Fleet HQ – at this rough-hewn facility that appears to be borne directly from the rocky ground. A vast portion of the compound is underground but the library is one of the few above-ground rooms. It is Spock's favorite. He has found solitude and his own brand of entertainment – in books mainly – here. And, as Spock is a creature of habit, this is where Kirk finds him every morning.

Spock's thoughts are interrupted by an almost indiscernible shift in the air. He recognizes the step, the scent, the presence of his captain.

“Still working on my book?” Kirk asks softly, the possessive wording purposeful.

“It is an excellent story,” Spock says, not for the first – or last – time.

“I'm pleased that you're pleased. But, really, you can't sleep at all?” The tone is concerned, a well-worn concern. Spock has not slept well since coming to Earth. Kirk's opinion is that, after living aboard Enterprise for twenty-three years, Spock hasn't found his land legs yet.

Spock simply replies, “No.” Kirk's query not unexpected nor necessarily unwelcome.

“At least one of us is catching up on his sleep,” Kirk says wryly, sitting on a low bench beside his friend. “I feel like I've spent every waking hour asleep.”

The humor does not miss its target and Spock turns pleased eyes on his captain. “You require the rest more than any of us. I am pleased that you are... 'catching up.'”

“I'm certainly doing that,” Kirk says. “Does it remind you of home?”

The seeming nonsequitur jars Spock slightly. It is not a question Kirk has asked of him previously.

“The desert,” Kirk elaborates, nodding toward the window. “Does it remind you of Vulcan?”

Spock turns his gaze back to the view and, after a moment, nods. “Perhaps. In some ways, it is very much like Vulcan. In others, drastically different.”

“The colors,” Kirk points out, “are vastly different here than on your homeworld. As I recall,

from what little I saw, it was very flat, too.”

“Of course, there are mountain ranges on Vulcan but none where you and McCoy... visited.”

“I don't mean to bring up unpleasant memories,” Kirk begins, only to be silenced when Spock looks at him.

“They are memories, Jim, and, as such, hold no emotion at all for me.”

“I'm glad,” Kirk admits. “I worry...” He makes an impatient gesture as if to erase what he's said. “Sorry.”

“There is no need to apologize for being concerned for a friend,” Spock tells him. “Your concern is... appreciated.”

“It's more than concern,” Kirk says, standing and moving to Spock's side. At the movement, Spock looks up at Kirk who has raised a hand as though to touch Spock's shoulder, perhaps his hair.

“Jim?”

“You know I brought you here for a reason?”

“I assumed there was something that could not be addressed at Star Fleet,” Spock tells him.

“These past five years, Spock. You've come to mean so much to me. I may think I know the answer to this but I need to ask, I need to hear your response.”

“What is it?” Spock asks, turning so that both feet are on the tiled floor and his attention is riveted on his friend.

“I know you've been offered your own ship,” Kirk begins. “No one deserves it more than you do. And I know this isn't the first time you've been approached on the matter. I'm... humbled to think that you prefer to stay with Enterprise...”

“With you,” Spock interrupts but Kirk doesn't seem to hear him.

“...it's your home... What did you say?”

“With you. I choose to stay with you. Have so chosen for years now.”

“I had wondered why you never took a promotion.”

“Aside from my preference to remain with Enterprise, a captaincy would not give me the time I require for my scientific pursuits. I am content to be where I am, with the duties of first officer and science officer. I am also content to be with you.”

“Spock.”

“You are surprised?” Spock sounds surprised himself.

“Some part of me is protesting your subsuming yourself to science, but part of me is jumping up and down like a little boy who still has his favorite toy to play with.”

An affronted eyebrow rises. “I beg your pardon?”

Kirk laughs at him. “You know exactly what I mean; don't play innocent with me, Mister.”

“I would never do such a thing, I assure you.”

“I'm happy to have you remain with Enterprise, Spock. Happier than I can say. In fact, Nogura's been bugging me about taking promotion to the Admiralty now that I'm an old man of forty.”

“You are, comparatively, extremely young.”

“Compared to whom?”

“Me, for one. I am sixty-eight solar years old.”

“But your life-span is longer.”

“Only if I bond with another Vulcan.”

Kirk looks nonplussed. “Um, I just assumed you would find a Vulcan wife...”

“I have no need for a wife,” Spock says. “I have no need of Vulcan or Vulcans.”

Even though well-versed in Spock Speak, this is a strange conversation for Kirk. “Explain.”

“There is no one for me on Vulcan, Jim. And, even if there were, I would not choose to bond with her. The very idea is... abhorrent to me.”

“But you just said your memories aren't bad of...”

“There is a difference between having no lingering emotional ties to the past and a preference not to repeat the mistakes of the past.”

“Indeed,” Kirk agrees. “But don't you require a bond?”

Spock shifts, leans away from the window, close to Kirk. “I had hoped I had found a companion with whom to share my life.”

Kirk, being extremely quick on the uptake, startles. “Spock,” he breathes, blinking back emotion.

“I thought I had found that companion, Jim.” Spock looks at him, a smile in his burnt umber eyes.

Now Kirk's voice has deserted him. He reaches out, lets his hand touch this time, Spock's shoulder, his cheek, his neck. “Spock,” Kirk breathes again, voice utterly lost.

“I did not intend offense...”

“Oh, Spock! None is taken, trust me.” The backs of Kirk's fingers caress one verdant cheek.

“Then you...”

“Absolutely,” Kirk interrupts. “Absolutely.”

Spock's eyes light up. He reaches for Kirk and Kirk gladly allows himself to be pulled forward so that he stands between Spock's outstretched legs. Strong hands rest at his waist, strong, hot hands.

They look deeply into eyes newly opened by realization, and neither is ever sure who moves first as their lips met briefly. It's Kirk who smiles, moving away just far enough to see the expression of wonder on Spock's face. He then leans in for a deeper, more revelatory kiss, only moving away again once he's too short of breath.

“I was waiting for you, you know,” Kirk says conversationally.

“Indeed?” Spock asks.

“Yes, indeed,” Kirk tells him with a full smile. “I couldn't make the first move, Spock. I didn't know what was acceptable and what wasn't. It's difficult to find accurate information on Vulcan mating rituals.”

“But you did try,” Spock acknowledges.

“Yes, both Bones and I tried. We found a lot of rumors, speculation, nothing concrete. So I decided to work on this issue as I would any unknown.”

“And let me come to you,” Spock says. “I see. And had I not come to you?”

“Well, I had a very elaborate seduction planned out.”

“Indeed?” Spock repeats.

Kirk laughs, lets himself fall forward, catching himself on Spock's shoulders.

“Perhaps you can utilize this seduction at a later date.”

“So it's not needed now?”

“Indeed it is not,” Spock tells him, humor in his dark eyes. And passion. Passion is there as well.

“I'm not taking the promotion,” Kirk informs him.

“I would hope not,” Spock agrees. “Your talents would be wasted if you did accept an admiralty. You belong out there, among the stars.”

“With you,” Kirk interjects.

“With me,” Spock agrees.

They stand, arms wrapped around one another, in the library, in front of the window looking out onto what could have been one of a dozen planets but was the planet, *the* planet that bound them together; Earth, their common factor, one binding force between them.

Outside, a lone figure wanders down one of the many hiking trails. The desert has awakened and now glows yellow in the fall light.

Inside, two figures stand, embracing one another, embracing their future. Creating, yet again, a world that never existed before. Choices have been made. Futures set in motion. Two, becoming one.

At Last

PaintedBird

Walking to the window once more, Jim Kirk looked at the street below. Spock was unusually late, and the roads were terrible. Finding himself fretting over Spock's delayed arrival, he forced himself to move away from the window. If he weren't careful, he would burn dinner. It had to be perfect – all of it – because tonight they were celebrating their anniversary.

Checking, he could see that the casserole was almost ready to pull from the oven. The table, he could see at a glance, was set and ready for their meal. The dinner was all his Vulcan's favorite foods cooked with his own hands.

Dammit, Spock. What a night for you to be late.

But even as the thought went through his mind, he regretted it. Since they were promoted to ground assignments, Spock had often worked late when there was a need or a deadline. The Vulcan was as diligent in his duty on Earth as he had been on their ship. But this was a special occasion, and he wanted everything to be just right for their celebration. For a moment, he wondered if his Vulcan had forgotten the date, but Spock never forgot anything. Going to the player, Jim looked at several of his choices and smiled when he made his decision. This would certainly be appropriate. Keying the player, the music started. A sultry voice began to sing:

“At last my love has come along.
My lonely days are over and life is like a song, oh yeah,
At last the skies above are blue
My heart was wrapped up clover the night I looked at you...”

His mind turned to long ago.

I should never have told Spock to go first, Kirk fretted, his mind only half on the task at hand and the other half on the small, tight ass of his First Officer. What was I thinking? Sure, he's the strongest person in the crew, has some mountaineering skills, and is a good leader for this climb, but why didn't I think of that lean ass right in my face? I'm glad that he's facing the other way because I will likely have a hard-on before long.

The Vulcan secured the line, turned back to look at his captain, and raised a dark eyebrow in question. Kirk sent a quick wish into the cosmos that he didn't already have that hard-on yet, put his best captain's face on, and said, “Everything all right, Mister Spock?”

“Yes, sir,” the Vulcan First Officer responded. “If we can maintain this pace, we should reach the trail that shall lead to the cave we seek to study shortly. Quite interesting results have come from previous studies. It is a pity that the irregularity of the weather systems here complicates full-time research.”

Kirk looked around them. The rest of the landing party milled about uncertainly. Ice and snow were broken only by the presence of massive boulders of granite. There was not a plant or a tree to be

seen. Their winter gear would protect them from the elements, but the frigid temperatures on this planet pushed even the capability of their gear. Personally, he would be glad to return to the ship and, he had to admit, thinking about his First Officer.

The mooning part did get to him. Since his assignment to the Enterprise almost two years ago, he had become increasingly interested in his stoic, logical First Officer. Spock was as brilliant as his reputation claimed, physically stronger than anyone Kirk had ever known, and rational to a fare-the-well. Now he had started having dreams about the long, lean body that so carefully guarded his own. However, despite Kirk's invitations to have dinner with him, play chess, and spend one layover together, Spock seemed unaware of his interest. How he should proceed – if, indeed, he should proceed at all – was a question that rattled in his mind every time he had a free moment.

