KiScon 2022 — The Official Zine

DEDICATION (first edition)

There aren't enough words to properly express my thanks to all of you who jumped in to help when I asked. Your kindness and generosity filled my heart with gratitude. — Carleen

Peace be with you and live long and prosper, my friends and co-editors!

Dear lovely readers, artists, authors, and KiScon 2022 members!

Thank you for your patience, your support, and your understanding. Little did we know at the time of the KiScon 2022 weekend that we would have to publish a second edition of our con zine, but here we are, four months later, and we are glad that we chose to do that. Much love, time, and effort went into this new edition, and we hope you'll enjoy it.

Happy K/S Day!

— T'Lara

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A Thousand Empty Stars
by Marlinspirkhall

If there were just shadows and there was no light
Merely quiet everlasting and endless night
If there was no Jupiter and there was no Mars, no gods, or angels, not stranded this far

I'll always hold you, however you are
Battered or broken
Or guarded or scarred
Or bathed in the half-light of a small, dying star

If I had no body and I had no hands
No more than atoms to join up the strands
I would hold you like moonlight, this much I command:
Just keep me forever, and we can withstand

When everything's open, and broken, devoured
When there is no reason, nor comfort, nor flowers
When I am a memory, know all this is ours
For I will love you in the embers of a thousand empty stars.

On the Edge of Forever
by Liz W.

To Love and to Cherish
by Ashaya T'Reldai

Summary: Unresolved issues trigger pon farr … and new learnings.

Author's Note: This fic is the sixth part of the Vows series accessible at the AO3.

The long, green cock plunged in again, soliciting an illicit moan from his depths which reverberated through his whole body. The hard member pulled back, only to press in again rapidly and relentlessly. Aching muscles, used and abused, quivered beneath the onslaught. Every part of him burned like the flame their union was stoking and quenching — and he welcomed it, welcomed the intensity.

A rest. Not enough! He groaned, no longer able to speak, his voice long since silenced by his own screams. He wanted, consumed with need; reached up a shaking hand to clutch the taut buttocks of his mate, as though through sheer desire he could take in more of him, deeper, ever deeper.

"Captain!" It vaguely registered that someone was trying to get his attention and had been for some time.

Damn. He'd thought he'd gotten away with allowing himself to wallow in sweet reverie; the *Enterprise* was another three days away from her next rendezvous, and there was little to do on the bridge.

He looked up as he sensed the presence of his communications officer.

"Captain?" she asked quietly, reaching out to touch his shoulder. "You've been away with the fairies for the last fifteen minutes. Are you all, right?"

Jim was saved from answering by the chime of the comm. "Kirk here."

"Captain, I need urgently to discuss with you the files I sent to your PADD. Could you please meet me in briefing room three in ten minutes?"

"Of course, Mister Spock. Kirk out." He switched off the comm. The intonation pattern in Spock's voice told him his mate was under some strain, probably induced by Jim's fantasy; they had a policy of keeping the bond open, and if Jim were honest, he *had* been goading his mate with the goal of producing exactly this response. He smirked to himself.

"Thank you for your concern, Lieutenant." He stood, tugging the hem of his tunic, and ignoring the fact he was more than half hard. Thank goodness for the black trousers that were part of the uniform; they covered a multitude of … well, *circumstances*. "You have the conn."

The moment the doors of the turbolift closed, he heaved a sigh of mixed relief and anticipation, resting his head on an arm propped against the wall. It was no secret to anyone that Jim Kirk loved sex. He always had. And since bonding with Spock three years earlier, the sex had been spectacular. Melded sex? Hell, *yes*! Jim relished the feedback loop, the doubling of experience, the ability to suck his mate off while feeling the effect — as though he were sucking himself, only through Spock's eyes.

Starship duty was a challenge to intimacy — that was a reality. Jim thought they'd done well, by and large, at keeping the spark between them alive around duty shifts and away missions, conferences, and projects. They kept things spicy by being open to trying new things. And so over time they had explored many different variations of intimacy.

But if there was any sex that was his favorite, it had to be *pon farr* sex. Jim found himself yearning for that connection. Memories of that time were more than memories to him; they were like re-living the original experiences … He would *remember* Spock's teeth biting into the flesh of his trapezius muscle and feel it. He would *remember* butterfly kisses gentling the sting, and soft lips lapping up blood from his broken skin — and he would groan aloud, just as he did at that time. He would *remember*…

He shook his head. He'd been doing that a lot lately. Ever since their last away mission two weeks ago…

It was a first contact. Mantis had just developed warp drive capability; in fact, like the Vulcan scouts two hundred years earlier, the *Enterprise* happened to be in Mantidaen space on the very day of the new technology's launch. It was too good an opportunity to extend Federation diplomacy to be missed.

The Mantidae had been hospitable, welcoming the captain, his first officer, and other crew members to the gala celebrating the launch. Following protocol, the Starfleet officers had no choice but to watch the games which were part of the gala. It was a stark reminder that not all societies shared common values, nor were they at an equivalent evolutionary level.

There were three sentient species on Mantis, each with different gifts. From what the *Enterprise* personnel had been able to gather, one species, which had the sharpest critical thinking and most cunning ability to scheme, dominated the other two. The games consisted of slaves from the other species battling it out in an arena, a contest somewhere between wrestling and mating. Jim had watched the fight, enthralled, while the Mantidaen King explained the history.

Back in the before-time, in the ancient days, these matches were fought to the point of death and the sexual joining was part of the complete devouring. Whichever mate won bore the offspring of the defeated and devoured the loser.

Jim had found himself increasingly aroused as the King whispered in his ear while the images of the coupling contestants played out on the sand before them. It had spoken to and awoken something deep within him which was wholly unexpected. Something he didn't understand, but which was becoming an addictive, never-ending quest… And he did little to resist the delicious, illicit images which tumbled through his mind. Besides, remembering *pon farr* sex had the

advantage, because it involved his bondmate, of setting off Spock's own memory, and he couldn't help but respond to Jim's advances.

Admit it, Kirk, he said to himself as the lift shifted direction to take him to Deck 7, *you're a dirty little masochist*. This … *thing* … which was eating at Jim was something for which he lacked a name, but which he felt compelled to explore.

He found himself outside the doors of the briefing room and stepping into sensor range, they opened.

"Computer, seal the doors to briefing room three, medical personnel only excepted," his first officer commanded.

"Doors sealed," the voice replied.

And the next moment Jim found himself bent forward over the table, the denser body of his mate pressing him into the laminate surface, and the scent of Vulcan herbs and arousal surrounding him. He took a deep breath, relishing the smell, and moaned in anticipation.

"Did you think you could have lascivious thoughts, uncontrolled lustful thoughts, with impunity, bondmate?" the rough voice crooned in his ear.

He shivered. *Yes!* This is what he wanted. The feel of Spock's body pinning him, the sensation of being subsumed by Spock, the hint and promise of something dangerous… He could feel the hardness pressed against his buttocks and twitching.

He could barely breathe. "Uh … uh…" What kind of answer was Spock looking for?

"Uh … no?"

Abruptly, Spock let go and stepped back, leaving Jim panting, and reeling from the sudden deprivation.

"Incorrect. My control was at no point threatened by your imagination. Your strategy, if it was to force me to lose control, is a failure, Jim."

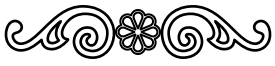
Jim pushed himself up, turning to face his mate. "Oh, really? So, what's that in your pants Spock? A moment ago, I thought you were going to take me so hard I would come on the underside of the table. I was looking forward to sitting through briefings, knowing we had marked this place as ours."

Was that a bona fide *growl* uttered low in Spock's throat? Jim grinned.

Spock drew himself up, and Jim watched the process of recollection. Nope. That wasn't going to happen if he could help it. He wanted Spock right the fuck *now*; wanted to be fucked into tomorrow violently and relentlessly. He launched himself forward, wrapping himself around the wiry form, planting his lips on Spock's.

After a moment of surprise, Spock responded avidly. When they came up for air Jim smirked. "Thought so."

Spock devoured him. Briefing room three would never be the same again.

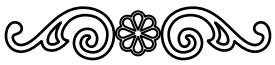


The problem with addiction is that one thing leads to another: the craving increases, and the satisfaction declines. After three or four days of reliving the highlights of *pon farr*-type sex, Jim found the images crossing his mind's eye changing, the violent intent in them escalating.

From Spock biting his shoulder and staking a claim to breaking the skin with his teeth, to clamping down and tearing. From being impaled roughly on that thick Vulcan cock, to being split wide by it, literally, torn apart. He fantasized about being tied up mentally and physically, broken, his submission forced from him as from a captive enemy. He fantasized about being subsumed completely into Spock, himself a sacrificial offering.

Jim could tell Spock was disturbed by this escalation of violence, as well as helplessly intrigued by it. It evoked a deeply buried, primal urge within the half-Vulcan, something which felt like molten lava welling up and getting ready to boil over. Spock, for the moment, went along with Jim's fantasies, despite his reservations, caught like a fly in a Venus flytrap.

It's the nature of the bond, Jim told himself. Gosh, but that reverb effect was something else. It was worth the odd looks they were beginning to get from the other senior officers; it was worth the possibility of a misdemeanor for "conduct unbecoming an officer" on his record, if they could satisfy their carnal desires, even if it meant sneaking away from the bridge, taking longer lunch breaks, or working from their quarters.



Jim blinked his eyes until the crustiness cleared somewhat and groaned as awareness returned. He lifted his head, discovering he'd been lying on his back, and went to roll over — but couldn't. What was this? His hands were tied to each bedpost at the head of the bed, and oh, his feet too were tethered by thick leather straps to the posts at the foot of the bed. For all his exhaustion from last night, a thrill of sharp arousal coursed through him.

How did this happen? Last night he could remember Spock had been pounding into him … He felt the skin and hairs on his stomach pull, caught in dried emissions. Spock must not have cleaned him up after their activities.

Jim yawned. Right. Their *activities*. Which had lasted well into the early hours of the morning and had involved at least ten different positions. Spock had somehow managed to control himself and drive him wild. Admittedly he passed out sometime between positions ten and whatever came next, having already come three times. Jim assumed Spock must have eventually achieved orgasm; he could feel dried trails on the insides of his thighs and between his cheeks.

"Spock?" he called out to empty air. The Vulcan was likely on shift. *Shit!* He wrestled with his restraints in the vain hope of scrabbling loose. What would the crew think if their captain simply didn't show up to do his duty. Or worse. What if his yeoman entered the room while he was trussed up like a rack of vine-ripened tomatoes ready for plucking?

The ties were secure; with a pounding heart, he ascertained that he really couldn't move. After a few moments of struggle, he gave in with a grudging acceptance of his helplessness. Spock most likely had already planned for this, the sneaky Vulcan, and if he hadn't then in his bondmate's mind it must be part of the game. That suited him fine; he was tired and sore all over, having not had much sleep. He relaxed as best he could, resigning himself to waiting until Spock returned.

He must have dozed; he jolted awake when the door swished open and his first officer and bondmate appeared at the end of the bed. For a moment they stared at each other until Spock raised an eyebrow.

"Care to explain this?" Jim asked saucily, rattling his wrists and ankles.

Spock folded his arms over his chest. Jim's eyes widened. It wasn't often Spock made such a Human gesture. The Vulcan glared at him, although behind the stern visage Jim knew something sharper and darker lurked.

"You are bonded to a Vulcan." Spock's voice was low, deliberately deep in his register, and so hot Jim's dick twitched, and a spike of arousal played his body like a violin string.

"Yeah?" Jim breathed.

"We do not think in the same way as Humans."

"I knew that."

"We are logical beings, priding ourselves on emotional control."

"You're not telling me anything I don't know, *bondmate*." Jim licked his lips, passing an erotic scene across the bond.

Spock threw himself on the bed, straddling Jim on all fours, hunger emanating from every pore. "You are provoking me, Jim."

Jim smirked. "That's the idea."

"Why?" Spock, for all his obvious arousal, looked into his eyes searchingly. "Why are you doing this?"

Jim had no answer for that, or at least, none that made sense. He shrugged.

"Jim, I am aware that you enjoyed our … union during my Time. However, you appear to have forgotten how shameful and painful it is for me to lose emotional control, and the social stigma still attached to that loss of control, including the abhorrence of violence. At the end of it, you were unable to walk, your body covered in wounds of my making. I would sooner end my own life than hurt you, Jim. And yet I shall never be able to expunge the memory of your blood dried into the sheets, smeared on my thighs, on my hands, and…"

The Vulcan trembled, visibly upset. He took a deep breath. "While the intimacy of that Time is … unparalleled, I do not look forward to the consequences of the *pon farr* in the slightest."

Warring emotions fought for dominance in Jim's heart. "I'm so sorry, Spock." What kind of a monster was he to forget the mental and emotional turmoil and pain of this gentle being he'd married? For the first time since leaving Mantis, he forced himself to face the reservations he

had about his new predilection for violent sexual fantasy. “I don’t understand it, myself. It’s this … compulsion.”

“Let me help.”

“How can I, when I don’t know what’s going on?”

Spock looked at Jim’s constrained nakedness with lust. “The constant memories you have been accessing of the last *pon farr* we endured, along with the violent sexual and erotic imagery you have shared over the bond have triggered a biological response. I checked with Doctor McCoy earlier today. My body is entering the Time of Mating, and within four days the blood fever shall be on me.”

“Seriously? Wow!” Jim couldn’t hold back his eager, guilty delight. And then realized his error as Spock frowned. “I mean, how is that even possible?” He thought for a moment. “But this is nothing like last time.”

“No. I do not recall any Vulcan account of partners stimulated to a faux *pon farr* outside of the normal rhythms and of course induction by artificial chemical means. You seem to have achieved what was never considered a possibility: the triggering of the Time by mere thought.”

Jim was chastened by this. “Oh.”

Spock shrugged. “In the interest of honesty, you will note that at no time did I refuse your advances, so the fault does not lie exclusively with you.”

He reached out to touch Jim, rubbing circles on the thigh beneath his right hand, then absently stroking seductively up and down the tingling flesh. “We now have no choice but to see this through.”

The Vulcan’s lust-blown eyes glittered like obsidian, and the mood shifted. “You have awoken ancient urges, and with them the instincts of the Old Ones. Perhaps you have not heard how warriors would confine their mates and jealously guard their chastity while the fires burned in their blood. Of course, the Fever lasts only two days. But the instinct to protect and isolate is activated up to a week in advance.”

Jim wasn’t a starship captain for nothing. He connected the dots.

“Right. So that’s why you’ve got me tied to the bed, covered in your spendings?”

Spock leaned over to capture Jim’s mouth in a possessive maul, one hand grabbing Jim’s cock and balls. Jim winced, but the strong fingers did not relent, digging into the sensitive skin.

“Huh, huh, huh,” Jim sucked the pleasure-pain through his teeth as Spock drew back. Spock’s eyes were fixed on his face.