“Sir, are you prepared to move on?” Spock inquired politely.

He could not focus on his attraction to Spock, especially not at the moment. “I think we’ve got our breath, Spock. Let’s move on.”

The lean Vulcan body turned away. As Spock fixed the next anchor point into the solid rock wall that they were traversing, Kirk took a moment to gaze openly at the lean body and the tight ass trying to imagine what it would be like to lie in a bed with Spock and have a more intimate conversation. *Kirk, his mind told him, you are being ridiculous. It will never happen.*

Jolted out of his reverie, Kirk followed in Spock's footsteps, wishing idly that he'd stayed on the ship instead. The wind was terrible and although the temperature was only marginally below freezing the wind made it feel much colder. He needed to focus on his surroundings, but again and again, instead his eyes followed the strong, trim Vulcan's body in front of him. How could one being be so perfect? Strong, attractive, highly intelligent, and loyal. Perfect. Spock was perfect.

The Vulcan raised his hand as a signal for the climbers to stop. Carefully he checked their location and then gestured that they should go to the right. If he had said anything in that deep voice, the howling winds had carried away his words.

The new path upon which they trod appeared to be surprisingly level and even a bit wider than the trail with which they had climbed the ridge. Looking back over his shoulder, Kirk could see nothing but swirls of snow behind the landing party, and when he turned toward the Vulcan there was snow as well. As he watched Spock, the Vulcan placed another anchor point, ran the line through it, and continued on his way as though he was the only being on this planet.

Spock's focus on a task was extraordinary, but there were times when Kirk found that frustrating. The precision of Spock's actions, the encyclopedic knowledge housed in that magnificent brain, and careful regard he gave to each action made him unique, especially among the human companions on this ship, but there were times like now when it also isolated him from his shipmates. Kirk had realized that he did not like knowing that the Vulcan could tune him out so easily.

What he was going to do about his infatuation with his First Officer Kirk had yet to decide. Spock was less reserved when the two of them were alone together which was encouraging, but as the captain Kirk was concerned about expressing feelings for his officer that he was uncertain were returned. Finding that his feelings were unrequited would be terrible, and even worse would be the

loss of Spock from his staff if the Vulcan became uncomfortable with him over such a statement and requested transfer to another ship.

Yet Kirk could not quit hoping. Something about Spock made the captain feel that his feelings could possibly be returned although certainty about anything the reserved Vulcan might say or do was not strong. The most assuring aspect of their relationship is that Spock sometimes seemed to seek him out or if Kirk was the one who suggested an evening together the Vulcan only declined when he had pressing responsibilities. Was it possible that Spock felt the same?

A half-hour later or so, his attention was drawn to the Vulcan's sudden stop at a point ahead on the trail. Spock gestured for him to stop, slid out of his harness, and slowly approached something only he could see. Turning back to the landing party, he gestured for them to move back, and when Kirk moved forward instead the Vulcan shook his head emphatically, gesturing that he should back up.

Kirk could see no problem. The ice and snow-covered trail appeared the same to him as all the rest. However, within seconds the ground began to tremble. Frantically, the Vulcan gestured for them to move back more. Before he could complete the movement, the trail cracked open under his feet and he desperately grabbed for solid ground. Kirk's heart froze in fear, and he yelled for Spock to run. The Vulcan turned to do so, but he didn't make it.

As the rocks cracked and began to slide down the face of the mountain, Spock's eyes locked with Kirk's for a moment, and Jim Kirk had the sensation that this was good-bye for the Vulcan. He could see the fear in the Vulcan face but sensed that there was also acceptance. The noise grew deafening, and then the slide caught him and Spock disappeared, swept off the trail into the unknown below.

For long minutes, the avalanche of snow and stone kept him locked in place, but finally, the flood of debris ended. Kirk ran the few steps to the edge of the debris field to see where the Vulcan had landed. As he watched, the long body slammed into an ice-covered pond on the icy river below. Stunned, he watched for Spock to return to the top. In moments, a limp body rose through the broken ice. Spock's face and head were bloodied and his eyes closed. As Kirk watched in horror, the still Vulcan body turned face down in the frigid water and did not move.

Throwing caution aside, Kirk ripped off his safety gear and quickly examined the terrain of the slide. Turning to his landing party, he shouted, "Tell the ship to prepare for an emergency beam out. I'm going after Spock."

He could hear the protests behind him and felt an anonymous hand grab at him as he strode to a place high above where the Vulcan lay unconscious, gathered his courage, and pushed off the rocky ledge, hoping beyond hope that he would land in the water, not on a boulder or ice-covered rock shelf. As he fell, Kirk muttered, "Both of us or neither of us, Spock."

Miraculously, he hit the water, preparing as he did to kick off when he hit bottom in order to return to the surface. Gasping for breath as he broke through the shattered ice, he looked around frantically. Spock floated near him, his motionless body pushed and pulled by the movement of the water, and Kirk swam through the frigid water, determined to keep him from drowning. When he reached the Vulcan, the captain focused on moving Spock's face out of the water and getting his body out so that he could breathe. Dragging the still, cooling body toward solid ground, Kirk

realized that the Vulcan's winter suit had been compromised and water had partially filled it. That would make his Vulcan friend even heavier to remove from the water, but Kirk crawled out of the pond, grabbed handfuls of the damaged cold weather uniform, and dragged Spock from the water.

Vulcan cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Why did he not know how to do Vulcan CPR? He had a Vulcan First Officer for god's sake! Determined not to quit, he turned Spock to his side, watched water gush from his open mouth, and then began CPR as though the Vulcan was human. Strong breaths into the sealed mouth. Ten chest compressions. More strong breaths into the mouth. More chest compressions. No, he realized, Spock's heart was in a different location. Quickly he adjusted his efforts to compress the correct area, the lower rib cage, instead. He kept on and on, periodically stopping to see if Spock was breathing. He was not.

Finally, there was a shudder of movement in the lean body. Spock gasped, struggling to turn to his side, and coughed and vomited vast amounts of frigid water onto the snow beside him. Again and again, he ejected the murderous liquid from his lungs and stomach until he lay, spent, on the numbing surface. For a moment he lay prone, eyes closed and no apparent breathing, and a cold wave of fear swept over his human companion who was uncertain whether this was a last, valiant effort at life or the convulsions of a dying Vulcan.

When Spock did not open his eyes or speak, Kirk's heart broke. His friend and a fellow officer had died. He had not saved him. How could he have failed? He lay prone over the still body and began to weep from exhaustion and loss. Spock was dead.

But in the midst of his heartbreak, Kirk felt a cold, long-fingered hand press against the back of his neck. He opened his eyes to see the Vulcan looking up at him, his gaze confused.

"You're alive," he murmured softly as he kissed the Vulcan lips for the first time.

"Obviously," Spock responded as soon as his mouth was freed. "You have a most interesting means of resuscitation, Captain."

Flushing with uncertainty, Kirk stammered, "I thought you were dead. I..."

Long fingers brushed his psi points, and Spock coughed up even more fluid before he said, "I, too, have wondered about your affection, Jim. Now I know..."

Finally, someone pushed him aside, but Kirk fought to get back into position to continue their dialogue until he realized that Leonard McCoy, delayed by the need to get into a frigid weather suit, had arrived to help. Exhausted by panic, Kirk lay down in the snow, hoping to rest. However, that was not to be. Strong arms lifted him up, and before he could protest he was beamed away.

Bundled into a warming blanket, Kirk was rushed to Sickbay, his desperate questions about Spock's condition unanswered. Finally, exhaustion caught up with him, and he went to sleep, the frantic scene on the planet's surface playing through his mind over and over again.

*I found a dream that I could speak to
A dream that I can call my own
I found a thrill to press my cheek to
A thrill that I have never known.*

He heard someone fumbling at the door and rushed to open it. There was Spock, nose green from cold, wet, and snow-covered. The dark Vulcan eyes softened when his husband opened the door.

“You’re late! Where have you been? I was worried,” Kirk chided.

Spock proffered a box that the human recognized as a carry-out dish from his favorite restaurant. “I went to get this for you since it is your favorite. However, the snow has caused most public transportation to be closed, so I had to walk.”

“That T’Ang’s is on the other side of town!”

“Yes, I was forced to walk when the transportation system closed down.”

His breath caught. Jim knew how much his love hated cold weather. For Spock to go traipsing around in this mess was a special and very dear gesture so he leaned in to give his spouse a gentle kiss of appreciation. Spock’s lips were icy cold.

“That was so...so wonderful for you to do. Thank you,” Jim breathed softly.

Spock’s eyebrow predictably lifted in amusement and affection, but he said nothing. After all, his mouth was thoroughly sealed by a kiss. His cold arms encircled his t’hy’la and they stood there for long moments in perfect harmony.

Beep, beep, beep!

“I believe our dinner is ready,” Spock observed softly.

“I don’t want to move.”

“Yes, I know, Jim, but I am very hungry.”

Jim grasped the tip of a bright green ear with his warm mouth and nipped it softly. “Are you certain?”

“You never fight fairly, do you?”

Jim thought again of the memory that had just passed through his mind, the incident that had finally caused the two of them to express their feelings after he had almost lost Spock. “No,” he said with determination, “and I never will.”

“Dinner is burning.”

“We’ll turn the heat off and heat up what you brought later.”

Spock sighed softly. “Very well.”

As he turned to walk toward their bedroom, Jim was quite certain that he heard his love murmur,

“At last!”

Sands of Vulcan

sunshine

The distress call from Vulcan came on the day that James Kirk took the Kobayashi Maru test an unprecedented third time. It was the day when many of my foundational beliefs would be shaken. My beliefs about my duties as a Vulcan, my duty to Star Fleet, and about one brash young man who I grew to respect. But before I give my account in full of the events as they took place, I should give some context.

My name is S'chn T'gai Spock, and I am a citizen of Vulcan-that-was and a member of the Federation's Star Fleet Command. I have long admired Star Fleet. Even before I gave serious consideration to embracing my human heritage and joining their ranks, I thought their history of scientific study, intergalactic diplomacy, and exploration to be laudable. Given the bigotry made evident to me in the Vulcan Science Academy, joining Star Fleet was a natural choice for my career.

It was at Star Fleet Academy that I first met James Kirk. Perhaps I should explain first that I had been employed by the Academy for several years by that point, primarily as a Vulcan language instructor, but also in the development of the program that served as the test called the Kobayashi Maru. The point of the trial was to place the command-track student in a no-win scenario, in order that they might experience fear and in so doing, still make the correct decision for the well-being of their crew. Such a situation is one that all Star Fleet captains might eventually face, and James T. Kirk, being a student in the command track was no exception. What made him exceptional was that he cheated.

I was in the observation room for the test that day, along with several other Star Fleet officials. I was not in the habit of observing test takers but James Kirk had elected for some unknown reason to take the test a third time. While taking the test an unlimited number of times was permitted. Taking the test a second time was almost unheard of, as all students understood that the test was not a winnable confrontation. But this student, this James Kirk, wanted to take the test that I had programmed a third time. That in and of itself was noteworthy. I am not ashamed to say I was surprised to find he did not seem to be taking it seriously.

"Yeah, don't worry about it," Kirk answered his crewmate lackadaisically.

I blinked as I tried to process the meaning of his attitude.

"Did he just say don't worry about it?" one of the instructors in the observation room asked.

I looked on, stymied by the level of casual disregard Kirk displayed as my well-scripted program came crashing down around me. The shields were not up. How had he done it? While a faint annoyance pricked at the back of my consciousness, I recall that I felt mostly curiosity toward the cadet, however inappropriate his attitude and however morally deficient his actions.

"How the hell did that kid beat your test?" one of my superiors demanded of me, his brow creased in obvious consternation.

"I do not know," was all I could answer, as I mulled over the myriad possibilities for hacking into the system. It was only later when I filed my complaint of Kirk's actions—a mere formality—that I realized I did also feel annoyance at the cadet. Not that he had beaten me; his intelligence was laudable. But much like the Vulcan Science Academy, I realized, the morally deficient were everywhere, and there was to be no bastion of moral integrity to be found anywhere in the galaxy.

Not only did Kirk disrespect the moral code upon which Star Fleet Academy was founded, but also he failed more importantly to discern the meaning of the test. Such a mistake in a command-track student should, at the very least disqualify them from the desired position. I would have thought no more of the matter for any other student. But it had been made clear to me who exactly Cadet Kirk was—the son of George Kirk, after whom the *Kobayashi Maru* was named. That James could fail to comprehend the valor of his own father's sacrifice stunned me. As much friction as lies between my own father and myself, I have never failed to comprehend the social risk he took in marrying my mother, nor do I lack a proper respect for the man's myriad accomplishments. Respect for one's ancestors who have come before is at the heart of Vulcan, and I had assumed human culture.

In light of the disrespect teenage humans regularly display to their parents perhaps it may seem my viewpoint is egregiously naive. But never had I seen such lack of regard for an undeniable hero. I found myself baffled by James Kirk's motivations—why even join Star Fleet in light of such a world view? Meditation on the matter would have to wait.

There was a distress call from Vulcan.

My primary thoughts were on my duties as a Star Fleet officer; where to go, crew assignments, protocols, and procedures. I was well trained and knew my responsibilities well. But I have found I am capable of carrying multiple threads of thought at once, and I did not try to curb my speculation as to what was happening on my home planet. A natural disaster seemed most likely, though to have no early warning of such an event in this era was astonishing. Attack by an alien nation seemed equally unlikely given the current political climate. I struggled to calculate the probabilities as I boarded, while a third thread in my mind spun out: when had I last spoken with my mother? What was the last news I had read of my homeworld? How disconnected had I allowed myself to become? These thoughts, proving unhelpful, were suppressed.

When Kirk burst onto the bridge my incredulity and annoyance echoed that of Captain Pike as he demanded answers for the interruption. A spacial anomaly resembling a lightning storm was both natural disaster and scientific curiosity but was not the attack the suspended cadet accused it of. At first all I could think was that he was wasting my time. My homeland, my mother, was under threat, and this morally deficient miscreant had forced his way aboard the *Enterprise*, and he was wasting everyone's time.

Loathe as I was to listen to his words, I will admit now as I have indicated before: the miscreant was intelligent. His intelligence, from what I had seen thus far, was unmatched among his peers. The creeping realization that he was correct—that Vulcan was under Romulan attack—sunk into my skin and chilled me to the bone.

This was not a rescue mission. This was a battleground.

Surak save us, was my first thought when we pulled out of warp. In my years of experience with Star Fleet, nothing had prepared me for the chaos that assaulted us as we entered the battleground. The debris I could see through the view screen alone was enough to nearly overwhelm my cognitive processes.

The shields were up. Information was being relayed at a rapid rate. I was the First Officer of the Enterprise but I felt like a cadet as I suppressed my physiological response to the best of my ability and tried to concentrate. Klaxons wailed, the red light of red alert bathed the bridge in the colors of my sun, and I struggled to see Vulcan through the attack. The ship shuddered and I braced for another hit. The turbulence far exceeded that of any spacial anomaly I had encountered. I was unprepared for battle.

The Romulan ship, when it emerged on the viewscreen, was a monolith, unlike any vessel I had seen before, and from the radio silence and volume of debris, it seemed we were the only survivors meant to confront it. Damage reports washed over me as the Romulans locked their torpedoes, and I clung to the directions given to me by my commanding officer.

He was not to lead me for much longer. In spite of my objections, Commander Pike had abandoned us all and left me in charge of the disaster. Not only that, but Kirk had gone from academic probation to First Officer. Later, when there was time, I would question my entire understanding of the command structure of Star Fleet. As it was, it was the least of my problems.

No help was to come from Star Fleet Command, given the interference in our communications equipment. At least Pike had directed me in this. Kirk and two others were to destroy the equipment the Romulans were using to interfere with our communications and transporters. From there, Star Fleet Command could tell me what to do, or I was to retreat. So armed with these directives, I thought I might survive my first act of captaincy, but I was yet anxious to find out what that drill was doing to my planet. When Ensign Chekov informed me of the singularity, the entire axis of my responsibilities shifted in an instant.

My first responsibility to an entire people, of any species that were about to face such devastation, was to try and get word to them in time. To communicate the immediate evacuation of the planet, in spite of the battleground. To save what I could. And to preserve what I could of the heart of the Vulcan culture. I will admit that even under the best of circumstances, it would be impossible for me to separate my objective duties with those personal bonds I felt with Vulcan kind, as well as those even closer attachments to my family. My duty, I was lucky to find, could serve all three, as I made my desperate voyage to the katric ark, to evacuate the Vulcan High Council.

I would like to believe I was thinking as clearly as possible in those final frantic moments when time was of the essence, and we teetered on the brink of such devastation I could barely comprehend. But I cannot say for certain. My ancestral bonds hummed with anxious energy not my own, and my personal knowledge of the truth of the situation filled me with a blind panic I was challenged to suppress, even on a physiological level. I required clear thinking, but I stood to benefit from the burst of adrenaline. And driving these careful calculations was the pressing need to go, go, go.

I cleared Kirk and the other one from the transporter pad, only vaguely noting their success. It did not matter. Not yet. Everything was secondary to my mission.

The ground was heaving, and the air was afire. This area of Vulcan had once been home to me, and I was shocked to see it so transformed. Through the chaos I knew was no earthquake, I located the ark and strained myself to reach it in time. I was aware of the wrenching and screaming of bonds, and I dared not acknowledge the pain or its cause, not with so much at stake, and so little time.

My father in front. The Vulcan Council, dropping like flies. My mother. My mother. The ground heaved. Mother.

I do not recall thinking as I leaped into the void, my hand straining to reach her. I recall mostly the look in her eyes, of wordless desperation. Behind me, there was screaming. Then the blinding shimmer of the transporter.

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I stood in shock, staring out at the sands of Vulcan that stretched before me. I was on Mount Seleya, the katric ark at my back, and Eridani beat down upon me. All was stillness and silence, but for the wind in the mountains and the gentle scratching of blown sand. My mind was locked on the visage of my mother, falling. The pain of severance of so many ancestral bonds still ached, like a deep, raw wound inside of me, yet it also felt muted in some way I could not describe, even to myself.

What had happened? Where was the Enterprise? Where was the maniac, Nero? Where was the chaos I had seen around me, only moments before?

I looked out across the desert. Where was ShiKahr? I should have been able to see the capital city from where I stood, as I had seen it many times before. The tall spires of buildings were gone. My mind went to the earthquake, the destruction raised by Nero, but the land was flat and unblemished. I couldn't make sense of it, and for a moment, I worried I had suffered some sort of mental break.

A scattering of rocks behind me caught my attention, and as I turned, I saw that infuriating cadet, now my first officer. "Kirk," I said flatly. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" he asked. Kirk wiped the grime from his face with the edge of his uniform, but it didn't help. He looked bewildered and breathless, and more than a little annoyed. "What the hell were you thinking transporting down to the surface on your own?" he shouted. "I followed you, not that you noticed." He glowered and looked around us, brow furrowed. "Where the hell are we?" he demanded as if I should know.

I was the captain. It was my job to know. And I was Vulcan. "We appear to be on Vulcan," I answered him because I was fairly certain of that. Mount Seleya rose at our backs, though I could no longer see the ornate carvings of the entrance to the katric ark, though I thought I could see an indication of an entrance to a cave. I squinted through the midday sun at the landscape down below, but still saw no indications of civilization.

"Then where is everybody?" Kirk demanded as he carefully lowered himself down the uneven terrain. "Where's the Romulan ship?"

"I do not know," I admitted. I pressed my combadge. "Spock to Enterprise," I tried and was met with silence. "Enterprise, do you read me?" Behind my shoulder, I heard Kirk doing the same, and suppressed my irritation. It was only logical that we both make an attempt, in case one of our badges had been damaged.

"Nothing," Kirk stated the obvious.

"So it would seem," I agreed. My thinking felt sluggish, as I struggled to process this turn of events. Where were we, and what were my duties now? I'd been the First Officer of the Enterprise, and my duty was to Star Fleet, and my captain. I was on a rescue mission to Vulcan.