“The problem presented to us currently is that we are traveling through a sector of space, which is not conducive to a situation in which both executive officers are absent from the bridge for five days. Therefore, you shall remain here at my pleasure, mate, and I shall come and go at will, sating myself in your body repeatedly before returning to duty. I shall maintain this as long as possible until the blood fever is upon me. I have informed Doctor McCoy of our status, and you are on medical leave.”

Jim groaned, his genitals painfully and deliciously hard in Spock's uncompromising grasp.

"Spock! Ah … I—" Spock changed the manner of his grip, tightly pulling at the steadily filling length.

"To know that I shall have the commanding officer of this vessel waiting on my leisure in my bed, and moaning for me to possess him…" The dark gaze glinted, and Jim heard the deep rumble of satisfaction that Spock felt at the thought. Spock increased the pace with which he masturbated Jim.

"And … Sp-Spock, uh…"

"Yes. I shall ensure that no one but myself sees you until the fires have burned in our blood. Come for me, bondmate."

At the command, Jim's orgasm overtook him, and he reflexively curled in on himself as far as the restraints allowed — which wasn't far; it emphasized Jim's extreme vulnerability tied up as he was. Spock kept milking him until he fell back, and then, holding Jim's eyes with an intense gaze, wiped his soiled hand on the sheets next to his captain. It was such an obvious marking of territory.

Jim heaved a deep breath and shuddered on the exhale, watching as Spock rose and made his way to the bathroom to wash his hands. He whined a little, still unable to string words together.

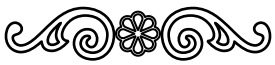
Spock returned and sat on the bed beside him, placing a hand on Jim's vulnerable stomach soothingly.

"Yes, I know. Already you feel it, don't you?"

Jim nodded. The embers were glowing along their bond, throbbing and hot. Spock's grasp tightened, fingernails digging into the flesh. Jim moaned. "Spock! Aren't you going to…?"

"Unnecessary. However, note well that I shall be exacting double when I next return." The first officer stood, straightening his uniform to its usual impeccable state. No one would be able to tell when he returned to the bridge that minutes before he had been applying the sweetest torture to the captain.

Jim watched him go, his heart rate still normalizing, feeling the sweat drying on his forehead and torso.



The following morning Jim woke with his face turned to the side on the pillow, tied up in such a way that he was kneeling face down, his hands tied to his ankles, his knees spread wide. He realized his body had been carefully positioned close to the edge of the bed so that he could be taken efficiently at the perfect angle. There was even less possibility of movement in this position than there had been the day before, and he was so exposed.

Into the bargain, after a moment he became aware that his ass was full. Okay. He narrowed his eyes in suspicion. It was just as well that Spock had released him last night after locking the door to their quarters. It was a relief to be able to walk around.

Spock's insistence that he not let Jim out of his sight led to some slight humiliation, when Spock insisted on overseeing Jim's use of the toilet, and in showering with him (another opportunity to demonstrate his claim once more, Jim pressed up against the tiles).

He did not allow Jim to dress, and Jim's meal had been edible pieces at Spock's fingers. Spock had become stroppy when Jim pushed the boundaries and tried to do anything for himself. In any case, Jim was thankful his bodily needs for the moment were sated.

All, that is, except one.

Jim turned inwards, focusing on the bond, and projecting his thoughts along with it.

Sometimes Spock would play hard to get, and Jim would feel like a sailor reeling in an anchor from unfathomable depths in an endless coil. Today was not such a day, thankfully, although Spock was toying with him like a cat toying with a goldfish in a bowl.

Hey, mister. What's the deal with the position you've left me in? And more to the point, how the hell did you manage to stuff the biggest butt plug we have in our collection into me while I was still asleep? I know I sleep heavily, but—

I gave your mind suggestions to the effect that deep sleep was greatly desired. It gave me the time to use you once more and to ensure that my essence remains in you throughout the day.

Jim groaned mentally. *You know there's no reason to keep claiming me. I'm yours.*

A growl.

It was dirty pool, Spock. Dirty pool. As if it couldn't get dirtier, Jim nearly leaped upright despite his confinement as the object plunged deep into his ass and buzzed, its tip right against his prostate.

Fuck, Spock! You're a monster!

Purring now. *Have you not heard the saying: 'As you sow, so shall you reap'? You are now reaping the rewards of your lascivious thoughts. And as you now know, it is not the largest of our toys I have chosen, but the most effective. It is always logical to use the tool best suited to the task.*

Right. Spock chose the vibrating butt plug, the control of which could be operated remotely. The signal was tied into the computer systems, which meant it didn't matter where Spock was on the ship; he could still drive Jim wild at the press of a button. It had twelve different speeds. It was beginning to dawn on Jim that he was in for a *very* long day.

Resolve formed within him. *Two can play at this. I declare the game on!*

For the rest of the day, from time to time he bombarded his bondmate with wild, sexually alluring, violent images. Each time he did, Spock activated the control on the butt plug. The problem was Spock didn't keep the damned thing going long enough for Jim to come.

By the fifth attempt, he was painfully hard.

Are you prepared to surrender? Spock's smug mind voice asked. Jim grit his teeth. *No fucking way. I'm not begging.*

Oh, Jim. You have no idea. You will plead for my cock before this is over.

I'm not going to let you win, you bastard!

I look forward to the time when you will sob for me to fill you.

Not going to happen. The plug went off, on its most intense setting. Jim cried out, his body vibrating, focused on that molten core that refused to erupt. The sensation stopped.

Submit, bondmate. Submission is something you want desperately.

No, it isn't! Jim cried, though he knew it to be a lie, and he could feel his resolve crumbling. This was exactly what he'd been craving…

The plug went off again, a gyrating, pulsing pattern. He yearned to rub himself against the bedspread, but tied in this position he was unable to do anything about getting the friction his weeping cock so desperately needed. At the same time, his fantasies are wild. He imagines the plug growing, growing, until he is split down the middle…

After another hour, Jim gave way to sobbing, pleading with Spock to come and relieve him. He went limp, losing the sense of himself until he felt the plug gently removed and replaced with hot flesh sinking deep into his channel.

Ah! Yes! Spock!

His mate plunged into the well-stretched hole repeatedly for hours, studiously avoiding Jim's prostate. A strong hand wrapped around Jim's painful sex and began to strip it repeatedly in the same rhythm as the probing thrusts. There was nothing gentle at all about this fucking; it was perfect — except for the fact that Jim was desperate, so desp—

"Spock!" Jim shouted, fire erupting through him and burning everything to ash in incandescence. He saw stars as Spock hammered his prostate mercilessly, going limp in his bondage under the assault. Spock came, his emission shooting deep into Jim's body. Jim was barely conscious of Spock's withdrawal. The plug going back in stirred him, its fat girth stretching oversensitive skin.

Spock grasped Jim's buttocks, digging his fingernails into the lush globes. Awareness returned to Jim as sharp teeth sank into one flank, but he was so enervated all he could do was moan weakly.

"Did I not say that you would plead for me? Beg me?"

"Umph."

"It is currently the hour for lunch. I shall show consideration this afternoon."

"Uhm," Jim grunted, his eyes closing despite himself.

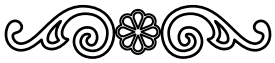
He barely took in Spock's parting words, replete with smug satisfaction: "It pleases me to see you so thoroughly fucked out that you lack words."

At another time, Jim might have felt the stirrings of arousal at Spock's uncharacteristic use of language. This time he was already dozing, and let it go.

The rest of the afternoon was sweet torture. Jim started awake when the vibe in his ass jolted — and kept going until Jim came with a sharp cry, shocked at the suddenness of his arousal, and its equally swift conclusion. Thereafter, Spock started experimenting with the settings on the vibrator. The "consideration" he showed his mate was to allow the vibrations to continue until Jim came, at least offering some relief to his need.

Spock took him again when he returned to their quarters, although by this stage Jim was beyond speech. He sensed distantly through the bond that some primal instinct in Spock to ensure his mate's compliance had been met; this time he maneuvered a compliant Jim up, helping to ease cramped muscles before directing him in using the bathroom and feeding him something sustaining.

The next day, while Jim was tethered to the bed by an ankle, it was a token only. Jim was lost in a haze in which he was only aware of Spock, of Spock's commands, Spock's voice, Spock's need and his own overwhelming compulsion to meet it. Spock once again visited him at breaks throughout the day, and Jim was passive in accepting Spock's advances.



"Jim?"

Jim stuttered awake, blinking to clear his vision. Huh? "Jim!"

That was the voice of his bondmate. Should he be responding? Something twigged in the back of his mind, but he couldn't act on it.

"Jim, listen to my voice." Jim nodded dozily. He could listen to that voice forever, to its sweet intonations, the comforting burr when it dropped…

"Jim!" A hand on the side of his face trained his gaze on brown eyes flecked with worry. "I want you to name five things you see. What do you see, Jim?"

"B-brown."

"Good. That's one. Another."

"Nose." It felt like it came from far away but was drawing closer.

"Light, hair, mouth." That mouth really was sinful. He couldn't look away.

"Excellent. Four things you feel. Four sensations. Come now, name them for me," his mate demanded.

Gradually, Spock led him back to awareness. When he was fully conscious, Jim pushed himself up to lean back against the pillows. Spock was looking at him with a mix of worry, concern, relief, and guilt, one hand either side of Jim's hips.

"What happened?"

Spock pulled back, sitting on the edge of the bed. He was wearing his oldest, most comfortable robe.

“Forgive me, Jim.”

“Why?” Jim shook his head. “Just tell me what happened.” He slowly reached out a hand to touch Spock’s arm. The Vulcan hung his head, not even attempting to hide the potent emotions he was feeling. Through the bond, Jim could feel the fire building in Spock and knew the fever would take hold fully in the next twelve to twenty-four hours. This was a reprieve, a brief clearing of a blue sky before the storm clouds closed in.

“I pushed you so deeply into subspace that you were almost lost.” Spock reached for the glass on the bedside table and handed it to Jim.

Jim drank thirstily. “Oh,” he said, handing the glass back.

“I never wished to hurt or harm you. I’d sooner end my own life than damage you in any way, Jim.”

“Well, you know I’ve always liked it rough. I mean, that’s how we’ve ended up here, isn’t it? My uncontrolled fantasies.” Jim couldn’t hold back the remorseful bitterness from his own voice. The dark beast within ran its claws down the inside of his heart.

Spock’s tortured eyes found his own. “Why do you desire this? Why, Jim? You could not offer an answer, before.”

Jim looked at his mate closely. “I’m sorry, Spock.” He could see how this was affecting the Vulcan. He reached out a hand to Spock’s arm and grasped softly, then rubbed up and down soothingly. “I can’t explain it.”

“When did the fantasies start?”

Jim hesitated for a moment, as though reluctant to divulge a guilty secret. “After Mantis. The wrestling match we watched.”

Spock looked at him blankly. “A display of slaves competing in an arena.”

“Come on, Spock, you know it was more than that.”

Something like jealousy flitted through Spock’s eyes before he looked away. “I saw the King whispering in your ear.”

“Yeah. He was telling me about how it used to be in ancient times…”

“I recognized the ritualistic elements in the display. They were in some ways similar to what was depicted in certain ancient Vulcan wallpaintings. I was unaffected by it.”

“But since then, I’ve been unable to get it out of my mind. The successful competitor would devour the competition after mating with them,” Jim mused.

“Starfleet abhors violence and slavery; those elements of the society will be carefully assessed, should Mantis make application for membership of the Federation. I still fail to comprehend how that display could have a lasting impact for you, Jim.”

“The only thing I can think of is that maybe something’s been triggered by seeing it. But I don’t know.”

Silence lapsed for a few moments.

“I feared you would never arise from the mental space you entered; it was beyond my power to connect mentally with you in that phase. It was as though you had slipped beyond the call of the bond itself, losing your individuation. I was…” Spock bit his lip and turned away. It was a big admission for the Vulcan to make. “We have experimented previously with submission and domination, and neither of us found it expressed what we desired for ourselves or each other. But what you have been projecting through the bond goes beyond submission and domination. I find it…”

Jim waited. Spock hadn’t yet finished, and Jim sensed he was building to something.

“I feel … I *feel*,” Spock tasted the word, owning something foreign to his normal spoken vocabulary. “I find the violence in your fantasies terrifying.”

Jim took a deep breath. Here was his mate, a being he loved, lost and floundering, and it was Jim’s fault. He was overcome with remorse and contrition and worry at what was going on in his own mind.

“I’m so sorry, Spock. I’ve violated your boundaries — the one person I vowed to honor.”

“Yes. But that does not explain why they have hooked into my own awareness, my instinct. Or why they have triggered … *this*.”

Spock jetted to his feet and began to pace, agitation in every step. He said nothing, the tension growing to fever pitch. The hackles on the back of Jim’s neck stood on end, his subconscious sensing the danger his rational mind knew was all too real.

“Talk to me, Spock.” More pacing.

“You’re angry.”

“Yes!” Spock bellowed. And then looked shocked and dismayed by his outburst. More quietly: “My people are right to castrate themselves emotionally in the *kolinahr*, to rid themselves of the ancient, destructive urges. These … violent and distasteful tendencies should be cauterized from the *katra*, excised with the sharpest of knives so that they cannot do damage to those we … those … we love.” Spock’s whole body heaved.

Jim rose carefully from the bed and wrapped his arms gently around the agonized form of his bondmate. “If you cut out your emotions, you wouldn’t be able to love or know how much you are loved,” he whispered into an ear.

“No emotion is preferable to strong, uncontrollable, destructive feelings,” the sullen reply came. But in the circle of his arms, Jim felt his mate calming reluctantly.

“Even these? You were terrified because you thought you almost lost me. I’m ashamed that I inspired such fear in you, Spock. At the end of the day, you shouldn’t be held ransom over my dysfunction.”

“Nor you over mine.” Spock’s words were edged in sharp steel as he pushed Jim away.

Laughter bubbled up from within Jim, illogical, inappropriate, ironic — and tension-breaking.

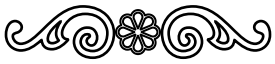
Spock looked at him in surprise, blinking. Jim raised a hand to Spock's face, brushing his thumb along his cheekbone.

"We're a fine pair, aren't we? Perhaps we should both have counseling after this is over."

The last of Spock's agitation melted away. "That would please the doctor no end," he commented wryly. The Vulcan took Jim to himself, pressing their bodies together with an aching sweetness as he buried his face in Jim's neck. His fingers wove themselves into the hairs at the back of the man's neck. "You have always accepted me, accepted the duality I battle. Help me to understand, Jim. Help me to understand why you wanted me to do violence to you, the one I cherish above all others and all else in existence?"

The blood fever was coming, and Jim knew there would soon be nothing between them. Spock would join their minds and would see all that was there, including those things buried so deeply Jim himself didn't know what they were. Soon he would be charged with holding the fullness of Spock's psyche as it plunged deep into his own, revealing all, even those things Jim didn't want to face, and if he were honest, had been avoiding…

It was best to face this now. He took a deep breath, steeling his courage: "Then meld with me, and see the truth."



Since their bonding, Spock had found it increasingly easy to slip into shared mindspace with his mate. Now it was a heightened experience, iridescence swirling around and between them, their minds recognizing each other joyously. Spock wondered whether this intimacy was a product of longevity and frequency of melding — the phenomenon of the two becoming one — or related to the incipient blood fever. Spock remembered little of their last Time, though he was sure this breathtaking beauty would have remained with him had it been like this. What it heralded he could not say, but he welcomed it.

His mind moved to mesh with Jim's, and he was surrounded by a sense of *home*. This close to Jim's mind, he knew Jim felt something similar. Jim was open to him; Spock always felt a humbling reverence moving deeper into his mate's psyche, knowing the vulnerability and trust this man placed in him. It prompted his own response of self-offering to the one whose being shone like the sun and dazzled in many-splendored hues.

I hope you can make sense of this, Jim's awareness expressed. Spock felt a tug, drawing him onwards. In the background the flames of fever licked. Deeper and deeper Jim pulled him until they came to a space that was veiled. Jim clearly couldn't move the veil aside or pass beyond it. On its outside, disjointed images played, and strong feelings circled, threads of energy weaving in and out of the thoughts displayed. Spock had the sense that Jim had replayed these thoughts and images a hundred times and still couldn't interpret their meaning or penetrate the veil behind.

Spock did not remember this veil or its mystery. They had melded many times, had been open to each other, holding nothing back. So why would Jim conceal this?

Well, it's not like I did it deliberately, Jim defended.

No. Spock pondered. *Your mind is complex, multilayered, and while you have your own logic and order, it is not disciplined in the same way a Vulcan mind might be. That is no criticism, merely an observation. It is possible that you yourself choose not to acknowledge this part of your mind in conscious acts of will.*

Right. That makes sense. Kind of.

For a while, Spock observed the thoughts and images.

I'm sorry, Spock, Jim apologized, an almost suffocating feeling of self-effacement clouding around them, along with threads of embarrassment.

Why are you embarrassed? The images and thoughts were mostly what Spock had been expecting: the lurid memories of their last Time, and the myriad of ways they had joined bodies over the years and given each other pleasure. Here, in this deep place, they throbbed with erotic power. Spock channeled the energy out to the flames for the moment, so as not to be a distraction.

Uh, um. Exposure?

Jim, do you not understand? I am honored that you are willing to share these thoughts with me, in spite of either of our reservations about them.

Spock turned his attention back to the memories, noticing the emerging patterns. All of them involved the violence of Jim taken and forced by Spock in some way to surrender his control, his priorities. It surprised Spock that this ideation was so deeply embedded in Jim's psyche. He wondered with some trepidation what awaited him behind the curtain.

It was time to find out. Moving closer, he ran a mental finger down the sheer fabric, which shuddered and parted for him. Passing through what seemed to be a membrane, Spock had the curious sensation that some sort of virginity was giving way before him. He went carefully, Jim's awareness not quite keeping pace with his own, almost hiding behind him.

It took a few moments for what he was seeing to register and be interpreted. A naked image of Jim, its face in an ugly contortion, stood before a mirror. The image was talking to its reflection.

Utterly worthless. From the moment you were born you were unwanted — your own mother couldn't bring herself to give you the breast. Nobody wants a useless piece of shit already unwanted. Good-for-nothing, useless. It's what you deserve. Nothing good in life will ever come to you. You deserve only pain and suffering for even being born. Pathetic little boy whimpering for his mother. Whoever thought you'd make a good captain had to have rocks in their head.

The only thing you're good for is a good fuck. Frank was right. Kodos was right. Slut! You'd do anything, bend over, and spread for anyone, just for a crust, for a crumb of affection. Did all

those lovers ever know what you truly are? Just you wait until he finds out. He'll sever the bond in a heartbeat and leave you for dead. You can't trust anyone.

Each idea was like an etheric cord that plunged into the body of the reflected image, making it wince, or moan, or gasp. At first those reactions came across as pain, which they were—

Spock felt the deep tearing in Jim's psyche. But as it went on, he realized those reactions were also associated with arousal.

So what if you're bonded? You know it's going to end, right? They all leave in the end — because you're useless to them. Good for a fuck, and then die. Pretty face, blue eyes — everyone wants to fuck that. That's all he wants you for, you know, your looks.

What could Spock possibly see in you? You're nothing but trailer trash. And you'll never win his approval. You just want him because he offers you something, but you know you're both warped. You want him to be your mummy, to nurture and care for you, and you want him to be your daddy, to protect and defend you. But what you really want, because you're a cock-whore, is for him to take you, take you, take you. To split you — like Frank did. Because it's what you deserve.

The reflected image was crying, and now looked like a small, lost boy. The naked adult standing before Spock with its back to him appeared increasingly like a Machiavellian godfather, stooped and cruel. A whip appeared in its hand, and it raised it, bringing it down with a rippling crack. The boy in the mirror flinched.

I'm going to beat you until that attitude, those pussy-weak dependencies are whipped out of you. It's all you deserve. How dare you want anything? How dare you ask for happiness? It's all an illusion; they'll get you in the end. You'll end up in creeping darkness. And when you do —

Enough! Spock declared, stepping forward. He didn't need to hear more of this, didn't need to witness the abuse. The wizened figure turned its hateful, empty eyes towards the Vulcan's mental emanation — too late, for he applied the equivalent of a nerve pinch. The figure dropped, paralyzed.

Jim, I believe the prudent action would be to destroy this mirror.

His mate was standing over the prone figure and gave it a solid kick to its genitals.

Do not do that. You do not want to become what it is.

What is it? Do you know what it is, Spock?

I suspect this creature represents your superego, that which should have protected you, cared for you — the internal parent.

If that's so, Jim reasoned, *then—*

—the child in the mirror is your id, that which needs to be nurtured, and represents playfulness, freedom, spontaneity.

Jim looked back at the decrepit body. *Is it dead?*

No. It is sedated, for now. I could not stand by…

I know, Spock. Jim caressed his cheek.

Smash the mirror, Jim, and I believe you will free the child.

But his mate delayed. Why was he delaying?

What am I, then? What do I represent?

The ego. The warrior. The captain of men.

But what will happen if I free the child? What if it goes wild?

Spock looked patiently at his mate. *You fear the child.*

Yes.

Because you fear vulnerability, weakness.

Yes! It wasn't something Jim wanted to admit. And… *Because people accused me of being such a child at the Academy.*

Doctor McCoy. I suspect it was convenient for you to play out other aspects of the child, if for no other reason than to taunt authority to act as you expect authority to act with cruelty, sadistically, and punitively.

Speechless, Jim nodded once. *I guess?*

I am no expert in Human psychology. However, it appears to me that the issue at hand concerns the integration of the disparate parts of yourself. Smash the mirror and free the child, Jim, he urged softly*. It is the only way to begin the path of integration of the self.*

Jim kicked out, and the mirror shattered. The figure on the floor disappeared. *Where'd they go?*

The greatest illusion is that the parts of the self are separate. They are here, Jim.

Spock reached a hand to Jim's breast. *They need to be accepted without judgment; they simply are.*

But that bastard—

Yes. And while you wanted to protect the child, don't forget that he represents pure impulse and is always seeking to get his own way. Both of them need to be dealt with lovingly and firmly, accepted as part of yourself. And you need to develop the capacity not to act out of their positions.

So … this violence stuff is related…

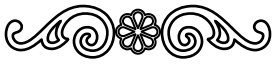
…to your inner conflicts. Yes. A submission kink is different from desiring annihilation as a punishment for existence.

Right, Jim murmured doubtfully. *I'm not sure I like this.*

The flames were encroaching now that the barrier had disappeared. They were no longer in a closed off space in Jim's mind, and they could feel the building of tension in the bond. Tension which would need to be resolved soon.

Spock brushed Jim's cheek gently, like a breeze on a summer's day. *Jim, you are unutterably precious to me. I accept all of who you are, as you have accepted me. Accept yourself.*

They joined awareness once more in a kiss that was beyond a kiss, and broke the meld.



Jim's face was wet with tears — and so was Spock's. The look in his bondmate's eyes, Jim thought, was both completely magnetic, and something he would never forget: a mix of sorrow, devotion, and selfless love.

Spock brushed a hand through Jim's hair possessively as he took Jim's mouth in a kiss and guided him over to the bed. He pushed Jim down, stretching out over his mate. The sweetness of this was to Jim like the scent of jasmine and honeysuckle on a summer's eve, languid, everlasting, and poignant.

Spock broke away so they could breathe, and as he did, Jim felt the fire flooding the bond. But this was different. Spock was different. He was different. There was no word for the strength or intensity of the emotions surging into him through the bond. They ebbed and flowed around him in gentle waves of energy: love, passion, fierce protection, cherishing, treasuring, worship, tenderness, and an endless gift of self, overwhelming him.

How could he hold the fullness of Spock? How could he, one Human vessel, hope to contain the being of the one to whom his own life was bound? And what could he give in return? No giving of himself would ever plumb his own depths. With the inner shackles released, Jim wanted to pour himself into Spock's hands in a perfect trust that Spock would hold him, just as he had vowed his life's purpose to upholding his mate. Deep in the inmost places, Jim released barriers he hadn't been conscious of holding, allowing vulnerability, and the pulse of his *t'hy'la's* tenderness flooded his being.

Tears began to fall unconsciously down Spock's cheeks, the overwhelming emotions flickering between them bathing the bond and driving the flames higher, like fuel poured on a fire.

"You will let me love you, bondmate. Surrender to me by my surrender," the Vulcan crooned. He slipped off his robe without leaving his position on top of Jim. Keeping their eyes locked, Spock ran his fingers over Jim's flesh, mapping the curves and bumps, the dips, crests, and valleys of thighs, belly, and abdomen.

Each brush sent courses of current through Jim's body, and rivers of delight through his soul. Following his fingers and palms came kisses — the sort of kisses made by supplicants on the bronze toes of gods, each a prayer, a petition, an act of worship.

Spock knew his bondmate's body, knew all the places to touch to play him like a lyre. Those deft fingers massaged with the exact amount of pressure to make Jim's body sing; those sinful lips trailed, soft as velvet, moist and dry in turns, setting Jim's nerves alight and making him shudder.

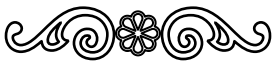
“Sp—!” he begged, half-choking as he arched beneath Spock’s relentless, generous touch.

Oh, he ached for cool hands to take his weeping hardness, for a wet mouth to suck him into silken heat, for anything! And it was denied. He found he didn’t know what to do with his hands. Spock was licking and sucking the thin skin at the crease of thigh and pelvis, all the way down to—

“Ah!” Jim writhed, Spock’s weight confining him wordlessly, his own hands clutching the comforter that covered the bed. The bond itself was growing, filling out with need, just as the Vulcan cock was stiffening beyond its usual engorgement. Jim welcomed it, yearning for completion he could only find in the bondmate who his defender was, his cherisher.

Yes! Come in me! He pleaded mentally. And Spock’s wildly joyful response filled Jim’s awareness.

Buoyed by the unfathomable, incomprehensible love of his mate, Jim was lost. And found. And lost and found again.



He didn’t know how long it had been since he’d last been conscious of himself. The fires were banked for now — that much was a cool relief, and he lay face down and partially draped over Spock’s exhausted body. Jim rolled over and pushed himself up onto his elbows, feeling the complaint of well-used muscles in his thighs and flanks.

Spock stirred.

Jim watched the dark lashes flutter and then open on tired eyes. Moved by the contentment between them and what it signified; Jim kissed Spock’s chest before moving up to kiss him properly.

“Mmmmmh,” Spock moaned, and they ended the kiss. The Vulcan’s hand cupped Jim’s cheek, brushing the stubbled skin with a thumb. “Do you understand now?”

Jim didn’t have to search his thoughts for an answer: the fire might have abated, but it had left behind a union purified and strengthened. Jim delighted in the closeness and intimacy. It was as though they breathed together, their hearts beating in tandem, their thoughts springing from neither and both their minds, their minds still one after the renewal of the bond. He nodded, speechless. Having tasted this holy thing, he wanted the tenderness and free affection of the last day to last an eternity.

“Did we not promise this three and a half years ago? That we would ‘love and cherish’ each other?” Spock asked gently, infinite fondness in his voice.

“Yes,” Jim admitted with a sigh, “we did. But could either of us have known what was going to unfold? How life and events give new meaning to those promises?”

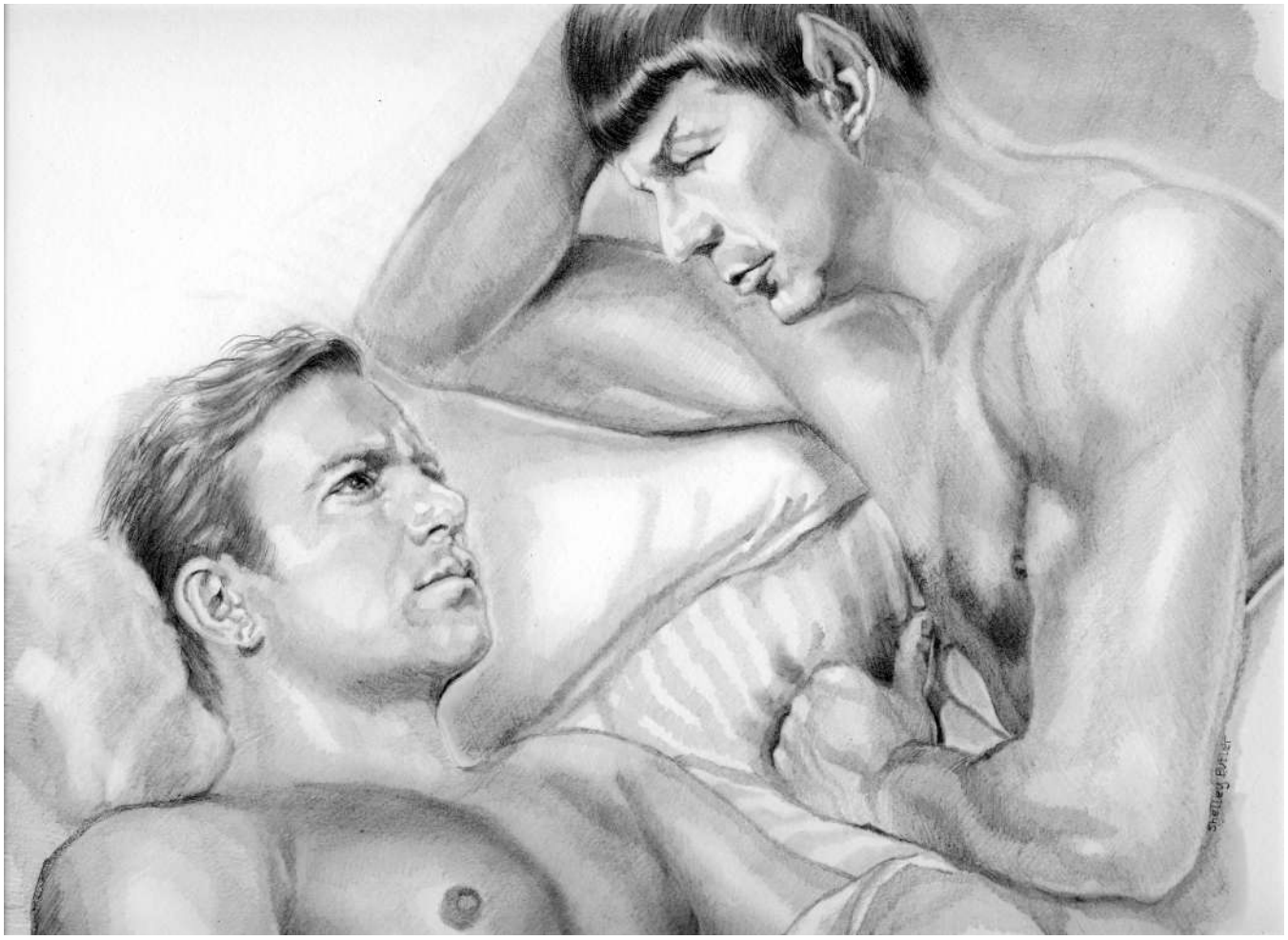
He saw now that the area where he had shattered the dreadful mirror was full of a profusion of flowers putting forth a heady scent. He felt cleansed, the need for violence expunged. In fact,

violence was so antithetical to this state of being it felt like sacrilege even to contemplate it intruding in this … paradise.