The rescue mission had become a battleground. I was Captain of the Enterprise. I had responsibilities to my crew. To Star Fleet. To my people.

Vulcan was about to be destroyed, an immovable and incomprehensible fact. My duty was to my people. To my family.

Now what? I dwelled on that question for an inordinate amount of time, though from an outside perspective, it was for only moments. I started up Mount Seleya once more, making toward what used to be the entrance to the katric ark.

"Hey!" Kirk shouted, scrambling over the rough terrain after me, puffing with exertion. His human physiology was ill-suited to the increased gravity and the Vulcan sun, especially in the heat of the day, and he clearly was unused to such terrain. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

I am not proud that I wanted to abandon him, rather than be saddled with the responsibility for his welfare. He was brash and irksome, and his disadvantages would burden us both. But he was my first officer, and even basic decency demanded that I help him. My investigation of the ark would serve a dual purpose.

"We should get to that cave," I said, pointing, and Kirk squinted up at the mountain, eyes slit against the sun. He roughly wiped sweat from his brow. "It will offer shelter from the elements and from there we can plan our next move," I explained, uncertain whether Kirk yet realized that the cave was not as it had been.

"Right," he mumbled. "Good idea."

Step by painstaking step, we made our way up.

There was nothing of the Hall of Ancient Thought. The cave was only a cave. Kirk sat against the cool stone, sweating, and puffing, as I made my examination. The walls were slick in the back. That was good. We would need water. Kirk perhaps more than me. By now, I had shifted gears into a desert survival scenario, and I reviewed my Star Fleet training alongside the experience of my kahswan. They were very different training scenarios, and I would have to strike a balance between both

if we were both to survive. And then... what? I had the uncanny suspicion, however improbable that we had somehow journeyed into Vulcan's past. Already I was forming hypotheses on how the event might have occurred, but survival would come before explanation.

In Star Fleet, all cadets who plan to embark on exploratory missions, or missions involving desert planets, are required to go through two weeks of desert training. Even having come from a desert planet myself I had been required to participate, in order that I might learn the Star Fleet specific protocols for such a desert survival scenario. The main thrust of the exercise was to wait. A human being could not survive in the extreme heat of the desert for long without supplies. Given a lack of supplies, the best course of action was to conserve both supplies and energy, and await a rescue from some other contingent of Star Fleet that would recognize a lack of check-in and send a rescue party in response.

On Vulcan, a child's kahs-wan or coming of age was very different. At the age of eight, I had spent ten days in the heat of Vulcan's Forge, very close to where we were now, practicing survival. But a child in his kahs-wan was not meant merely to wait for rescue, he was meant to practice the skills of his ancestors that they might not be lost. I could navigate by sun and stars. I could find shelter, food, and water. I knew which animals to avoid, and which to eat, though my people preferred to keep a vegetarian diet outside of the kahs-wan, or other times where meat was needed for survival. Were I alone in the desert sands of Vulcan's distant past, it was possible I could maintain myself indefinitely, though not in any comfort. But Kirk would need more water, perhaps different food. He would need less heat, and more rest, and could contribute less than I could in terms of energy. The weight of our long term survival began to settle within me.

"So did we time travel or what?" Kirk interrupted my thoughts, cutting straight to the point.

I hadn't realized he'd worked it out himself, though I should not have been surprised. His intelligence was one of his key qualities, alongside his grating personality. "That is my current hypothesis," I agreed.

"Huh," Kirk said, taking that in and seeming to mull it over. "So how do we get back?"

Getting back had hardly occurred to me, and I shared with Kirk my thoughts on the matter. "With no understanding of how or why the event took place, and without any modern technology at our convenience, I do not believe it is possible for us to return to our own timeline under our own power."

"What?" Kirk asked as he sat up against the wall a little straighter, clearly looking for an argument but still too exhausted to do more than prop himself up. "I am not staying on ancient Vulcan the rest of my life," he said resolutely. "You can't expect us to stay here," he went on, as if the decision were within my power. "Spock. We've got to get some supplies and then figure out how to get out of here."

"I do not believe we have much choice," I answered him.

"Like hell!" Kirk argued. "You just want to stay here because it's better than the alternative," he said viciously. I blinked at him and felt a pain in my side at the reminder of what was to become of my planet. I did not believe I had envisioned remaining on Vulcan because of avoidance of that terrible fate, but the reminder stung nonetheless.

"Spock," Kirk said more softly, but I had had enough of his illogical refutation of reality. I made my way to the entrance of the cave, leaving him behind in the cool safety of the shelter. He shouted after me, but though the Vulcan sun was hot, I needed some space. I needed to meditate. Far too much had happened, and too much was yet to come.

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My uniform was designed with a temperate climate in mind or the standard environmental settings of a Star Fleet vessel. I wanted a robe, the traditional dress of my people, and I was concerned how I would acquire one long term. My clothing was too warm and too skin tight, but I was loathe to try and fashion something else out of it, lest I only make it less effective clothing without solving my problem. In ancient times, the robes would have been woven from the hair of a sehlat, and we hardly had the time or apparatus to find such an animal, tame it, grow food for it and feed it, shear it, spin its fur, fashion a loom, weave it and so many other steps involved in the making of cloth.

A tribal community would be able to offer such technology, but finding one could be difficult and perilous. In fact, I was more concerned about the possibility of a tribe finding us. My people would not yet have embraced Surak, and what I knew of Vulcan history was savage and brutal. Outsiders were unlikely to be welcomed, and Kirk's alien appearance and poor constitution would not serve us well in making the attempt. Perhaps I could brush off my modern Vulcan dialect as having come from another tribe, from some distant part of the planet, but even my own narrow understanding of our history gave me real concern at my ability to fake fitting in, even if Kirk were not an issue.

The hot wind blew sand in my face as I sat on the flat stone in deep thought, and my second eyelids shuttered my eyes against the grains of sand and glare of the sun without my conscious volition. It had been some time since I had had to recall the lessons of my *kahs-wan*, and now I was grateful for the training, though I had been ambivalent at the time.

"There you are," Kirk said, settling himself down beside me on the rock. I suppressed a sigh. After an hour in meditation, I felt more settled, though no more clear about our path. And I still had not dared touch my grief and confusion over Nero. I did not know how to fit the loss of my planet and family in with the existence of the planet now. I glanced over and saw that Kirk was less flushed than before, and that he'd stripped his undershirt to wear atop his head. It was wise, though not as affective as a robe. I pushed the thought aside, as I could not change it.

Kirk blew out a long breath. "So what's next?" he asked me. "I'm thinking water."

"The walls of the cavern toward the back are moist."

"Well that's awkward as fuck," Kirk said dryly. "There's not even a trickle there. We'll have to lick the walls or try and soak a cloth in and suck on that."

"Without proper equipment, I see little alternative."

"What about the cacti?" Kirk asked.

I knew to what he was referring. In Star Fleet training, they explain that water can be acquired through many earth cacti. It was not quite so simple here. "There is a variety of succulent from which we might acquire moisture," I explained to him. "Though I have seen none here. That," I pointed, "will not suffice, and dealing with the fine spines can prove dangerous. And that," here I pointed to another plant in the distance, "I do not recognize at all. While I have studied some of the flora and fauna of my planet's past, there is certain to be large variety with which I am unfamiliar."

"Right," Kirk answered, deflating. He drummed his fingers with nervous energy. "So. Cave water. Is there anything to eat?" he asked next.

"I am uncertain about the small lizards and arthropods I have spotted in the last hour," I confessed. "I could hunt for larger game at night, though it would prove dangerous. But the meat of a le-matya would feed us for several days, and could be dried in the sun. I am loathe to use my phaser too frequently, but until we can find wood or bone, it will be difficult to fashion a weapon. Until we find wood or dung, it will be difficult to build a fire."

"I thought Vulcan didn't have wood," Kirk remarked.

"It does not have much," I said, and left it at that. We could both see far from our perch atop the mountain, and there was no evidence of trees. They would be few, and near the coast, another thought that plagued my mind.

"Okay. So we've covered water, food, shelter, and clothing. Tell me what to do and I'll help you with the food source tonight."

I glanced at him, and confirmed what I thought I'd seen before. "You've lost your phaser. You would only prove a hazard. I will go."

"Spock. I'm not letting you go out into the dark and dangerous desert alone at night. I'll at least keep watch or something. Provide a distraction. Throw a rock at it."

"I would not recommend that. Le-matya's are fast and have excellent night vision. I'll warm one of the rocks in the cave for your heat and hunt alone."

"Spock -"

"I am the captain!" I interrupted. I was embarrassed to display such emotion but I was irritated in having such a basic plan questioned.

Kirk threw up his hands in acquiescence, though I doubted that would be the end of the discussion. "So we wait," Kirk said.

"That is Star Fleet protocol," I agreed.

"But?" Kirk asked, sensing I had not shared my full thoughts on the matter.

"There is no reason to anticipate rescue," I explained again. "We must consider our options long term. We have no supplies, nor the security of a community. Mount Seleya affords us shelter and some food, but Lake Yuron would provide water, a more temperate climate, better conditions for agriculture, and perhaps community."

"You think there are others living there, that could help us."

I hesitated. "Perhaps," I said, though I did not yet share my concern that such a community would be far more likely to harm us than help us. However, we faced the same possibility on the mountain. We would not be the only people to seek such an obvious cave as shelter or a source of water. Wherever we went, the presence of others would be a constant concern.

"So you think we should go to this Lake Yuron."

"It is a consideration," I corrected, for I had decided nothing.

"Where is it?" Kirk asked, squinting at the horizon and peering around.

I pointed. "The large open expanse at the base of Seleya is Vulcan's Forge," I explained. "We would have to cross the Forge, to the valley that runs between those two mountains there. That is where ShiKahr used to lie. Lake Yuron is on the far end of ShiKahr."

Kirk blinked. "ShiKahr. That's the capital isn't it? Do you think anyone's living there now?"

"I am uncertain," I admitted. "Without more evidence, I find it difficult to speculate how far into the past we have been thrown, if indeed that is what has occurred to us at all. In addition, my knowledge of Vulcan's past is broad and shallow. My focus has always been on the sciences, not anthropology." I felt deficient in admitting as much, but there had never been need for me to study my planet's history in such depth. Some ancient peoples had once lived in the area now known as ShiKahr, this I knew. But when? And how many? I struggled to recall whether I'd ever even learned that information at all.