“What can I say? ‘I love you, Spock,’ isn’t big enough.”

Then we shall cherish each other, Spock murmured through the bond, *and that shall be enough.*

So Beautiful
by Shelley Butler



Parted From Me, and Never Parted
by MoonNewt66

Summary: Two weeks after the events in *Star Trek: Generations* Spock reflects on his relationship with James T. Kirk. And how Spock can fulfill a promise he made to Kirk more than 106 years prior.

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Prologue: Delta Vega — 2265

Captain Kirk's first personal request of Spock had been asked the day following the memorial services held on the *Enterprise* hangar deck for the ten crew members who were killed by the energy field at the barrier of the Milky Way galaxy. Six of the eight crew members left instructions to be buried in space, two wanted to be buried on their home worlds and were now in stasis in the ship's morgue.

Gary Mitchell and Elizabeth Dehner had been buried on Delta Vega. Actually, they had been cremated; their ashes had been strewn over a wide expanse of the planet. Captain Kirk wasn't going to take any chances with either Mitchell or Dehner somehow being revived, energized, reanimated, resurrected or zombified.

The following day, Captain Kirk promoted Spock to first officer of the *Enterprise* to replace Gary Mitchell. Spock would also continue in his role as the science officer. Surprising everyone, including Spock.

Following the promotions ceremony, Captain Kirk asked Spock if he could meet with him in Spock's quarters. As they entered, Kirk immediately noticed the increase of temperature, and the increased gravity in Spock's quarters. It was the first time he had been inside Spock's quarters. Kirk was also struck by how alien looking Spock's quarters looked — which was odd, because by now, Kirk had adjusted his view of Spock as a fellow officer, a friend, and not that of an alien.

As Spock entered his quarters, he pulled out his ornately carved wooden Vulcan chair in back of his desk for Kirk to sit in. Kirk bypassed it; sitting in the guest chair at the front of the desk instead. Spock's curiosity as to why Kirk wanted to meet with Spock in *his* quarters was piqued by Kirk's actions.

Kirk began speaking, looking directly at Spock, "I very rarely ask for promises from anyone. I had asked this of Gary, and now that he's … gone, I would like to ask this of you. When … if I should die while in service, I would like to ask you to make sure that I am buried with my family in Riverside, Iowa, on Earth. I … I promised my parents that I would, and it's a promise I would

like to keep. If that's not possible, then I would prefer to be cremated, and my ashes to be interred on Earth. I have mentioned this in my will, and there is a proviso in my Starfleet records. But I'd also like to have a friend who is aware of this. Is this something you could be, uh, comfortable in accepting and following through on?"

Spock immediately promised Kirk that he would honor his request to the best of his ability. And he understood now why Kirk had wanted to meet in Spock's quarters. Kirk had wanted Spock to have the "home advantage," so that Spock would not feel pressured by his commanding officer to make a promise based only on duty or loyalty; to allow Spock the choice to make a promise based on friendship.

Spock made the promise, and perhaps the first true friend in his life.

Flashback: Vulcan — ShiKahr — S'chn T'gai home — 2232

The lights are low within the home, except for the bedroom of their son, Spock. His mother, Amanda, is reading to him from his favorite book, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. The book has been Amanda's favorite since she was a child, and she is delighted that she can share this book with her son. It's her third reading of the book to Spock, and at age two, he's already making out a good percentage of the words to read with her.

They come to a stopping point when little Spock, wearing his blue sleeping gown, yawns three times in succession. I'Chaya lifts his head at the side of the bed and pushes against the book with his muzzle. Amanda laughs lightly, and pets I'Chaya on the head, telling him thank you.

She helps Spock snuggle down into his bed, fluffing his pillow for him, pulling up an extra blanket over him. Then, she leans in, and using her right index finger, traces the small angular eyebrows on Spock's face. Then she kisses each eyelid, softly whispering "eye winker;" kisses his nose, again whispering "nose smeller;" kisses his mouth, whispering "mouth eater;" kisses his chin, whispering "chin chopper;" then tickles very gently under his tiny chin, whispering "gobble, gobble, gobble, gobble."

By that time, Spock was almost sound asleep. His hands had relaxed; his legs were starting to fold into his favorite fetal position. This was the ritual her own grandmother had used with her at bedtime, and she had longed for a child of her own to partake in this ritual.

What a wonderful, loving, intelligent, respectful son she and Sarek were raising. While thinking of Sarek, she heard his footsteps behind her, as he came into Spock's bedroom. He kissed the top of Amanda's head, then leaned down, and kissed Spock on the side of his face. He ran his right index and middle fingers along Spock's psi points; lowering his own psi shields; briefly accessing Spock's mind, wishing him a good night's rest.

Sarek helped Amanda to stand up; as they embraced, they gazed fondly on their son.

Schrödinger's Kirk — 2371

It was winter on Romulus, and Spock was not comfortable. The winter cold affected his 141-year-old ankle, knee, and hip joints. In addition, approximately two weeks ago, the seventy-eight years long dormant *t'hy'la* bond that Spock had with his husband, James, had inexplicably become extremely functional.

Spock could feel, through the bond, that Jim was concerned, frightened, confused somewhat, yet determined. The determination was a quality of Jim's that Spock recognized the most. There seemed to be someone with Jim, wherever that was, there was a goal to be reached, and they were in pursuit of a quarry. Then, an extreme amount of fear came through the bond, followed by excruciating pain, and Spock could hear Jim thinking about how he yearned for Spock.

Spock concentrated, thought of his love for Jim, and projected with all his *katra*, his inner self, calling out *ashayam* toward Jim. Spock heard a muted reply from Jim, "Oh, my," and then the bond imploded within his head.

In its place, an excruciating headache bloomed; an extreme sense of despair and longing filled him. Spock had been trying to alleviate it all with extensive meditation since then.

Which is why Spock was out walking in the cold, on an overcast bleak windy day, towards the apothecary shop, to obtain, if possible, local remedies for his ailments. (As Spock had no official Romulan ID, he couldn't access the Romulan medical establishment.)

A citizen approaching him from behind, fell into step with Spock, and at the same, placed a hand on Spock's upper left arm. Spock glanced to his left — astonished to see that Commander Data (disguised as a Romulan), was walking alongside with him.

They continued walking to the apothecary shop, Spock made his purchases; they returned to Spock's home. Once there, Commander Data set up a device that would mask their conversation from anyone who might be listening; especially any electronic listening devices that the Romulan secret police, the Tal Shiar, could be employing.

Spock made some tea for them both; joining Data at the kitchen table, where the device had been placed.

"Ambassador, I've been dispatched by Captain Picard to relay a message."

Spock asked, "Is this in regard to the recent loss of the *Enterprise D*?"

"It is regarding the events that occurred during that mission, sir. Captain Picard encountered another Starfleet Captain trapped in the Nexus, who assisted Captain Picard in defeating Soran, and saving the inhabitants of Veridian IV. However, the other Starfleet captain and Soran were killed, Captain Picard alone survived."

Data reached out for his cup of tea, and Spock noted that Data's hand was slightly shaking. Data sipped his tea and looked up at Spock. The Vulcan observed Data's eyes appeared to be leaking moisture.

“Sir, Captain Picard sent me to convey his regrets; that I am to inform you of the identity of the other Starfleet captain. The officer…”

Spock interrupted Data, “Captain Kirk was there as well?”

“Yes, sir. He had been trapped in the Nexus since the accident on the *Enterprise B*. Captain Picard stated that Captain Kirk spoke fondly of you. The *Enterprise* crew was rescued by the *USS Farragut*, and Captain Picard convinced her captain to return to where Captain Picard buried Captain Kirk and return him home. Captain Picard wanted to apprise you. Also, to ascertain if you would like to return with me, and help escort Captain Kirk home?”

Spock had promised Kirk to return him home so many, many years ago. It was a promise he would keep.

Flashback: Vulcan — 2246

By age sixteen, Spock knew two things with certainty. He most certainly did *not* want to attend the Vulcan Science Academy and he *did* want to attend Starfleet Academy. His father, Sarek, wanted him to follow his teachings, and attend the Vulcan Science Academy. When Spock broached the subject of attending Starfleet Academy, Sarek advised that he would cut off family funds to prevent Spock in trying to accomplish that.

Spock, having a somewhat stubborn personality, went to his great-grandmother, T’Pau. He carefully elucidated his reasons for not attending the Vulcan Science Academy, and for wanting to attend Starfleet Academy. And, he explained to T’Pau how he could earn the credits himself to buy passage to Earth on his own. Once there, he would petition for emancipation, so that he would be considered an adult (by Federation law, which was contrary to Vulcan cultural norms), and he could apply to Starfleet for an early admission to the academy at seventeen.

He had already been earning credits tutoring other students since he was twelve. He had made inquiries at the shipyard at ShiKahr and found that quite a few of the merchant vessels would provide passage to Earth, if he worked as their computer administrator, plus earn a stipend. If he left within the next two weeks, it would take almost nine months to reach Earth (on impulse power). That, hopefully, would leave him plenty of time to file his lawsuit for emancipation. He had located a youth hostelry that would provide him a single room for an economical rate, even for San Francisco.

Spock didn’t hesitate when T’Pau asked to meld with her great-grandson. He knelt before T’Pau, dropping his psychic shields. Spock had melded with T’Pau on three prior occasions: the day of his birth, to establish a family bond; at his bonding ceremony to T’Pring, to judge the completeness of the bond; and at the completion of his *kahs-wan* that same year.

T’Pau’s mind meld was brief. She inhaled sharply after she released Spock from the meld.

T’Pau advised Spock that she would consider his plan and would respond within two days. Spock thanked her and promptly left. T’Pau considered the situation. Her grandson, Sarek, was loyal enough to her; but also had his own personal quirks and agenda that often did not

compare with T'Pau's. T'Pau remembered when she had first disagreed with Sarek's decision to marry the Human, Amanda. But the events at P'Jem left her little choice but to accept Sarek's choice of a mate.

T'Pau signaled for her aide. Asked him to contact Admiral Dobesh at Starfleet Headquarters on Earth. Time to cash in on a favor owed.

T'Pau reflected on how stirring the soup improved the flavor.

Veridian III — 2371

Klingon Captain K'Vada bade farewell to Spock and Data as they took their positions on his ship's transporter pads. Captain K'Vada had delivered Captain Picard and Data to Romulus three years prior and had insisted that he and his crew have the honor of returning Spock and Data from Romulus. The Klingon transporter officer beamed Spock and Data over to the *USS Farragut*.

Materializing aboard the *Farragut*, Spock and Data were greeted by *Farragut's* officers, Captain Elaine Sutter, First Officer Commander Ron Winchester, Chief Medical Officer Kate Allison; and by a complement of officers from the *Enterprise D* — Captain Picard, Commander Riker, Lieutenant Commander Worf, Commander Troi, Doctor Crusher and Lieutenant Commander LaForge. Commander Data stepped off the transporter pad to join his crew mates.

All the *Farragut* and *Enterprise D* officers came to attention at the order of Captain Sutter. The official Starfleet "Honors" music was piped into the transporter room.

Ambassador Spock received this honor with equanimity. When the honors were completed, Spock addressed Captain Sutter, "Permission to come aboard, Captain?"

"Permission granted," replied Captain Sutter. "Both Doctor Allison and Doctor Crusher would like to see you in sickbay immediately. And then, please join Captain Picard and me in my ready room."

Both Doctors Allison and Crusher walked with Spock to *Farragut's* sickbay. Doctor Allison addressed Spock, "Commander Data related to us that you appeared to be having trouble adjusting your body to colder weather. It's winter on Earth also at this time, and we would like to see if we can alleviate some of your symptoms. Also, Commander Data inferred that you may be suffering from headaches. Could this possibly be related to the complete termination of your bond with Captain Kirk?"

It took a few seconds for Spock to reply. His mind was caught up in affection for the recently departed Doctor McCoy. McCoy had finally succumbed to old age in 2365, which had left Spock the last remaining original crew member of the *USS Enterprise* — not including the A, B, C or D series. How closely these two doctors reminded Spock of McCoy, by their kindness, Vulcan medical knowledge, and their affection towards him.

“I would appreciate anything you could do towards alleviating my body’s sensitivity to cold. I, however, am uncertain as to what the cause of the headache might be. If you can rule out a medical cause for it, I would need to seek the assistance of a Vulcan healer to ascertain if the headache is related to the bond.”

And thus ensued a four hour stay in sickbay, as the doctors assisted Spock.

Flashback: Vulcan — 2246

Spock left a handwritten letter for his parents. He was allowed two carry-ons; he filled one with warm clothing; the second with his lyrette, three of his favorite books (that his mother had given to him), photos of his parents (and one of Spock with I’Chaya), and some Vulcan snacks and his water flask. Took public transportation to the shipyards at the edge of ShiKahr, checked in at the gate, and was given instructions to the berth for the merchant ship, *Scotland’s Pride*. Found the berth, but the ship was locked up tight, and no one answered the intercom.

Spock sat down next to the intercom, with his bags at his side. He was in the shade. Thought of meditating but decided against it. Approximately fifteen minutes later, an older Human with dark hair and eyes, and facial hair approached *Scotland’s Pride*.

“You must be our new computer specialist slash engineering assistant.” Spock stood up quickly. “I am, sir. My name is Spock.”

“I’m Lieutenant Montgomery Scott. I’m an engineer with Starfleet, but I’m on loan to *Scotland’s Pride*. Well, grab your gear, I’ll show ‘ye where your bunk is. And then give ‘ye a quick tour of the ship. The ship lifts off tomorrow, so the rest of the crew will be returning in drips. By the way — how old are ye exactly?”

“I’m sixteen, sir. I’m working my way to Earth, where I will apply for entry to Starfleet.”

“Starfleet? Well, we’d be lucky to have ‘ye, lad. All right, let’s get on with it.”

Mister Scott showed Spock his bunk, which was housed in what appeared to be a refurbished storage room, a few doors down from Engineering. Scott explained this was the only way he could have a private bunk.

Then, Spock was shown where he would be working for the majority of his time, the computer facility one level up from Engineering. Mister Scott also informed Spock that the rest of his time he would be assisting Mister Scott in Engineering. Scott showed Spock around in Engineering, and was pleased that Spock had a better than average understanding of what made a merchant vessel run — impulse power engines.

Then, Mister Scott showed Spock the hidey-hole behind the port fuel injector.

“Now, lad, I think ‘ye ken to the dangers of traveling through space on impulse travel. Starfleet doesn’t have enough starships to be in the general neighborhood most of the time. There are a lot of pirate ships, and quite a few rogue Klingon ships between Vulcan and Earth.

“I know you’re young, but you’ve got the look of an intelligent young man. Most of these brigands are liars, thieves, cowards … and rapists. They like fresh meat, if ‘ye understand my meaning, and by the look on your face, I think ‘ye do. This here in the vernacular is what is known as a hidey-hole.

“If we get boarded — this is your emergency station. And don’t let anyone stand in your way. Also, don’t let anyone else on the crew know about this. The brigands will rape ‘ye, and then probably gut ‘ye, so if ‘ye don’t hide, there won’t be anything to save. I’m not trying to frighten ‘ye off, I’m just leveling the playing field here.

“Now, I’ll show where the cleaning facilities are closest to your bunk, and then where the mess room is. After that, I’ve got some work to do. I’ll expect ‘ye to report to me for duty tomorrow morning at 0700. If ‘ye don’t report, I’ll understand. But if ‘ye report, I want ‘ye to remember what I said to ‘ye. Do ‘ye understand?”

“Yes, sir, Mister Scott. I understand. Thank you, sir.”

“All right now, let’s finish this tour. We’ll be lifting off early tomorrow afternoon.”

At 0700 the next morning, Spock reported to duty in Engineering to Mister Scott. Mister Scott grinned, and began explaining the work they would be doing that morning on the starboard fuel injector.

Ready Room — 2371

Commander Data escorted Spock to Captain Sutter’s ready room. Captains Sutter, Picard and the Klingon K’Vada were seated around Captain Sutter’s desk. There was a chair already available for Spock to sit. Commander Data had informed Spock he had a special project he was working on, and would report back as soon as possible with an update.

Captain Sutter prompted Captain Picard to begin speaking.

“Ambassador Spock, I’m sure you know how highly esteemed Captain Kirk is viewed by Starfleet, and a majority of the Federation worlds. Somehow, word has gotten out that his body has been recovered. Captain K’Vada was directed by the Klingon government to help escort the *Farragut* to Earth. Within the last six hours or so, we’ve received requests from a variety of worlds that we allow their flagships the honor of being part of the escort. We wanted to apprise you of the situation. We realize that Captain Kirk was your bondmate, your husband; and we do not want to violate any agreements or cultural considerations that you may have had with Kirk in regard to his obsequy.”

Spock thought back to the first promise he made with Kirk back on the original *Enterprise* oh so many decades ago. He was acknowledging his promise by returning Kirk’s body back to Earth to be buried; however, Spock considered the accolades being offered honest and justified to Kirk’s memory and achievements for the United Federation of Planets and to their galaxy.

Spock replied, “Thank you, Captain Picard and Captain K’Vada. I accept this plan and these offers. However, I agreed to act on a promise that Captain Kirk asked of me many years ago, and I must tell you now — when he is finally buried, he will be buried with his family in Riverside, Iowa. Captain Kirk did not want to be buried in the official Starfleet cemetery in San Francisco. As an official Starfleet funeral service has already been held, I see no point in duplication. There will be a small family memorial ceremony, and interment, in Iowa.”

Captain Sutter replied, “Captain Picard and I have already discussed this point with Starfleet, and they have agreed with us that they will honor whatever you decide. All right then, Captain K’Vada, I suggest we get our ships ready. We’ll depart in two hours at 2100. Once we reach the outer markers for the Sol system, we’ll be making our way on impulse travel only, to give other ships a chance to join the escort. This is per Starfleet command’s direction.”

Flashback: Earth, Sol System, Sector 01 — March, 2265

The *USS Enterprise* had returned to Earth. Captain Christopher Pike is being promoted to Fleet Captain, and the *Enterprise* is being retro-fitted.

Captain Pike’s first officer, Number One, is also transferring over with Captain Pike to Fleet Command. Doctor Phillip Boyce is retiring from Starfleet, Doctor Mark Piper will step in as the ship’s CMO for the time being. A good portion of the ship’s officers are being promoted to new ranks and being assigned to new ships.

There is a Change of Command ceremony, in which Captain James Kirk takes command of the *Enterprise*. Captain Kirk’s family was beamed aboard first, as guests for the ceremony. They are standing in front on the left hand side of the crew assembled in the shuttlecraft hangar bay. Kirk’s family members included his father, Lieutenant Commander George Andrew Kirk, his mother, Lieutenant Winona Kirk, and two nephews of the captain, Gregory and Duane Kirk.

Spock has heard of Kirk’s exploits in Starfleet previously. When the news of Kirk obtaining command of the *Enterprise* had been released, Spock read his service file extensively. Excellent academic records, with an emphasis on history and engineering. Spock is not sure of the new captain, he’s so young … younger than Spock.

The bosun’s whistle signals, as Captain James Tiberius Kirk is beamed aboard. Over the intercom, Starfleet “Honors” music is piped into the hangar deck. The first officer called attention, and everyone on the deck snapped to attention.

Now, Spock observes Captain Kirk in person. Somewhat shorter than he expected. And just as young as expected. Captain Pike extends his right hand to Kirk, which he accepts instantly. When they finished shaking hands (*such an odd Human custom*, Spock thinks), Kirk places his hand on Pike’s shoulder, turns him to face his crew, and starts the crew in cheering Captain Pike.

Although he didn't think it would be possible, Spock manages to stand even more rigidly at attention, letting the admiration and respect that the crew feels towards Captain Pike wash over and through him.

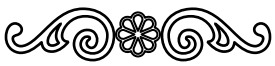
The ceremony commences, with Captain Pike reading the order of detachment and turning over command to Captain Kirk. Captain Kirk then reads the orders of relief and assumes command.

The change of ceremony is accomplished, and the guests and crew descend on the tables of food and beverages set up in the shuttlecraft bay. The ship's band plays for those who would like to dance, and to provide a congenial atmosphere to the festivities.

Pike makes time to talk with Spock before he leaves. Spock served with Pike for eleven years, five months and four days. Spock came aboard as an Ensign, was promoted to Lieutenant and then Lieutenant Commander.

Before Spock retires that evening to his small room located in the BOQ (bachelor officer quarters) within Earth's spacedock, he meditates. Spock sifts through his memories of the day. Which should he delete, which should he save?

Spock very carefully saves every recent memory of Captain Pike in the existing folder "Pike".



The next day, Pike and Kirk discuss options. Kirk wants his new chief medical officer to be Doctor Leonard McCoy. Lieutenant Gary Mitchell will be the lead helmsman. For first officer, Pike had recommended his science officer, the Vulcan Mister Spock. Kirk has already heard of Spock's record, but demurs. Mitchell will also be his first officer; however, Spock will oversee the science departments.

Kirk had participated in the Vulcanian Expedition earlier in his career. The interactions with the Vulcans, in regards to Starfleet mission orders, had left him perplexed about which goals the Vulcans were attempting to achieve. He was slightly leery of Spock, but intrigued by his Starfleet record, and now, by the praise from his former captain … and a certain amount of affection that Pike couldn't hide from Kirk towards Spock. Interesting.

While the *Enterprise* is being refitted, Kirk and Mitchell work together to find crew replacements; keep track of the refit schedule; and various other large and small details to be able to report the *Enterprise* ready to sail at the appointed time. Spock also lends his assistance, and Kirk finds himself becoming more at ease while working with Spock.

They complete their work three weeks ahead of time. Gary takes off to burn off two weeks of leave time, much to Kirk's annoyance. Kirk had wanted Gary and Spock to go camping with him, to help build rapport between Kirk and Spock, and Gary and Spock.

Kirk talks Spock into going camping “old school style” with him at Yosemite Valley National Park. Spock has never been there, and it’s one of Kirk’s favorite parks. They camp along the south side of Tenaya Creek in the Camp Curry area of Yosemite, across from El Capitan.

Spock soon discovers that Kirk’s idea of camping “old school style” means no modern equipment. They sleep in tube tents; thin sheets of plastic that are suspended between two trees by a length of rope; spreading the floor of the tube tent by placing down first a sleeping pad; then a sleeping bag; with extra blankets for Spock. Cooking was accomplished over a campfire; which was fed by daily scavenging for drift wood and fallen branches and twigs.

One morning, Spock is awakened by Kirk whispering his name from his tube tent. Kirk whispers to him, “don’t move.” Spock quickly detects a juvenile black bear walking along the creek. It is in no hurry. Both Kirk and Spock watch the bear as it ambles off into the distance.

Over the next few days, Spock observes mule deer along the creek. A cheeky raccoon, some chipmunks, and squirrels make off with some of the nuts that Spock had brought along to supplement his protein rations.

On the last day, in the early morning, Spock wakes up abruptly, somehow immediately realizing Kirk is not at the campsite. When he looks around, he sees through the mist rising above the Tenaya Creek, that Kirk is bathing in the creek. Spock wants to look away but he is captured by the beauty of Kirk’s form.

The sunrise is behind Kirk; the light illuminating Kirk; adding a coruscation to the water on the creek. The mist, created from the sunlight on the creek, provides an ethereal effect. Then, Kirk stands up. He is completely nude. And his penis is erect.

Kirk masturbates — an act that Spock has never seen performed to completion. The act in itself is powerful. Kirk is even more powerful, alluring, and so very beautiful. Then Kirk cleans himself in the stream once more, and goes to the bank to dry off.

Later that evening in his BOQ within Earth Spacedock, as Spock meditates before retiring for the night, he sifts through his memories of the day. Which should he delete, which should he save? It should be an easy decision for Spock, it has always been before in the past. Until … Jim Kirk. Now, not so much.

Save memory … yes or no.

Save memory … yes or no.

Save memory … yes or no.

Yes.

Save to the new file “Jim”.

Escort Home — 2371

At 2100 hours, Captain Sutter ordered the helmsman to bring the *Farragut* to warp six on a direct route to Earth. Communications apprised Captain K'Vada the order had been given, and the two ships set sail from Veridian III. No more than ten minutes later, the communication officer advises Captain Sutter that the captain of the Vulcan flagship, the *Surak*, wishes to join the escort. After a brief discussion, the Vulcan ship joins the group. As the *Surak* takes its position, the Vulcan ship fires off a spectacular bombardment of fireworks that lights up space surrounding all the ships.

Immediately, Captain Sutter orders First Officer Winchester to fire a salvo to honor the *Surak*. Then, calls down to Engineering, ordering Engineering to begin manufacturing additional fireworks for the *Farragut* to be able to respond to any further ships joining the escort. At the same time, the Klingon ship fires a salvo of fireworks to honor the Vulcans.

Throughout the shift, and on into every shift thereafter, the communication officers receive similar messages. At first it's just a single starship, representing a fleet, that appears. Soon though, it's a multitude of ships greeting them; however, only a single starship representing each group joins the escort fleet.

No one is turned aside — not even ships that could be considered adversaries, for example, the Romulans, Cardassians, Nausicaans. As each ship joins, fireworks are discharged.

By the time the *Farragut* reaches the outer edges of Earth's Sol system, there are over 200 ships that joined the escort. They include ships from the homeworlds of Andoria, Algolian, Arcadia, Ardana, Ariolo, Bajor, Betazed, Breen, Bzzit Khaht, Caitian, Cardassian, Coridan, Delta IV, Ekosians, Ferengi, Gideon, Grazerite, Halkan, Kasheeta, Medusans, Rigel IV, Risa, Romulans, Tellar Prime, Tholians, Trill, Xelatian, Xindi, and Zaranite.

Ships representing the Federation Colonies included: Alpha III, Aldebaran, Alpha Eridani II, Archer IV, Benicia, Berengaria VII, Cerberus, Cestus III, Colony Alpha 5, Cygnia Minor, Deneva, Earth Colony II, Earth's Lunar colonies, Janus VI, Mars, Minos Korva, New France, New Paris, Norpin, Ophiuchus III, Penthara IV, Planet Q, Proxima and Vega.

Ships representing various hegemonies, including: Gorn, First Federation, Iconian, Kzinti, Orion.

There were ships from planets that the original *Enterprise* had never encountered. Had never been aware of during their time in space. But they had heard of Captain James Tiberius Kirk; the promise of the United Federation of Planets, and came to honor both the man and the promise.

A variety of other Starfleet vessels also joined the escort, including Galaxy, Hope, Miranda, Nebula, New Orleans class starships, scout ships, science specialty ships, cargo ships, medical only ships, training ships utilizing refurbished Ambassador and Constitution class starships … any ship that could join the escort without delaying their current assignments.

Quite a few ships had joined that represented a multitude of news agencies from various worlds. None of the journalists are allowed to board the *Farragut*, out of deference to Spock. But the journalists were busy interviewing the crews of the other ships, asking why they felt the need to join the escort, if they understood the contributions that Captain Kirk gave to the Federation, and the sacrifices he made for the Federation. And every ship has their own story to tell.

Even private space ships and passenger liners detoured to join the escort.

Two days prior to arrival at Earth, another cruiser joined the group, and a special passenger was beamed over to the *Farragut*. Commander Data met the passenger in the transporter room, and escorted him to sickbay for a quick checkup. When the passenger was released from sickbay, Data was asked to escort the passenger to a guest room set aside for him. And then Data went in search of Spock.

Flashback: Alpha Quadrant Sector 51-K Starbase 11, Stardate: 5930.3

Janice Lester and Doctor Arthur Coleman had been transported, with a security guard detail, down to Starbase 11. Janice Lester for medical treatment (then to be held for trial); Doctor Coleman to be held for trial upon the medical availability of Janice Lester to participate in the trial for murder of the three scientists at Camus II; the attempted murder of Captain Kirk, and the attempted hijacking of the *USS Enterprise* (plus other assorted and sundry charges).