"How long would it take to get to Lake Yuron and check the place out?"

"I believe I could make the journey in three," I told him, already calculating the distances and imagining survival scenarios.

Kirk grunted. "And what about with me along?"

"You would not go," I clarified. "You would need to remain behind, at least at first, as we have no vessels with which to carry water. As a Vulcan, I could go without for some time."

"Like hell you're going alone," Kirk argued. "I think we should stay here."

"I have not yet decided."

"Well I've decided. We're staying here."

"You are not the captain," I argued back.

"Look around, Spock! There's no *Enterprise* out here. You're no longer the captain."

"Star Fleet protocol suggests --"

"Star Fleet protocol my ass! We shouldn't leave the place of the incident anyhow. We don't know if that would affect rescue."

"Why do you insist upon illogically clinging to the idea of a rescue?" I demanded, my tenuous patience at its end.

"Because I don't believe in no win scenarios!" Kirk shot back. "I thought I made that perfectly clear at my hearing, or have you forgotten that conveniently?" he asked with irritation. I had not known that he was harboring resentment for his disciplinary hearing, although I was aware that he did not believe in a no win scenario. It was evident in his every action, and I could not decide whether his determination was laudible or folly.

"Besides," Kirk went on, "why the hell do you think we wouldn't be rescued?" he asked. "We've been here less than a day. Christ. At least give them time to figure out what happened to us. Think about it from their perspective."

"The members of the *Enterprise* are in a battle zone, against an alien hostile. The planet of Vulcan is imploding upon itself. Immediate evacuation is required or all will be destroyed," I recited woodenly. "There will be no time for rescue, nor speculation as to our whereabouts. The next in command will assume control of the *Enterprise* and they will contact Star Fleet Command."

"You really are a glass half empty kind of guy."

"I am a realist. We are here now. *Kaiidth*. We must do what we can with what is."

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I was injured, but not badly. I had strained something in my right side, and something in my left knee in my pursuit of the *le-matya*, and I'd sustained several bruises and scrapes from the necessity of leaping rock to rock in the black of night. Kirk was unhappy at my state but the *le-matya* was dead and Kirk had stayed in the cave. After two days of only our meagre water supply, we were glad of the meat, but our one phaser was running low on charge and we huddled together for warmth as we preserved it. Once I could fashion weapons out of the bones of the *le-matya*, we might risk using the phaser on the rocks one more night, but until we could secure wood there would be no fire.

Without the light of a fire, my small wounds and the gutting of the *le-matya* would wait until dawn. I left the meat in the cool desert air and tried to gather what rest I could, as preparing the carcass was a gruesome process and we had no water or sonics with which to wash.

At the first glimmers of dawn, I arose and made my way to the mouth of the cave. Kirk was close behind me. I had thought to allow him to rest, but the rock was uncomfortable and the air was still chill from the desert night. We could see our breath as we chafed our hands and got out our little utility knives, not ideal for gutting an animal as large as a small cow, but they would have to do.

At least Kirk was familiar with the process, as he'd no doubt been instructed on the basics in his field training, though it was clear to me he had little experience as he heaved and gagged several times. The waste products I threw far out on the rocks for the other creatures to consume, or for the sun to bake into dust with time. The blood we strove to collect in a depression in the rocks, though whether or not we could bake it into a cake by sun without it spoiling was an experiment yet to try.

The organs and muscle likewise were prepared as best we could, laying some out to bake in the heat of day, while other pieces we packed behind rocks in the back of our cave to attempt to keep cool, uncertain which strategy would be more beneficial. A fire would be ideal, but we still of course lacked in wood. Then, while our meat was still unspoiled, we consumed a good portion of it raw, for we were in need of nutrients and it would take days for the meat to dry into a jerky. Even then, whatever parasites the meat contained might remain. I was confident in my Vulcan constitution and having had some exposure to the microbiome of my home world, but I worried for what the food might do to Kirk.

My worries were well founded judging by the sounds of Kirk's toilet behind some rocks, an hour later. He lost a good deal of water in the process, and seemed weak, though there was no point in either of us mentioning the incident, as there was nothing that could be done. As time ticked by, my determination to set out for Lake Yuron only increased. In spite of Kirk's objections, I decided to set out in two more days. By then I would have had time to fashion some tools out of the bones of the le-matya, and Kirk would have the dried skin to use for warmth.

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"I'm coming with you."

It was the same argument as before. "You're weak," I told him. "You should stay in the cave."

"And what, you'll bring back wood? What good is that if you have to be gone six days at a time to get it? We need a better location."

"We don't yet have a way to transport the water."

"Wrong," he argued back. "I've been thinking about that. We can form water skins from the skin of the le matya, and waterproof the seams with glue made of sinew."

"We'd need a fire to make the glue," I argued, though I was reluctantly impressed that he had considered the water skins. I had considered it myself for the trip to Lake Yuron; going without water for three days was not ideal. But the amount of work and time needed to fashion the skins seemed an unnecessary expense when I could set out immediately and make it to the lake sooner.

"We can make a fire. I think," he said. "If we can find flint in the cave or surrounding area, we can use it with our knives with the *le-matya's* hair for tinder. It's light and it won't burn long but it should work, and if we have long enough we can throw some of the meat on the coals too to try and preserve it."

Kirk was right of course, and his intelligence continued to impress me, though it annoyed me in this circumstance as well. I did not relish the idea of trying to get Kirk across The Forge alive. It was daunting enough a task for a Vulcan. But I ceded to the logic of his suggestion, knowing that if I did not he'd continue with his plan anyway, and follow me. Alone on The Forge he would be vulnerable, and I could admit that as annoying as I found him, I was reluctant to lose Kirk. I was reluctant even to abandon him for the better part of a week, lest something happen to him while he was alone. So we set about his plan, instead of my own. In two more days, we would attempt to cross The Forge.

The Forge is hot. By Vulcan standards it is hot. The sun beats down upon it relentlessly, and it is not close enough to any mountains or hills to provide shade. The earth is cracked from the arid air and the ground scoured smooth in places from the constant scratch of wind blown sand. The dust on the wind and the oppressive heat make it difficult to breathe. The lack of large rocks or vegetation by which one might take some meagre shelter make the entire experience brutal. Were I alone, I would attempt to cross The Forge in a day, pressing through dangerously high heat during the day and the exposure to predators at night in order to make the valley as quickly as possible, where I could rest and recuperate myself.

With Kirk, expediency was not possible. Crossing The Forge took us two and a half painstaking days. We travelled at dawn and dusk and through the chill and darkness of night, as Kirk gripped my arm for support and guidance. The heat of the day was brutal on him, even lying still under partial cover of the *le-matya* hide. I was certain he was suffering from heat exhaustion, but the only way out was through.

"You said three days," Kirk said breathlessly as we finally made it to the shelter of a mountain, one of the two that framed *ShiKahr*. He leaned against the hot rock, sitting in the dirt as he caught his breath and wiped more sweat from his brow. I was glad he was sweating. It meant he wasn't dangerously dehydrated yet.

"That was assuming I went on my own and crossed The Forge in one," I corrected.

"Fuck," he muttered with a tired grimace.

I scanned the mountains more closely, worried about the pockmarks and holes I saw high up. They might be only natural caverns, but I had my suspicions that someone lived there, that they might have seen us coming for days, could see us now. The valley of *ShiKahr* was wide enough to hold a city, but it was narrow enough to make me uneasy at the prospect of tribal peoples surrounding us while there. I debated over the merits of walking the valley toward the middle. There would be less shelter. We would be exposed. But up against the mountainside, we'd have little warning of attack, and no chance of defending ourselves. Then again, we would have more potential places in which to hide, and by the flush to Kirk's skin I doubted whether he could handle more exposure to the sun.

"Why the fuck did I think this was a good idea again?" Kirk asked. I had no idea whether he meant it rhetorically. "We should have just stayed in the cave and lived off of le-matyas."

I had considered that possibility myself, given how much difficulty Kirk had had with The Forge. The possibility of returning to Mount Seleya seemed remote at the moment. The sun was steadily creeping overhead as the morning cool waned, but I wanted to make some progress in the valley before our rest.

"We should keep going," I said as I scanned the holes high in the mountainside.

"Spock, it's the middle of the day," Kirk complained, and seemed disinclined to rise. Perhaps he could not. I debated once more the wisdom in leaving him behind, in a sheltered place, to finish out my reconnaissance alone. "We'll go again at dusk. Just... sit down, would you? Meditate or something. You're making me nervous."

"You would be wise to be nervous," I told him as I continued to gaze up and around us. "I am concerned we may be watched."

"What?" Kirk asked, blinking alertness through the fog of his exhaustion. He looked around, evidently trying to see whatever it was I could see. "Where?" he asked seriously, his hand reaching to grasp the short bone spear he had strapped to his belt.

"I am uncertain," I confessed. "Perhaps it is simple fancy, but something about the nature of the caverns on these mountainsides has made me uneasy. These mountains may very well be inhabited."

Kirk sat up and observed the mountainside with new eyes. "What do you want to do?" he asked me. I was a little surprised he'd ask, considering how belligerent he was at other times.

"We go forward," I said. "We should stick to our plan." Changing plans continually in a survival scenario I knew was madness. A sound mind was more important than a sound body, and it was all too easy to reconsider and diverge from the plan again and again.

Kirk nodded, accepting my direction. "Okay," he agreed. "And we stick to the shade, travel mostly at night," he said. "I need to ration my sweat or this is going to be a really short trip. I've already lost too much in The Forge, even only travelling at night."

"Agreed."

"Until then, what? Keep alert? Hope for the best?" he asked, fingering his spear nervously. I knew it would be useless to him if he faced even one Vulcan. It was more suited for use against arachnids and small reptiles than for combat.

"We keep alert," I agreed, and settled in to wait for evening. I would not waste my efforts on hope.

Crossing *ShiKabr* was relatively easy after The Forge. We still travelled in the dark of night. I still feared le-matyas and sehlat, and even more than those large predators was wary of snakes and arachnids whose venom could be deadly, and who were small enough to be missed. I was never more thankful for my Star Fleet issued boots; though I missed my ancestral robes, I could do without ancestral sandals.