Starfleet, in their infinite wisdom, had elected to give the crew of the *Enterprise* shore leave for three weeks.

Most of the crew have already decided on their plans for shore leave. Jim had thought Spock would head home to Vulcan to visit his parents. (Vulcan being relatively close to Starbase 11.) Spock and Sarek had found better footing on a father and son relationship after those events on the journey to Babel. Spock also had discovered that it was easier than he thought it would be to tell his mother, Amanda, that he loved her. Much to Kirk's joy.

But as Kirk walked into his quarters, he was surprised to see Spock waiting for him inside, sitting at Kirk's desk.

"Anything I can help you with?" asked Kirk.

"Yes, I believe there is," replied Spock, as he stood up from the chair, walking over to where Kirk stood. Spock's right hand reached out, and with his index and tall finger, traced the curve of Kirk's eyebrows. As Kirk reflexively closed his eyes, Spock gently kissed Kirk's eyelids, his nose, his mouth, and chin.

Spock leaned back, looking at Kirk expectantly. Kirk opened his eyes, clearing his throat.

"I get the feeling you're trying to tell me something."

“Yes. After the mind meld, we shared when your consciousness was within Janice Lester’s body, I could sense that my attraction and desire for you, was acknowledged in your mind for me as well. We’ve been trying to deny our true natures for some time.”

“So … you’re trying to tell me you love me?” asked Kirk.

“That is part of what I’m trying to tell you. Because I found acceptance for myself in your mind … I inadvertently created an incipient bonding link with you. I wanted to let you know as soon as possible.”

“I already knew,” replied Kirk, smiling.

“You knew?” Spock was astonished.

”Yes, I knew. I’ve been … feeling you in my mind every now and then; since that mind meld on Melkot. And after you melded with me while my consciousness was inside Janice’s body, it became constant.”

“While the bonding link is still incipient, we can go to a healer to try to remove it, if you wish,” replied Spock.

“If I wish? What about you? What do *you* wish?” inquired Kirk, as he moved in closer to Spock, and kissed him lightly on the mouth.

“I would wish to complete the bond. That though you have been parted from me, we will never more be parted. *Always touching and touched*…” Spock pauses briefly.

“You are *t’hy’la* to me … friend, brother — and soon, I hope, my lover. Travel with me to Vulcan for the *koon-ut-kalifee*, that I become your mate, and you mine. That we are bound as bondmates to each other. That we love each other, and live with each other, for the rest of our lives. That you will be my husband, and I yours. That is what I wish for.”

Kirk’s smile lit up the room. He laughed gently, replying, “Yes. Yes, I do, too. I wish you will be my husband, and I yours. How soon can we do this?”

They spent the afternoon making plans. Going to Vulcan for the *koon-ut-kalifee*, then traveling to Earth, so that they could be married with Kirk’s family in attendance, in the Trinity United Methodist Church in Riverside, Iowa.

That evening, they slept together in Spock’s bunk, learning more about each other; creating new memories to be cherished.

Special Guest — 2371

Commander Data waits to speak with Spock, while Spock makes tea for the two of them.

Data understands that Spock is diverting attention from his emotions to the task at hand. Data employs the same method, since his emotion chip was fused to his neural net just recently.

Spock has finished brewing the tea, and sits a cup in front of Data, and sits down with his cup, and looks expectantly at Data.

Data sips his tea and sighs. He's … gathering courage to tell Spock his message. Spock notices that Data is nervous, and interjects.

"Commander Data, has something happened to you recently that has affected your operating system. You are acting more … emotionally than in our previous encounter."

Data sips some more tea and replies, "During our confrontation with Doctor Soran, he employed a dampening field, which caused my emotion chip to become fused to my neural net. I'm still adjusting to the situation. Captain Picard has requested that I continue to try to adapt. It can be a mixed blessing, but my friends are there to help me when I feel … confused."

Spock relates to this. He too was confused by his emotions, and he was also fortunate to have his friends, Kirk, McCoy, Uhura, Scotty, Sulu, Chekov, and even Chapel help him during his events of confusion.

"I commend your efforts, Data. And now … what additional information do you have for me?"

"Sir, a year after we left you on Romulus, we received a distress call from the *USS Jenolan*. When we dropped out of warp, we were trapped in a massive gravity well. We discovered that the *Jenolan* had crashed on a Dyson Sphere. Commanders Riker and La Forge beamed over, discovering that the transporter pattern buffers were locked to cycle in a Level Four diagnostic mode."

"When Commander La Forge discontinued the diagnostic loop, he was able to recover Captain Scott. Once we were able to clear the gravity well, Captain Picard loaned a shuttlecraft to Captain Scott, who advised he was no longer going to retire on the Norpin Colony. We were finally able to track him down, and he arrived early yesterday. Captain Scott is currently resting in our guest quarters. He would like to attend Captain Kirk's memorial service, and he specifically has been asking about you."

Spock stares down into his cup of tea. He's not quite sure on how he can handle this discovery so soon after the discovery of Jim's body. Data notices Spock's discomposure, and moves his right hand to rest against Spock's left hand. It distracts Spock's attention on his tea, and he looks up at Data.

"Commander … Please advise Captain Scott that I would be honored to visit with him. Perhaps he could join me tomorrow night for dinner in my quarters?"

Flashback: Vulcan — *Koon-ut-kalifee* — 2269

On this visit to Vulcan, it was the planet's spring season. It was fractionally cooler, however the gravity remained the same strength (as gravity on stable planets is wont to do). For both Spock and Kirk, it was also a far more joyous celebration than the last time they had been here, two years prior, while Spock was experiencing his first *pon farr*.

Kirk had been more worried about his friend at that time. Spock experienced, for perhaps the first time in his life, a gamut of staggering emotions — overwhelming sexual desire, fear, shame, sadness, trepidation, sorrow, all at the same time.

Worse, was the agonizing power of grief once he realized that he had killed his captain, his best friend. Only to find out, shortly afterwards, that his best friend was alive and healthy, and apparently not angry, or disgusted, with Spock. All thanks to the quick thinking of Spock's other best friend, Doctor Leonard McCoy.

Doctor McCoy had traveled with them again to Vulcan for their *koon-ut-kalifee*. Both Spock and Kirk had asked him to be there, to be their best man, so to speak. Kirk and McCoy stayed at Sarek and Amanda's home, while Spock prepared for the ceremony at the family's site. There was an underground complex at the site, containing several rooms, for the newly bonded couple. Spock would undergo Vulcan rituals for the ceremony to come (rituals he had missed out the first time around, due to the exigent need to complete the ceremony that time).

Tomorrow, after the ceremony, Spock and Kirk would retire in those rooms, to celebrate their union for three days.

Parted from me, and never parted. Never and always touching and touched. We meet at the appointed place.

Scotty and Spock — 2371

Spock spent several hours in meditation, to prepare for the dinner that night with Montgomery Scott. They had last seen each other in San Francisco in 2294 — over seventy-seven years ago, as Scott was leaving for the Norpin Colony to retire. The ship had been declared missing; leaving Spock to grieve for yet another shipmate.

Spock hadn't been seen by a Vulcan healer as yet, he had delayed the appointment so that he could meet with Scott first. Spock surmised, knowing Scott's emotional character, Mister Scott would react better to an emotional response from Spock when they met. In fact, Spock also surmised that he would react better, instead of erecting his psychic shields and hiding emotionally.

Promptly at 1800 hours, the stewards arrive at Spock's guest quarters, setting up a small dinner table and chairs; setting the table with dinnerware and accessories; placing the serving cart nearby, then promptly disappearing. At 1830 hours, the doorbell chimes at Spock's quarters. Spock walks over to the door. Montgomery Scott is waiting outside, with Commander LaForge escorting him.

Montgomery Scott is, theoretically, 147 years old. However, his body had been stored in a transporter buffer aboard the *USS Jenolan* for seventy-five years, which left Scott's appearance looking in his middle seventies. He looked … so welcome, so very familiar, and he was crying. Spock hugged him, and realized that he was crying, too. Commander LaForge

wished Scotty and Spock a good evening, and walked away slowly, watching as Spock escorted Scott into his quarters.

They talked for several hours after they ate dinner; reminiscing of their adventures aboard the *USS Enterprise NCC-1701* and *1701-A*. Scott talked of his adventures after he left the *Enterprise D*. Spock only briefly mentioned that he had been on an ambassadorial mission for the Federation, without going into detail.

They honored their comrades they worked with for so long, who were now gone. Spock and Scott were the only two still left alive from their time period. And they were returning to Earth, to honor their captain. They were young men, they were old men. They were friends.

Flashback: Earth 2269

United States of North & Central America Trinity United Methodist Church
11 East 2nd Street
Riverside, IA
United States of North & Central America.

The small city of Riverside is located within the county of Washington, in the state of Iowa. It was established in 1872, and incorporated in 1882. It is located along the English River, a tributary of the Iowa River, in southeastern Iowa.

Included among the original farming families of Riverside, is the family of Curtis Horatio Kirk and his wife, Velma, and their eight children. They had moved from New Hampshire to Iowa, looking for a better future for their children in 1868, in the aftermath of the Civil War. Curtis passed on in 1898, leaving the family farm to his two eldest sons, Tiberius and Samuel Kirk.

In 2221, one of the progeny of Samuel Kirk's lineage, George Andrew Kirk, married Winona Kirk, and they had two sons, George Samuel and James Tiberius. George Samuel Kirk and his wife, Aurelan, had three sons. Unfortunately, in 2267 George Samuel (or Sam as he was referred to by his brother, Jim), and his wife, were killed on Deneva, and their youngest son, Peter, was injured. The two older sons had been on Earth, still in university.

George Andrew Kirk died shortly after James Kirk assumed command of the *Enterprise* in 2266. Winona Kirk died many years later in 2280, during Kirk's second five-year mission aboard the *Enterprise*.

Representing the Kirk family at the wedding of Jim Kirk and Spock S'chn T'gai, are Winona Kirk, her three grandsons, William, Garland, and Peter; George Kirk's two sisters, and their various progeny; Winona's brother and sister; and their various progeny; and a variety of distant cousins.

Representing the S'chn T'gai family, are T'Pau; Sarek and Amanda; also, various progeny of T'Pau's line.

Friends of Kirk and Spock, include many of their shipmates; Nyota Uhura, Leonard McCoy, Montgomery Scott, Pavel Chekov, Hikaru Sulu, Christine Chapel, Geoffrey M'Benga and Barry Giotto.

Various childhood friends of Jim Kirk have also RSVP'd to attend the ceremony. Various friends of Spock were also in attendance.

For the first time since being at Starfleet Academy in San Francisco, Spock is awakened the morning of the wedding by church bells. There are four churches in Riverside, representing the Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian faiths. And all the churches have bells. In honor of their favorite son's wedding, the other churches arrange for their bells to ring along with the Methodist Church.

Now inside the Trinity United Methodist Church, Spock and Kirk stand before the Reverend Pauline Clarkson, as she announces to those in attendance, her greeting.

"Dearly beloved,

"We are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the presence of these witnesses, to join James Kirk and Spock S'chn T'gai, in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate.

"Instituted of God, and signifying unto us the mystical union that exists between Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence in Cana of Galilee. It is therefore not to be entered into unadvisedly, but reverently, discreetly, and in the fear of God. Into this holy estate these two persons come now to be joined."

The ceremony progresses and at the end of the ceremony, Reverend Pauline Clarkson sends them forth into the community as a married couple:

"God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit bless, preserve, and keep you; the Lord graciously with his favor look upon you, and so fill you with all spiritual benediction and love that you may so live together in this life that in the world to come you may have life everlasting. Amen."

Vulcan Healer — 2371

The following morning, Spock had his appointment finally with the Vulcan healer, T'Kel, on loan from the Vulcan starship, *Surak*. Spock explained to T'Kel that 102 years ago, Spock was bonded and married to Captain Kirk. When Kirk died aboard the *Enterprise B*, Spock felt his death, but the mating bond between them did not disintegrate, it became quiescent. Over the last seventy-eight years, Spock had felt the bond being tugged at the other end, very faintly. Then, just recently, he was overcome by intense pain in his head, and realized that the bond had finally been terminated.

Spock had been meditating more, but was unable to balance his *katra*, and could not lessen the pain, or the turmoil of his emotions.

T'Kel and Spock then placed cushions on the deck, and assumed their meditation positions. They would meditate until they reached the third level, then T'Kel would mind meld with Spock.

The attunement flame was placed between then, and burned at a low level initially. The deeper they reached within during their meditation, the brighter the flame became. Soon, T'Kel reached the third level, and waited patiently until Spock arrived there as well.

They both inhaled deeply; then T'Kel reached forward with her right hand, placing her hand on Spock's face, on the psi points. Spock lowered his psychic shields, as T'Kel initiated the mind meld.

The once vibrant, bright bonding link was now desiccated, dark and quiet. The brain tissue around it was inflamed. T'Kel directed healing energy towards it. She searched Spock's mind for what else was causing him pain. She discovered that Spock used a memory system akin to a computer's filing system, partitioned into separate drives (personal, Starfleet, science, family, culture); within each drive, there were separate file folders.

She found several file folders in the family drive that were password protected. She surmised correctly immediately that the password was "Jim", and found folders for love, joy, friendship, family, and finally, grief.

Inside the grief folder, T'Kel opened the first file named "death", and experienced Spock's memories in the aftermath of Kirk's death in 2293.

A week before the launch of the *Enterprise B*, both retired Kirk and Spock had been approached by Starfleet Command, to ascertain if they would be willing to participate in the launch ceremony for the new starship.

Kirk was not overly thrilled about being Starfleet's poster boy for the event, but he would like to be on a starship again. Spock, however, had already made a commitment to Sarek, to travel with him and Doctor McCoy to a conference at Khitomer, with the Klingons, for additional discussions on how to assist the Klingons in their transition from a military oligarchy to a representative democracy government.

Kirk didn't press Spock on the subject. Kirk knew how important this was to Spock. They had made love the morning before Spock left for the conference. They discussed the possibility of keeping their reservation for a hotel, on a planet that they scheduled to travel to for a conference they were both interested in, next month. They agreed to keep those plans.

Spock left for his conference. Three days later, Kirk, Scotty and Chekov had boarded the *Enterprise B* for the launch ceremony. Spock had planned on talking with Jim that morning before he boarded the *Enterprise B*, but was unable to complete a subspace connection due to Earth's sun experiencing severe solar flare activity at the time.

Spock was sitting at a conference table on Khitomer, hundreds of light years away, when suddenly, he realized that Kirk's mind, which had been deliriously gleeful about being on the new starship, suddenly changed in its emotional tone — now extremely concerned, apprehensive, with fear edging in.

Spock stood up from the table, walked over to the sideboard, to pick up a glass of water. Just then, Kirk's concern spiked; Spock fell to his knees. He was vaguely aware that McCoy and Sarek rushed to him. And then … a brief flash of bright, searing pain … and then nothing. Spock passed out.

T'Kel then opened the second file in the folder, named "remorse," and experienced Spock's grief on Jim Kirk's death.

Spock knew he could not let grief own him. He could not allow his grief to leach into his bones and devour his marrow; take up permanent residence within his mind; stake out his heart; poison his breath.

Yes, Spock grieved the loss of Kirk, but Spock's favorite mantra was that there were always possibilities. Kirk especially had taught him the value, the gift, the promise of hope. Hope that tomorrow the grief, the pain, the deep sense of sorrow and despair and loss and loneliness … would eventually fade over time. Be less acute. That his heart, his body, his soul would accept new experiences, new acquaintances, new feelings, new possibilities to enter his life.

Spock knew this: when all that was: name, love, honor … had been lost, when all that remained was pain — that the concept of tomorrow and hope had faded so they mattered not — that his lungs breathed James' name; his heart pumped James' name; his brain knew only James' name. Faith, then, was all that Spock had left to him. And James' name was branded everywhere on him.

Taluhk nash-veh k'dular. I cherish thee.

T'Kel ended the mind meld, and slowly, both she and Spock recovered from the shared grief.

"So, is your pain that you did not die with Kirk? Or why you continued to live, enjoying, exploring, what you could have left to you? Or is it something else?" T'Kel asked.

"I have long wondered. Jim had mentioned six years before his death that he had always known he would die alone. But he didn't. Not on the *Enterprise B* and not on Veridian III when Captain Picard was with him. And in the life I have lived after he died, I have strove to make it purposeful. I remarried in 2328, we had several years together, however, my wife died…" Spock stopped talking, trying to compose himself more. The mind meld had been taxing.

T'Kel waited for Spock to assimilate.

"I … remember thinking that I was surprised I had survived Kirk's death. Although, when we participated in the *koon-ut-kalifee*, Jim had asked me to not make the bond so strong, so that if one of us died, the other would live, as we served aboard the same ship."

"I have regretted that I didn't have the opportunity to speak with Jim before he left home to board the *Enterprise B*. To tell him goodbye."

"However, after the incident on *Enterprise B*, I couldn't prove that Kirk was still alive, although our bond was still viable. Nor could I conclusively prove that Kirk was really dead, as the bond was not broken. Starfleet Command at that time didn't understand the nature of our Vulcan bond, and viewed it with mistrust and disdain. I felt that if I … if I took my own life out of grief,

my death would certainly then destroy the bond, and the part of Kirk that was still alive within me would die also."

Spock paused again.

"I thought that Jim was something akin to Schrödinger's cat. Kirk is dead, because his body was killed in the blast to the *Enterprise B's* deflector by the Nexus. However, his consciousness, or soul, was still alive within the Nexus. And only I, who is/was Kirk's bondmate, is/was aware of this."

"After all our years together, I felt I had to stay alive, out of honor, respect, duty, loyalty — and especially love — to Jim Kirk. I told someone — one hundred and four years ago — that I am who I am, and that if there are self-made purgatories then we all must live in them, that mine can be no worse than that of someone else."

"How strange, how history is repeated. Is that what I have been doing, living in a self-made purgatory, flagellating myself for surviving?" asked Spock.

T'Kel replied, "If I may be so bold, it may be that you have not forgiven yourself for not dying with Kirk. From what I saw within your mind, Kirk did not seem to be the type to disparage you for your courage to live after his death. He was your *t'hy'la*, I have rarely seen such a vibrant example of that type of bond. And he lived after your death during your encounter with the Khan Noonian Singh.

"Your Kirk loved you so much, that he risked his career, his life, his starship, to help McCoy take your *katra*, that you placed in McCoy's mind to Vulcan, to attempt the *fal-tor-pan*. He loved you, Spock, you know that. It was what the Humans call a 'miracle' that your body was resurrected by the Genesis effect; then discovered by Starfleet personnel, and that Kirk fought off the Klingons to save you.

"Also, I think you are still trying to assuage your guilt in regard to your relationship with Sarek. You were bookmarked by two strong, passionate men in your life. Your father and your husband. You are just as strong and just as passionate as they were. Forgive yourself, like yourself again, love yourself. I have lived among Humans for a long time, their philosophy of self love is intertwined now within my understanding of the psyche. And if you have difficulty in forgiving yourself, let me say that *I* forgive you. I understand your pain and grief, but I believe that you have suffered enough, Spock."

"Thank you, T'Kel, for your assistance. Indeed, the pain is lessening. I appreciate your assistance."

"If you need any further assistance, please do not hesitate to ask. Live long and prosper, Spock."

"Peace and long life, T'Kel."

Flashback: Mutara Nebula — 2285

Spock was on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, sitting at his science station, scanning for signs of energy signals. It was a shame that during the last refit of *Enterprise*, his station had been moved so that it was directly behind the command chair; instead of on the starboard side of the bridge, where he could often watch Kirk while he commanded his ship.

Now … Spock detects an energy signal. Spock advises Kirk that he is scanning an energy source on the *Reliant*. A pattern that he's never seen before. David Marcus takes a quick look into Spock's scanner, advising that it's the Genesis wave. Spock hears Jim asking, "What?"

David advises that it is a build-up to detonation. Kirk rushes to Spock's station. Tries the intercom to raise Engineering. There's no answer. Kirk looks at David, asking "how soon?" David replies that the device is encoded for four minutes. Kirk makes a quick decision to board the *Reliant*, and stop the device. David advises that the device can't be stopped once it is initiated.

Kirk leaves Spock's station, returns to his command chair. Tells Sulu to get the ship out of there.

Spock decides he will go to engineering, to provide assistance. He carefully closes his end of the *t'hy'la* link to Jim, projecting an image of him sitting at his station, and leaves via the working turbolift for engineering. Where the turbolift stopped functioning, he continues descending through the ship, via vertical Jefferies tubes, under which he emerges into Engineering.

Engineering has been impacted harshly by the battle with the *Reliant*. Multiple systems have failed. And his wonderful young cadets, so many of them are wounded, dying and dead. He checks the status panels for the dilithium reactor chamber. It has shut down. There is a way to accomplish an emergency restart — but the reactor chamber is heavily, lethally irradiated. No Human could withstand that amount of radiation to effect repairs in the amount of time available, less than three minutes now. He is only half-Vulcan — perhaps that will be enough of an advantage, for one last time.

Mister Scott is sitting on the deck, dressed in a radiation suit; he appears to be struggling to remain conscious. Doctor McCoy is treating the wounded and the dying. As Spock attempts to enter the reactor room, McCoy stops him. Spock pretends to agree with him, distracting him enough, so that he is able to apply a nerve pinch to McCoy, temporarily disabling him. Spock reaches over, and takes the radiation suit gloves out of Mister Scott's hands. Then … he has enough time to do this; he mind-melds with McCoy, using no finesse or gentleness at all, and transfers his *katra* to him, advising McCoy to "remember".

Spock enters the dilithium reactor chamber, locking his mind down. He can't afford emotions at this time. He knows the process to restart by heart, and follows the steps in order. Soon, he can hear McCoy and Scott, yelling at him, to leave the chamber. He pays them no mind. He has to finish this in time.

The first affliction to his body is the loss of his eyesight. Even lowering his inner eye lids didn't provide any extra protection. Well, he had to try. Now it was muscle memory that would get him through the rest of the restart process. How many times had he practiced this on the merchant freighter with Mister Scott, when he was en route to Earth to join Starfleet Academy? How many times had he practiced this in Starfleet Academy, and in all the years of service since graduation? He was almost finished. There. He was putting the cover back on the control column. Done. He was standing at the back of the chamber, when his legs gave out. He managed to compose his body, leaning against the chamber, his legs folded under him.

From his position he could hear the warp core come back online. Soon, he could feel the *Enterprise* jump into warp speed. He clung to hope for as long as he could.

He could also hear the roar of blood in his ears; feel his blood leaking from various places inside his body; felt his skin sloughing off from his face. He was so tired, so hot, and felt so alone. How he would miss Jim. His parents. If only…

Then, he thought he heard Jim's voice. Yes, it was Jim's voice on the speaker, calling his name! Oh, he would have time to say goodbye. Slowly, he stood up, turned around. Walked carefully forward, to where he thought the transparent shield walls were at the front of the chamber. His nose bounced off of them.

Starfleet training was ingrained within him. He had to be a living example to his cadets, maintain decorum, even now, even now. He asked his admiral about the ship. *Oh, husband, forgive me.* Yes, they were alive. He asked the admiral not to grieve. He told the admiral one last time that he had been and always would be his friend. *I love you, t'hy'la*. His legs gave away again. He was kneeling on the deck, leaning against the chamber wall. He managed to take off the right glove, hold up his right hand in the sign of the *ta'al*, place it against the shield wall, and tell his captain, his admiral, his *t'hy'la*, his husband, his friend, his brother, his lover, "Live long and prosper." *Parted from me…* Heard Jim's pain-filled, anguished exclamation, "No!" And then … darkness.

Briefing Room Meeting — 2371

The *Farragut* and the escort of ships had come to a halt just outside Jupiter's orbital path. Starfleet had dispatched several cruisers to escort the civilian ships away from the escort, they were proving to be hazards in everyone's navigation systems. They were in reach now for civilian communication networks, to allow Spock contacting the remaining members of Kirk's family in Iowa; the local authorities, the church, and the graveyard, to make plans for memorial services for James Kirk.

In the meantime, the *Farragut's* communications team were fending off requests for private interviews of Ambassador Spock from the media. And taking note of requests from several family members who were descendants of personnel that had served with, or under the command of both Captain/Admiral Kirk and Ambassador Spock.

A flight schedule had to be arranged for the starships that had joined the escort, in the order that they would follow the *Farragut* into Earth's orbital path. Politics played into everything, it seemed. Starfleet command was handling this responsibility as well, their decision had more weight than the captain of one Starfleet starship.

Captain Picard noted that Ambassador Spock looked better today, as he entered the briefing room. Not as pallid, or in pain. He had great respect and admiration for this man, and was grateful to whichever doctor had provided assistance. Captain Sutter entered the briefing room, and her first officer, Commander Winchester, called the officers to attention.

"Today on Earth, it is Friday. The authorities on Iowa have asked to wait for local law enforcement to secure the church and the graveyard, for both the memorial service and the interment. They advise it should take a few days. Also, Starfleet Command has advised that they will be sending some security personnel to assist the local law enforcement.

"Ambassador Spock has given me a rough outline of the schedule ahead. The memorial service will be at the Trinity United Methodist Church in Jim Kirk's hometown, Riverside, Iowa. That's in the United States of North & Central America. The service will be private only, and last approximately one hour.

"The interment will be at the local graveyard. After his mother died, Captain Kirk thought ahead, and purchased two grave sites in the family plot in the graveyard. Coburn & Sons Monument company is preparing the gravestone now, following Ambassador Spock's instructions. One of Jim Kirk's relatives has volunteered to host the wake in her home, which as it turns out, is Jim Kirk's family home."

Captain Sutter paused, to take a sip from her beverage. "Per Starfleet protocol, Captain Kirk's remains will be transported down to Earth by shuttlecraft, with an honor guard, dressed in Class A uniform. Captain Picard requested that half of the honor guard be composed from his ship's crew, and crew from the *Farragut* will complete the squad.

"Requests for interview are being handled by Starfleet Commands Communication's Division. These requests will all be denied. Captain Kirk had an official funeral after the incident in 2293. This is strictly a family ceremony, per the request of not only his husband, Ambassador Spock, but also on the request of Mister Kirk's family members; and the descendants of those previously under his command. Starfleet Command has pledged they will honor these requests.

"Ambassador Spock has extended permission for Captain Picard and his officers to attend, if they so wish. Those are my announcements. Now, let's open the meeting up to questions, and let's see what else we can resolve to Ambassador Spock's, and Starfleet Command's, satisfaction.

"In the meantime, Starfleet Command is also devoting their efforts in organizing funeral services for the honored dead of the *Enterprise D*, who wished to be buried on Earth. With so many personnel involved, the logistics are very problematic. I want to assure you, Captain Picard, and your officers, that Starfleet is making every effort to provide each and every

casualty their recognition for their ultimate sacrifice to the service, to their fellow crew members, and to the United Federation of Planets."

Flashback: Vulcan — 2285

There had been darkness, pain, and agony.

There had been awakening, steamy warmth, then extreme bitter cold.

He had died.

He had been resurrected.

He was confused now. Who is he? What had happened? Who are these … others around him?

One of the others approaches, places part of his form on his form … something warm inside him … a spark … darkness replaced by bright light … His name is Spock. The form is Sarek. Spock is the son. Sarek is the father. Spock was injured and he is now healing.

Concepts are introduced

Parents. Son. Vulcan. Logic. Humans. Friends. Love. Gratitude. Compassion. Regret. Joy. Concern. Forgiveness. Redemption. Welcome. Remembrance. Education. Life. Death. Resurrection. Past. Future. Promise. Hope.

The form is his father, Sarek. There had been … an accident. Your name is Spock. *My name is Spock.* Spock had died, trying to save his friends. His friends had come to his aid. Spock's best friend, his *t'hy'la* (odd, how familiar that name is to him, but the context and concept is still fuzzy), was a Human, who waited below.

Sarek told Spock that he would be assisted with reintegrating his *katra* and his mind, and must walk with these other Vulcans to begin the process. Sarek walked with Spock over to a group of Vulcan priests, who helped Spock into the traditional white robe of a Gol novitiate, discarding the black burial robe he had been wearing.

They climbed down stairs, walked across the lower level, passing the Humans, who had turned to watch his leaving. Spock started to climb the stairs on the other side … then paused, turned around, lowering the hood to his robe.

He walked back down the stairs, walked over to the Humans who had waited through the night. Faces that seemed familiar … a young Vulcan woman dressed in a uniform that matched the uniforms of two of the other Human males, an older Human male, a Human female, three more Human males, the last one also older, who seemed very familiar.

Spock turned away from the priests and walked over to the Human male who stood apart from the others, the emotions being broadcasted by him were so powerful, almost incapacitating the sense of sureness that Spock had managed to achieve in such a short time span.

He told the Human male that his father (*his father was Sarek*) had told him that this Human had been his friend. That he had come back for Spock. The Human replied that Spock would have done the same for him. Spock asked, “Why would you do this?” (Why did Spock have the impression that they had done this for each other several times in the past?) The Human replied, “The needs of the one outweighs the needs of the many.” That phrase also seemed so familiar.

Spock turned around, walked a few steps back towards the other Humans. Stopped. Turns around again, facing the solo Human.

“I have been, and ever shall be, your friend,” he says to the Human.

The Human replies, “Yes! Yes, Spock.”

The joy on the Human’s face filled Spock with hope. Staring into the Human’s face, Spock suddenly remembers the ship he had died to save.

“The ship! Out of danger?”

The Human replies, “Yes, yes Spock. You saved the ship. You saved us all. Don’t you remember?”