I kept an eye to the hills as often as I was awake, and I did without sleep as long as possible. It was not wise, perhaps, to stress my already fatigued body, but it seemed unwise to risk myself to attack. I never saw a flicker of movement, or light or smoke from a fire, but the pattern of the mountainside gave me chills I was unable to explain.

On our fourth night, we reached the end of the valley, and we continued on into our fifth day to reach the lake. The sun was high but Kirk was delirious with excitement as we approached the water.

The air was moist and fresh, and the lakeside dense with *g'teth* bushes. Their berries were out of season, but the sight of so much wood dizzied me. Even in my childhood treks to Lake Yuron, I had never seen *g'teth* so abundant. There was less dust in the air, and the ground was soft with coarse desert grasses. Kirk raced ahead of me through a break in the brush, laughing as he waded into the lake fully clothed.

"Please tell me we can drink this," he begged, already washing the grime off his face and hands, basking in the relative cool of the waters. I allowed myself a small smile as well, grateful for the life giving water of the lake.

"We can drink it," I confirmed. It would be safest, we both knew, to boil the water first, but without a pot to boil it in, the fresh water would do. I knelt by the shore and washed my own hands and face, and drank deeply to replenish myself. It was while I stared off at the distant shore that I felt the chills return up my spine. There was a settlement there, among the hills, and there could be no mistaking it. Perhaps we were safe, as no one had yet confronted us. My desire to leave, to hide, warred with my longing for the safety of a community. Without knowing how we would be received, I could not decide which route to take, but I pointed out the settlement to Kirk, who eyed it speculatively as he came free of the lake, undressing and wringing out his clothing to dry.

I regarded him carefully as he sat next to me on the shore. He looked to be much revived, though his color was high. I could not tell for certain how much of that was the unavoidable burn of the sun on his pale flesh and how much of the red came from the unnatural flush of heat exhaustion. In The Forge, I had harbored real concerns for Kirk's constitution, but in the refreshing cool of the lakeside I was somewhat reassured at his continued survival. As annoying as I found the human, I had grown accustomed to him. I had worked diligently to preserve his fragile health and found I had no desire to do otherwise. It was a shame that we could not linger too long at the lake, I thought, lest we be discovered.

"They probably have food," Kirk said as he stared out at the distant settlement and licked at chapped lips.

Our own meagre supply of meat that we'd brought along was diminished. We'd had to leave the bulk of it in our cave on *Seleya*, and even if we should return to our mountain home, we might find it spoiled and need to begin again.

Even from this distance, I could see the settlement had agriculture. There were pens of quattil, and rows of growing flatroot. The cavern entrances were covered with various skins and I saw flickers of movement in doorways and windows, though few would be out in the heat of the day.

"They most certainly have food," I agreed. "However, my ancestors did not often take kindly to strangers, who would have been from rival tribes. These people might kill us before we have the chance to explain ourselves, and at any rate I am uncertain how I would explain your looks or either of our clothing and tools."

"I was afraid you might say that," Kirk said, staring off toward the settlement longingly. "So what do we do? Fill up the water skins, grab as much of the brushwood as we can carry, and retreat back into *ShiKahr* tonight? Head back to *Seleya*?"

"We may not have the opportunity," I said, and I watched as several Vulcan men came out of the hut, gesticulating to each other and across the water toward our location. Though we were still and crouched in the brush, they had evidently seen us, and were likely to investigate.

"Shit," Kirk said as he grabbed for his wet clothes and began hurriedly dressing.

I wished he had not waded into the water in his shoes, but any blisters he received as a result would be his own fault. I scanned the environment for a suitable hiding place, and considered heading back toward the *ShiKahr* valley. It would take the Yuron villagers time to skirt the perimeter of the lake and by the time they arrived perhaps we could be on our way.

We made a hasty retreat back toward the valley, as the midday sun beat down upon us. Travelling in the heat of day seemed a reasonable sacrifice in order to reach the cool shores of Lake Yuron, but retreating in haste under the Vulcan sun was less than ideal. I was concerned for Kirk's health but I suppressed my concern, and focused instead on scanning the cliff side for a place where we might conceal ourselves.

No sooner had I spotted a suitable cavern than a strange Vulcan face appeared in the hollow. Mumbled speech echoed against the rocks and Vulcan warriors poured out of the cliff side toward us from above and ahead. I began to question my decision to retreat, and thought I would have preferred to take my chances with the Lake Yuron residents than the warriors of ancient *ShiKahr*.

"Son of a bitch," Kirk said, grasping his spear as we paused, frozen in the open expanse of the valley, uncertain which way to run. I glanced back the way we had come, toward the oasis of the lake, but the *ShiKahr* warriors had closed in and were shouting at us, their speech rapid and aggressive. Had we survived so long, and come so far to the life-giving shores of the lake, only to die? "Spock?" Kirk asked nervously. "What the hell do we do now? What're they saying?"

I clenched my teeth to bite back my retort, as it would serve no one, and concentrated my effort in deciphering the foreign dialect of ancient *Golic*. My *Golic* was clunky at best and this dialect was new to me, but I could make out the basics, and raised my hands in supplication.

"Drop your weapon," I told Kirk hastily. He looked at me incredulously, but undoubtedly saw the futility in retaining the short spear under the circumstances, and dropped it.

I still had my phaser, strapped to my uniform, but it was low on charge and there were at least twenty men surrounding us, not to mention those I could not see. Though I held no hope of rescue from Star Fleet, I could not help but think of the Prime Directive. What would happen if these warriors captured us? What would they make of such advanced technology? How might my presence here alter the flow of time? My mind flashed to the certain destruction of my planet, though I tried not to think of it, or what my presence here might mean for its survival or destruction.

I dared not use my phaser to defend myself, and hoped only that it would not be confiscated from me. As I stood before these warriors, I realized that the phaser was not the only technology which might alter the flow of time. Our steel knives and even the zipper fastenings on our clothing would contaminate any ancient peoples that were exposed. We had failed to think our journey through, so desperate were we for a better source of water, for wood to make a fire, our survival instinct outweighing all else.

Weapons of all sorts were pointed at us, and the warriors encroached steadily upon us. One of the tribesmen demanded my identification. I gave him my name, but was forced to invent a tribe. He wanted to know where they were. Why had he not heard of them, seen them? Why would I have left them? Should I lie and say they would come for me? I lied instead saying that they were dead. Where had we come from? I told him the north. It is said a Vulcan cannot lie. I assure you, we can, and I did so in blind desperation. All the while Kirk kept asking me what was happening, what was being said, but I could not answer him. It took all of my concentration to comprehend the tribesman and to make myself understood.

In all the natural disasters I had witnessed, I had never dreaded one in the way that I dreaded being killed that day by my own ancestors. It seemed a unique abomination, a refutation of the teachings of Surak though I knew that Surak had not yet come. My blood was about to be spilled on the sands of Vulcan, almost certainly, though death would be preferable to them disbelieving my story and forcing a meld.

Who was the man beside me, they asked. Why did he look deformed? Our peculiar clothing was ignored for now, perhaps because it was assumed to have come from the northern tribe, from which I'd said I'd descended.

Kirk was from my tribe, I lied. His physiology was merely a mutation.

They'd seen how slowly Kirk had run, could see now how he sweat, and panted for his air. Could see the unnatural red undertone of his heat-blotched skin. Why had he not been drowned at birth, they demanded. Why saddle myself with him even now, as he was weak?

I did the only thing I could think of. I claimed him as my property. Kirk could not hunt nor could he bear children. He was almost useless to an ancient tribe. But I knew that they kept slaves for pleasure. Would they see Kirk as deformed or exotic? Would they believe him to be my petty indulgence?

I was not to find out, at least not now. The warriors exchanged words between themselves rapidly, more rapidly than I was able to follow. Someone was to be told...something. It was impossible for me to follow.

"Spock!" Kirk whispered frantically. "What the hell's going on?"

"I do not know," I answered honestly, still straining to make it out, and unwilling to risk movement as we were carefully watched. I considered explaining my claim of ownership to Kirk, but could only imagine his incendiary response, which I could not risk were the lie to hold. I would explain later, should we survive.

There was some sort of yelling coming from the direction of the lake, and a new clan burst forth from the brush and rocks. The two clans sized each other up, and if I'd thought the ShiKahrans were irate at us, it was nothing to their hostility toward the Yurons for their interruption. We had trespassed on the lake, the Yurons said. There was some dispute about territory, and some words exchanged about who we were, where we had come from. The ShiKahrans had been tracking us for some time. That did not surprise me. The Yurons said they had forfeited claim to the foreigners when we'd left ShiKahr territory.

The ShiKahrans responded in kind, saying we were no longer in the domain of the lake. This apparently was also up for debate. In the confusion, I sought desperately for a means of escape, to utilize the distraction, and I saw Kirk scanning the hills, likely thinking the same. But there was nowhere to go, nor sufficient weapon at our disposal. The valley was an open expanse, and there was no sure escape in the rocks of the mountain, could we even hope to reach them without detection.

I wondered whether it would be logical even to hope for one side of the debate to win over the other. The Yurons likely had better resources than the ShiKahrans, but whether either party was likely to allow us to live was unknown.

A shout went up, and before I knew it, a spear was thrown, from one side or the other. I flinched as absolute chaos broke out. My ancestors were violent. This I knew. It was something else entirely to witness the speed at which a battle took place, there on the sands with only a moment's provocation. And over what? The right to two prisoners, worth almost nothing at all.

Kirk did not hesitate to grasp his spear again from the ground. I had no time to wonder whether it was the correct decision, but grasped my phaser and fired above, toward the area of the cliff side that looked most precarious.

The air was thick with shouts and weapons, flying at heads and vulnerable skin. "Spock!" Kirk shouted, leaping toward me as I leapt for him.

I saw green blood spilled on the red sands and heard the deafening roar of rocks, collapsing down the mountainside. I grasped Kirk's arm, and heaved us to the side, as fast as my straining muscles would allow, faster even than Kirk was able to keep up as I dragged him.

I heard the echoing shouts of my kindred in the valley and huddled against the heaving cliff as rocks fell. The ground was moving. And the noonday sun, bright overhead, shimmered in the chaos. Blindingly bright. The glimmer of a transporter.

The Enterprise coalesced around me, and I saw again the falling face of Mother, my arm outstretched before me as Kirk grasped the other behind. Around us on the platform, the survivors of the Vulcan Council, my father among them, but Mother gone. My mind reeled. The warriors. Ancient Vulcan's past. The Enterprise. Nero.

Kirk was up and moving even as I collapsed. I was aware he was speaking to the others, giving orders rapidly as my mind reeled. What had happened?

"How did you find us?" I asked, dazedly.

"Sir?" Chekov asked uncertainly.

"We were..." I blinked, shaking my head. "You didn't know?"

"We almost lost you, Captain," he said, "when the ground collapsed, and you fell toward the singularity. Not all of the Council made it. I am sorry, Sir."

They didn't know. They didn't know that we had been lost, for days and not moments. That we had seen the history of my planet, that now collapsed into itself, folding away for all eternity. The bonds that had dulled flared back to life, then excruciatingly severed, nearly all of them. I put a hand to my temple and closed my eyes.

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.

Afterwards

A short K/S play, Kandy Fong

- Narrator: (offstage) After the events which took place during their interrupted shore leave, Uhura, McCoy, Spock, and Kirk returned to Enterprise. Dr. McCoy examined Kirk and Spock and found ...to no one's surprise... that they were suffering from mild dehydration and sore... muscles. He put them both on medical leave while the rest of the crew enjoyed shore leave. Spock was confined to the isolation ward in sickbay at his request, while Captain Kirk rested in his own cabin
- Kirk: (offstage) Computer, Captain James T. Kirk Personal Log. Stardate 2011.2 After the two days of rest ordered by Dr. McCoy, I am recovered and ready for action. So far, Bones refuses to let me speak to Spock, saying that he requested privacy. I need to talk to Spock about the eye-opening events on the planet. End Log.
- Kirk: (enters stage left) Bones! I'm ready for my medical leave to end.
- McCoy: Come sit down and let this old country doctor give you the once over. (waves his salt shaker) Why Jim, I do believe you lost some weight after all of your... exercise on the planet.
- Kirk: Since our return, I've done nothing but think about what happened in that cave.
- McCoy: You can't blame Spock for his damned Vulcan heritage.
- Kirk: Bones, you don't understand. I've never allowed myself to even think that Spock and I could ever be more than friends. I never knew that I could respond to Spock like that. If more of the meanings of t'hy'la are possible, I want them.
- McCoy: Well, you are back to your normal good health except for one thing... you're out of your ever-loving mind! What makes you think our pointy-eared hobgoblin would want something like that? He was in Pon Farr in the cave.
- Kirk: I don't know, Bones. We didn't mind-meld in the cave. But what happened felt so right between us. Spock and I need to talk.
- McCoy: Why Jim, could it be you're in LOVE?
- Kirk: Are you our love doctor, Doctor?
- McCoy: Dammit Jim. I'm a doctor, not a Doctor! (pause) Tell you what. Go back to your cabin. I'll keep you on medical leave for right now. After I examine Spock, I'll send him to you.
- Kirk: Thanks, Bones. (exit Kirk stage left)

Uhura: (enters stage right) Dr. McCoy! Dr. McCoy!

McCoy: What's wrong, Uhura?

Uhura: I don't know what to do. It's Spock. He wants me to send a message to Vulcan. He's planning to leave the Enterprise!

McCoy: Why?

Uhura: I don't know, he didn't give them any details, just that he needs to leave the Enterprise to report a major crime. Spock can't leave. The Captain and Spock are so GOOD together, (crosses her legs) and they make a great command team.

McCoy: They didn't mind-meld...

Uhura: What?

McCoy: I think Spock might not understand Capt. Kirk's reaction to the events in the cave. Uhura, Spock is still on Medical Leave. On my medical authority, do NOT send Spock's message to Vulcan.

Uhura: Okay. Then what do we do?

McCoy: I can think of one way to make sure they talk. Computer, page Capt. Kirk and ask him to return to sickbay. Uhura, I'll take responsibility for what happens.

Kirk: (enters stage left) What do you want, Bones?

McCoy: Jim, Spock asked to speak to you. Go on in the isolation chamber, no one will bother you there.

Kirk: (enters the chamber - i.e. goes behind screen) Spock, I'm glad to see you.

McCoy: Computer, lock the door to the isolation chamber and do not open it without my medical authority.

Uhura: How will we know what's going on? What if something goes wrong and they start fighting?

McCoy: Computer turn on the microphone inside the isolation chamber.

(McCoy and Uhura react to what they hear)

Spock: Captain, I am surprised to see you here.

Kirk: Spock, how are you feeling? I mean, are you recovered?

Spock: I have recovered. I would like to take this opportunity to apologize for my actions on the planet. I regret any harm that I may have caused you.

Kirk: Just minor bumps and bruises, I'm alright. Spock, what happened in the cave...

Spock: Captain, I realize that I gave you no choice in the cave. That is a major crime among Vulcans. I plan to surrender myself to the Vulcan High Court for punishment.

Kirk: No, Spock. You don't understand. I did have a choice. I had a phaser, I could have stunned you. But I gave it to Uhura to guard the cave, and to protect herself in case you rejected me.

Spock: REJECTED you?

Kirk: You were in Pon Farr. Uhura is female. Just because I wanted to help, didn't mean you wanted me to.

Spock: You WANTED to help me? Captain...Jim. There is no other I would choose regardless of who else was there.

Kirk: There is no other I would choose.

Spock: Jim, I have observed that the available data does not support that statement. You have had many short term relationships while Captain. I do not want only a short term relationship

Kirk: I have sowed some wild oats, but I want someone who can share my life on the ship.

Spock: I fail to see how planting untamed grain has to do with your relationships.

Kirk: That's just a saying that means I was trying out a large number of relationships, not only ones that I thought had the best chance of success. Now I want more, and I hope that you do, too. Mind-meld us. See the truth.

Spock: Jim, come sit on my bed facing me. (pause) My mind to your mind...

Uhura: (hums the mind-meld theme music)

Spock: Think of the events in the cave. (pause) Jim, I understand, now. And you could see what I wish for, T'hy'la.

Kirk: We'll pleasure each other both mentally and physically.

McCoy: Oh no, Not again!

Uhura: Oh, YEAH!

Spock: Jim. I don't know how to pleasure you.

Kirk: That will be the fun part. Learning what we both enjoy. For example, if I massage your hand like this...

Spock: (takes a deep breath) That feels...

Kirk: Thought you might like it. Part of my joy will be discovering what brings you pleasure. Like this... (kissing sound) and this... and Spock, you gave me pleasure in the cave. It was the best THREE minutes of my life.

Spock: I really don't remember.

Kirk: Start by putting your hand here... feel my reaction to your touch? It's your job to find out what I like.

Spock: Fascinating. I assume that some of the things I enjoy you would enjoy also. Perhaps we should remove our uniforms to facilitate discovery?

Uhura: (nods head 'yes') McCoy: (shakes head 'no') (both look at each other and stop)

Kirk: Better yet, let's go to my cabin. It would be more comfortable.

McCoy: Computer, unlock to the isolation chamber door.

(Kirk and Spock appear from behind the panel, i.e., isolation chamber)

Spock: Lt. Uhura, please cancel my message to Vulcan.

Kirk: Bones, Spock and I are going to my cabin. Please extend our medical leave for one more day.

McCoy: Aye, aye Captain.

Kirk: Come on, Spock. We have some research to do. (Kirk and Spock exit stage left)

(McCoy and Uhura high-five each other and exit stage right)

END

*Note from the author: script inspired by the fantastic story "Poses" (1977) by Leslie Fish.
One of the first and best K/S stories I ever read. —Kandy*

Somniloquies

Nostra Battista

“This way, Captainjameskirk,” said Consulate J’Delm’na, fluidly extending one of xer four arms in the direction of a nearby corridor. Jim looked down the hallway, which glowed with a soft purple, and he turned to verify that Spock was still with him. They’d both been offered rooms in the embassy after the formal welcoming ceremony and its following diplomatic conference, which, while providing a thorough introduction to Ylpatian culture, had been much longer than any of the bridge crew had anticipated. Jim had been repressing a yawn for several hours now.

“After you, Captain,” said Spock, nodding to him.

Jim followed J’Delm’na down the hallway, passing several curtained archways. A few moments later, xie paused beside one and pulled the draperies to one side.

“This is the room we have prepared for you, Jameskirk. I hope that it pleases you most thoroughly. You will see that we have lit the nbedan crystals.” Xie looked at Jim from beneath dark, velvety lashes, and a slow smile crept to xer face. “They have the property of...”

“Providing mental clarity,” Spock said, finishing xer sentence. J’Delm’na’s top two hands clasped xer lower two hands, a gesture that signaled great satisfaction.

“Commanderspock, it is pleasing you know our customs. Peaceful sleep is very important to us.”

Spock bowed his head. “Indeed,” he said, “sleep is a key component to maintaining health in many species.”

“In Vulcans, too — isn’t that right, Mr. Spock?” Jim couldn’t help asking. He had learned over the years that Spock’s personal philosophy on sleep was not exactly in correlation with Vulcan standards. Just because the man could forgo sleep for several days didn’t mean he should, and Jim was well aware of Spock’s ability to selectively edit the truth.

Spock turned to face him. “Meditation quite frequently provides clarity of thought, thus ensuring an untroubled mind for the night,” Spock said, deftly sidestepping Jim’s needling. The left corner of his mouth quirked upward, and Jim’s heart skipped a beat.

“Your room is this way, Commanderspock,” said J’Delm’na. Xie placed two hands on Jim’s arm. “If you find yourself needing anything in the night—for any reason at all, Jameskirk—please pull the bell cord beside your bed, and I will attend.”

Jim suppressed a sigh, and instead, gently extracted himself from xer hands. He patted his own left shoulder with his right hand, indicating appreciation. In turn, J'Delm'na craned xer neck, tossed xer hair and gestured that Spock should follow xer.

As soon as Jim pulled the door's curtain, he leaned up against the wall and rolled his eyes. Unless he was much mistaken, the beautiful consulate was attempting to strike a more...intimate relationship between their two peoples. He couldn't be less interested in xer if he tried, and Spock had been witness to all of xer's overtures.

Oh, Spock, thought Jim. There was so much space between them that he longed to fill, but he could never find the words. How could one even begin to express *love* to a Vulcan? Jim had scoured the database for information on Vulcan courtship rituals in vain; the words love, romance, and even sex yielded nothing but the driest of abstracts. The description of Vulcan marriage in its entirety consisted of the words "an agreement between partners to mate permanently together and enter into a telepathic bond." In desperation, Jim had turned to Vulcan literature from the time before the Reform.

His search hadn't been easy, but when he finally acquired some romantic literature, he was stunned to discover its highly erotic nature. His new favorite poem explored the relationship of two warriors who forged a lifebond in the desert wilderness. After reading *R'Tas Man*, Jim had spent the rest of the evening trying to suppress the burning of his cheeks. Ultimately, though, his own imagination had run away from him, and he had finally succumbed to thoughts of grappling with his own warrior-lover in the sand.

These were thoughts he couldn't fathom sharing with Spock, words that he didn't dare utter. The prospect of dimming the warm glow in Spock's eyes with his unwanted affections was motivation enough for Jim to keep his mouth shut. He shuffled away from the wall and toward the refresher, each step taking him that much farther from Spock.

Jim emerged from the sonic shower, clutching his robe tightly to his chest. He found the lack of a door to be somewhat unsettling, but the curtains appeared undisturbed, along with the rest of the room. The entire chamber exuded a calm quiet, which could likely be attributed to the plush, carpeted walls.

After he slipped on some sleep pants, he crawled into the spongy, round bed and pulled the coverlet up to his chest. In deference to his host's customs, he had left the two nbedan crystals untouched. Although their glow was of a warm lavender, they reminded him quite strongly of Terran lanterns made from pink salt. Jim smiled softly at the understated luxury of his surroundings.

The bed was delightfully soft, the environment was peaceful, and he was far too tired for troublesome dreams. As he rolled over, he drowsily thought that the process of going to sleep was like turning a page in a book.

Nam-tor wak vah yut s'vesht na'fa'wak heb pla'rak.

Jim inhaled deeply, stretched as he let the words roll through his head. He loved this poem so much.

Halovau nash'veh k'fal on stukh heb pon. Ashaya. How many distances have I traversed to find you? I know now that you have been there at the end of the journey, your eager body now stretching beneath me, vak'surik, beautiful. Ang'jmiẓn.

These were the words he'd read before, but some of them were new, thrumming with love and lust.

Ang'jmiẓn. Bek-tor nash'veh r'tas mau na'du. I have waited, and waited, and would wait a thousand more years na'du. For you, t'hy'la, I treasure you, will embrace your mind with my mind and your body with my body, we will be one, I will take you into me, and you will take me into you, ang'jmiẓn mine, Captain.

Heat traveled up his thighs at the urgency in the poet's voice, and his legs shifted restlessly against the sheets.

Kyl'l nash'veh uz̧h khom-eiktra na'du. You must know now there is no place I fear to go na'du, no land I would not brave for you, ang'jmiẓn. I worship you, t'hy'la, let me touch you. I shall bow my head before you, Jim, let me praise you with my hands and lips and tongue and I will show you how I burn for you, ang'jmiẓn mine, yontau t'nash'veh, Jim.

and I, Spock, will be yours alone

yontau t'nash'veh

I burn for you, Jim, t'hy'la

Jim

Jim

“Jim!”

That was Spock's voice!

Jim hurriedly launched himself from the bed and stumbled across the dimly-lit room. He nearly ripped the door curtain from its fastening on his way out of the room.

“Jim...”

He heard Spock calling him again, but he didn’t sound distressed. He sounded...content.

“Ashayam.”

Jim skidded to a full stop, his bare feet slightly squeaking against the marbled tiles. He was right next to what he could only assume was the entrance to Spock’s chamber.

“*Yontau t’nash’veh.*”

Jim’s mouth went dry. He felt as though he were standing on the edge of some great precipice. He could enter and brave the unknown, or, now he was assured that Spock was in no danger, could return to his own comfortable room and his dreams.

He pulled open the curtain.

At the slight noise, Spock jerked up from the bed to a sitting position, clutching the sheets to his bare chest.

“Captain,” he said, raising one eyebrow. “Has there been an incident?”

Jim paced slowly over to the bed and stood at its foot, folding his arms over his chest.

“You could say that. You were calling for me, so I came to see what you needed.”

Spock crooked his head to the left.

“You are mistaken. I have been sleeping.”

“Then you’ve been talking in your sleep. Were you...dreaming, too?”

Spock looked off to the side, very purposefully avoiding Jim’s gaze.

“I heard you, Spock. Whether it was aloud or in my mind, you called *me* ‘Ashayam.’ I heard you say, ‘Bek-tor nash’veh r’tas mau na’du.’”

Spock placed a hand over his face, obscuring his features. Suddenly, he snatched up a tricorder that had been sitting on a nightstand, and he rushed over to one of the nbedan crystals. The tricorder

gave several beeps in quick succession and Spock straightened. He carefully assumed a bland expression, again avoiding Jim's eyes.

"Captain, I must report that the nbedan crystals have properties that enhance telepathic abilities. My psionic powers have been amplified, causing the...invasion you have no doubt experienced."

Invasion! Jim couldn't let Spock's misunderstanding of the situation persist a moment longer. He hurried over to Spock and grabbed his hand, bringing it to his lips.

"Please, T'hy'la," he implored. "Believe me when I say this. R'Tas Mau Di'kiz-tor. I'd trade a thousand years, for you, too."

Spock's eyebrows rose into the air and remained motionless for almost ten seconds. Jim was about to beg for him to breathe, but before he could open his mouth, he was scooped up and tumbled down onto the bed. Spock hovered over him, and those deep brown eyes shone with affection.

"Jim," Spock began, and Jim's heart nearly imploded as his face was caressed by one of those smooth hands. "You must know that I would never have meant to trespass..."

"Mr. Spock," Jim interrupted.

"Yes, Captain?"

Jim pulled his hand to his lips again and was gratified to see him swallow hard. After slowly kissing each of the pads of Spock's fingers, Jim smiled.

"I understand your concerns. But in this case, it's impossible to find you guilty of 'trespassing' when you've simply ventured where you've always been wanted. I'd like to point out, Science Officer, that there are a number of guests in this embassy. And not a single one of them seems to have been alerted to your...psychic sleeptalking."

Spock drew closer to Jim—so close, in fact, that their lips rested against one another.

"Your logic is flawless...and..."

Jim rose up and pushed their mouths together, causing lips and tongues to mingle and dance. He closed his eyes in pleasure and sucked Spock's lower lip into his mouth.

...your mouth like the best wine...

Jim gasped and shuddered. "Spock, I can still *hear* you." His lover ignored him and dove to press kisses against his neck, to nibble at Jim's tender, vulnerable skin. He writhed at the sensation and the deep voice in his head.

...your love more delightful than wine...

Jim laughed in wonder at it all. Breathlessly, he said "let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth..." and was rewarded with a flash of Spock's beautiful smile before that dark head ducked to nuzzle at his bare chest. He cried out as lips fastened on one of his nipples, tonguing the sensitive flesh.

...the live, insatiable play of your nipples in my mouth...

Oh my god, this is going to be the end of me, thought Jim, and Spock's mouth hummed around him in agreement.

"Please," Jim rasped out, "let me," he said, and Jim trailed his fingers down from Spock's neck to his waist.

...reaching where I had been waiting eons for you...

"Oh yes, my friend, sometimes it felt like a thousand years," whispered Jim as he helped him out of his pants, exposing his long member to the air. Spock, with less patience than Jim would have expected, tugged at his waistband until Jim's pants wound up below his ass. Jim thrust up against him and groaned as their cocks met, hot flesh kissing and sliding together.

"You create me anew against your thighs," Jim quoted shakily, and Spock moved so that he stroked the full length of Jim with the tip of his own cock.

"I burn for you, Jim," Spock said, and Jim shuddered. Jim gathered them together in one hand and stroked and stroked. Spock's body fairly vibrated against his own and he pushed his own forehead to Jim's.

...unclasp it like your armor, empty your basket of kalafruit, spill your wine...

Jim shook as he felt a surge like electricity travel down his spine. Spock's hand crept up to his face. Just as shudders overtook him, Jim pleaded, "Do it! Do it now!"

Spock's fingers fastened onto his face and they both cried out into the night.

I would give a thousand years for you

The next morning, after hastily sneaking back to his own quarters, a freshly shaven and showered Jim strolled down casually to collect his first officer and meet with Consul J'Delm'na. Xie was waiting at the corridor's entrance, accompanied by another Ylpatian; both Ylpatians had one arm from their middle set of arms outstretched so that the backs of their hands were touching. J'Delm'na nodded to Jim and Spock without adjusting xer arm.

"Captainjameskirk, this is my consort A'naAkuus. Xie is a chemist in our Ministry of Science and has volunteered to give a tour of our laboratories to Commanderspock today. Captain," xie said, smiling broadly. "Did you and Commanderspock sleep well? Did you find clarity in your dreams last night? Our nbedan crystals often permit the expression of that which is obscured by...trepidation, as A'naAkuss and I once found."

Jim's lips parted and he stole a quick glance at his first officer's impassive face. The corners of A'naAkuus's light purple eyes crinkled.

"I can't speak for Spock," Jim began, "but the quarters were very accommodating. I am grateful for your hospitality...and your insights."

He looked up at Spock, meeting his eyes. As one, they held up their arms to touch the backs of their hands together, in the manner of their new friends.

The Vulcan poem "R'Tas Man" is heavily inspired by A Thousand Years by Scandroid, verses from the Song of Songs, and poetry by Adrienne Rich and Ellen Bass. The lyrics of A Thousand Years are K/S through and through: "I would brave new frontiers for you."

Two Souls

reeby10

Two souls reach through time
and space
to join together as one.
T'hy'la —
Friend, brother, lover —
the closest bond two can have
in this life or the next.
Together
across the universe and
those that run alongside it.
Forever,
two souls parted and
never parted.