Spock searches deep within himself. He steps toward the Human again. “Jim. Your name is Jim.”

The Human’s face comes alive just then, his mouth turns up at the corners, and he joyfully responds, “Yes.”

Spock remembers something else. He turns around to look at the oldest Human male behind him … who points a finger at his own head … a puzzling gesture. Then all of his Human and Vulcan friends rush up to him, their joy so apparent. Spock turns back towards Jim, whose face is radiant now with joy.

Preparing Kirk’s Body for Burial — 2371

It was early Saturday afternoon in Iowa when the *Farragut* assumed orbit of Earth. Spock had a restful night’s sleep, and is now up, reposed in meditation, after partaking in the noon meal. Today is the day that his *t’hy’la’s* body will be taken out of stasis, so that Spock can prepare Jim’s body for burial, according to both Human and Vulcan customs, which are remarkably similar. Then the body will be replaced in stasis, to wait for the final removal for the memorial service and the interment.

T’Kel, the Vulcan healer aboard the *Surak*, arranged to have a quantity of the fine Vulcan burial sand transported over to the *Farragut*. The *Farragut* beamed up a quantity of water directly from the English River in Riverside earlier this afternoon. Both materials were waiting in the room adjacent to the ship’s morgue for the cleansing rites.

Both Doctors Allison and Crusher had assured Spock that Kirk's wounds had been repaired when he was received on the *Farragut*. They had cleansed the body themselves before placing him in stasis, wrapped in white cloth.

Twenty minutes later, Spock finishes his meditation. Ship's stores have provided him with a white Vulcan robe, and the accouterments necessary for the rites, including a funeral attunement flame.

Spock marvels at the *Farragut*. Such a beautiful ship, a newer, more updated version than the *Enterprise D* had been. A magnificent view of Earth was before him, via the quite large transparent windows in his quarters. The *Farragut* was in synchronous orbit over Riverside, Iowa, but at a high altitude. Spock couldn't make out fine details, just see the long expanse of the prairie lands that extended halfway across the North American continent.

Spock picks up the accouterments, and walks to the ship's morgue. Two morgue attendants are waiting for him. The two attendants open the stasis chamber, and move Jim's body (still wrapped in white cloth) to the preparation table. The attendants then leave the room. The preparation table has outlets built into the table, with hoses fitted to the opening, so that fluid(s) can drain from the table to a reservoir below.

Spock places the attunement flame on the counter in front of the table and lights it.

Spock walks back to the preparation table. First, he will cleanse Jim's body with the soft, fine sands of Vulcan, that are used for this purpose only. Spock reaches out, to touch Jim's head through the white cloth covering him. Jim's body is only a vessel now. He lifts up the left side of Jim's body, then reaches over and grabs the edge of the white cloth, and pulls it back, uncovering Jim. Spock discards the white cloth in the hazardous materials bin.

Spock had thought his mediation would have prepared him for this moment, yet once again, he is proven to be a fool. "Oh, *Jim*," he thinks. Jim looks so much like he looked on that last day they were together, before Spock left for the conference at Khitomer. He was so young, he was only sixty years old when he died. Doctors Allison and Crusher had done an excellent job repairing his wounds.

Spock placed his right hand on Jim's face. "*Ashayam*," Spock thought. He leaned down, kissing Jim's forehead. Spock then placed his right hand in the ritual container of sand, withdrew a handful, and started to spread it across Jim's face, brushing the sand through his hair, and down his face to his neck, working his way down the body on the left side. Picked up another handful of the sand, and cleansed on the right side of Jim's body. Cleaned all the way to the toes; then rolled the body over, and worked his way down to the toes again.

Next step was to rinse the body of the sand. For that, Spock used the water the *Farragut* had beamed up from the English River. The water had been heated so that it was above room temperature. Spock added some ritual purifier from Vulcan, a mixture of sodium and potassium salts. Again, he cleansed Jim from head to foot on both sides of the body.

There was one more water rinse of the body. This time, Spock added the oil from a variety of roses that his late mother, Amanda, had created on Vulcan so many years ago. She had

blended a traditional modern garden rose with a Vulcan wildflower, that was of a similar genus. The scent of the rose was more of a spicy lavender fragrance.

Spock had given much thought of what Jim Kirk would have liked to have been buried in. If he had still been in active service, he would have preferred to have been buried in his Class A Starfleet uniform. But he was retired when he sailed on the *Enterprise B*. Spock remembered that Jim always preferred wearing his red plaid shirt and blue jeans when off duty. He had the *Farragut's* replicator create such an outfit yesterday, had the replicator "distress" the material, and he dressed Jim in the clothing.

Then, Spock placed several photos in Jim's hand; including the main bridge crew's final photo together before they retired; a photo of Jim, McCoy and Spock; photos from their wedding in Riverside. A photo of David, Jim's deceased son. A photo of Sarek and Amanda. A photo of the *USS Enterprise*, just as she looked when Jim took command.

He placed the silver IDIC on a chain that he gifted to Jim on their first wedding anniversary, around Jim's neck.

Spock leaned down again, lightly traced Jim's eyebrows with light kisses. Then his eyelids, nose, lips, chin. Spock thinks, *Wait for me, love. Wherever you are, I'm sure to see you again shortly.*

Spock reached for a clean white cloth shroud kept in storage in the room, and re-wrapped Jim. Then, signals for the attendants. They step into the room, and return Jim Kirk's body to stasis. Spock waits to reach a level of stability, and then returns back to his guest quarters. He decides he needs to rest again, and then he will meditate.

Flashback: Fiji, 2286

After their return to San Francisco, Starfleet Command rather magnanimously granted everyone who had been aboard the *H.M.S. Bounty* (the converted Klingon bird-of-prey), an extended shore leave of two months. McCoy returned to Georgia, to catch up with his daughter, Joanna, and his grandchildren.

Scotty returned to Scotland, to visit family. Uhura visited family in Kenya. Sulu had married several years ago, and returned to his home in Arizona to be with his spouse and his young daughter, Demora. Chekov remained in San Francisco. He had been dating a Lieutenant Commander assigned to Starfleet Academy for a few years, and they had plans for a nice vacation in his Russian home town.

Jim and Spock decided to find that beach that Jim had longed to walk on, and ended up on a pristine, white sand beach, on one of the 333 islands that comprise the archipelago nation of Fiji, in the south Pacific ocean.

They had arrived at the beginning of the Festival of Diwali, the Hindu "Festival of Lights", honoring Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, and lasted for five days. Diwali

symbolizes the spiritual victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance.

This year was especially joyous, as the ocean had been wild just recently for several days, the tides had risen, and homes were threatened. But now, the ocean had resumed its natural demeanor, the fish had returned, and the sun was shining again.

Spock and Kirk had rented a bungalow at the edge of the village, just far enough away for some relative privacy. Spock's memory had vastly improved since the *fal-tor-pan*, but Jim Kirk hadn't seen a return of any desire from Spock towards himself. He wouldn't push Spock. He couldn't bear to lose Spock again. They hadn't even talked about reinforcing the bond link as yet. It had been frayed when Spock … died. The Vulcan healers had suggested that sufficient time be allowed to see if the bond would heal itself. No definition was given on "sufficient time" .

The Diwali festival, as wonderful as it was, finally ended. The population of the village leveled out within a few days. Kirk had taken up swimming in the morning after rising, and just before sunset. He was also trying to learn to surf. Spock had never had an affinity for water, and usually spent the time Kirk was swimming alone, meditating.

When Kirk wasn't swimming, they explored the small island they were on. They would wander through the lush rainforest. Spock was delighted by the rich range of avifauna (birds) that were native to Fiji. There were 165 native species to the nation, and quite a few of them resided on this particular small island.

Wherever Jim and Spock would be on the island, when they encountered the natives, they were always warmly welcomed with "Bula," the Fijian word used to greet people or say hello. When you say *bula* to someone, you are actually wishing them life.

Early one morning, usually when Jim would go swimming, Jim ran back to their bungalow, shouting for Spock. Spock was meditating, but heard Jim yelling, and withdrew from his inner mind. He met Jim outside.

"Is there something wrong? Are you all right?"

Kirk smiled. "No, nothing wrong. Something marvelous, Spock. I don't know how they found us … but George and Gracie, and their calf were seen, just outside the lagoon, by the fishermen. The fisherman retreated from them, and one came to advise me. He's waiting for us, to bring us out to greet the whales!"

Spock was amazed. He remembered after his mind meld with Gracie, that he felt an affinity with both whales, and received the same impression from the whales towards him. He ran with Jim back to the shore of the lagoon, where the fishermen were waiting for them in one of Fiji's traditional sailing canoes, or *camakau*.

They sailed out of the lagoon, into the relatively calm (for the Pacific) ocean itself. At approximately three miles, Spock began to hear the infrasound of George's whale song. Then, the native fisherman, Anirudh, pointed to the northeast as George breached from the ocean.

Spock quickly estimated the whale was at least forty-eight feet in length, and made an impressive sight.

As they sailed closer, Spock could see Gracie swimming nearby, with her calf alongside. Anirudh dropped his sail, and the sailboat drifted. George and Gracie, and her calf, then swam near to the sailboat.

Spock reached out, touching Gracie. How healthy both whales appeared to be. Gracie's calf also appeared to be very healthy. Gracie rolled to one side, so that she could clearly look up towards the sailboat.

And then … George, Gracie and the calf swam off, heading north, possibly en route to the Hawaiian Islands, which had a rich feeding area for the whales.

Spock was feeling light, almost euphoric. He looked towards Jim, and Jim certainly was very happy. Even Anirudh was excited and happy. When the whales had disappeared from sight, Anirudh raised the sail again, and returned them back to the lagoon and their bungalow.

They both thanked Anirudh for his kindness. Anirudh left to return to fishing with his fellow fishermen.

Spock walked into the bungalow, as Jim watched Anirudh sail away. As he walked into the bungalow, he was enveloped within Spock's arms, who kissed him, lightly, on the forehead.

"Thank you, *ashayam*."

"Trust me, you are very welcome," replied Kirk who gently kissed Spock on the lips.

Spock inhaled, brought his right hand up, traced Jim's eyebrows; then kissed his eyelids, nose, mouth, and chin. Spock felt Jim trembling slightly within their embrace. Spock stepped back, reached out to Kirk's hand, leading him into their bedroom.

Church Bells — 2371

The memorial service for James T. Kirk had been set for Saturday. Spock had been invited to stay with the current Kirk family living in Jim's family home (located at 60 Greene Street) on Monday. He was even sleeping in the back upstairs bedroom that had been Jim's bedroom. Of course, the décor had changed quite a bit over the last 102 years. There had been a wing added to the home in the early 2300s.

Staying in Riverside made it easier to make arrangements for the memorial service and for the interment. The Riverside transport node had been locked down, to contain visitors.

Spock had stayed up late Friday evening, talking with the Kirk family, about Jim Kirk. It was fascinating talking to so many relatives of Jim. There were great-great nephews and nieces and cousins. Some were in Starfleet. Some had Jim's hazel eyes. Finally, he grew weary, and retired for the night.

He had overslept that Saturday morning. What woke Spock was the sound of multiple church bells that all rang on the hour. They would be ringing every hour throughout the day until after the interment had been completed.

The first time Spock had heard church bells was when he lived at Starfleet Academy. San Francisco had so many churches, and they all rang their bells on Sunday and special occasions. The second time was at his wedding here to Jim in 2269.

Spock found the church bells very musical and they filled him with peace and joy. Vulcan bells had never evolved to this size, they had transitioned to gongs instead, which have a deeper tone.

Spock finally got out of bed, and went down the hall to the bathroom, taking a shower. Returned to his room, and dressed in a dark suit, to honor Jim. He wore his IDIC around his neck. Went downstairs to have breakfast. There were several people at the table, and they welcomed him. One of them ran into the kitchen to prepare his normal breakfast of fresh fruit, juice and the oatmeal he had grown so fond of.

After breakfast, they sat in the living room, waiting for the last group in the home to finish breakfast. The memorial service was in three hours, there was some time to spare. Most of the extended Kirk family were not gathered in the home.

The matriarch of the family, Winona's great-great granddaughter, Francesca, came over to sit next to Spock.

"Spock, the family has close ties to the local Amish community here. Their craftsmen have made a handmade plain pine casket. They have asked me to ask you, if you haven't already chosen a casket, would you honor them by accepting their gift?"

Spock nodded, then found his voice to answer Francesca. "Yes, that is a splendid idea. Winona was also buried in an Amish casket, chosen by Jim. Please tell the Amish that I am honored by their gift."

Francesca replied, "Excellent. I asked one of your young Starfleet security agents to obtain the coordinates of the Amish location," Francesca handed Spock a slip of paper, "and the Amish will be agreeable to have your starship 'beam' up the casket."

"Thank you, Francesca, I will take care of this immediately."

Right then, there was a knock on the door. One of the cousins, Amelia, went to the door. Closed the door, and walked up to Spock.

"Mister Spock, there's a Starfleet security agent at the door, requesting to speak with you."

"Thank you, Amelia."

Spock went to the door. The Starfleet security agent advised that three aliens had arrived at the security checkpoint at the entrance to Riverside, and they all had letters of introduction from Captain Picard, requesting that Mister Spock meet with the aliens.

Spock advised Amelia that he would return shortly, and left with the security agent in his solar car for the security checkpoint. On the ride there, the security agent relayed the coordinates to

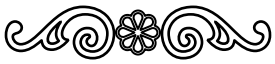
the Amish community to the *Farragut*, so that the casket could be beamed up. When they arrived at the security checkpoint, Spock found himself stunned at the aliens gathered to pay their respects.

The Gorn captain, S'slee, from the incident on Cestus III in 2267. Time had made no impact on the Gorn. However, history had been made from that incident. A peace treaty had been established between the Gorn hegemony and the United Federation of Planets. There was a federation colony on the west side of the planet, and on the east side of the planet, a Gorn colony. They had been sharing the planet for over fifty years peacefully.

Balok from the incident with the First Federation in 2266. He too, had not aged a day, based on his description from both Jim Kirk and Doctor McCoy. The First Federation had entered into a mutual defense pact with the United Federation of Planets.

And lastly, was one very old gnarled Klingon. Spock eventually recognized him as Kor, from the Klingon invasion of Organia in 2267. Jim had mentioned that Kor had threatened to have Spock dissected to see why he could withstand the power of their mind sifter. Fortunately, the Organians had interceded between the two opposing forces, preventing an escalation of hostilities between the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire. Spock had worked on the peace treaty between the Klingon Empire and the Federation in 2293.

Spock asked them why they were here in Riverside. They all replied they came to honor the memory of Jim Kirk, and to honor the achievements of both Jim Kirk and Spock. Spock welcomed them, and added them to the guest list.



The Starfleet security agent returned Spock to the Kirk home. The extended Kirk family had been very busy with some special project they had been working on secretly. When he walked inside the home, all of the Kirk family was waiting for him. The memorial service would begin in three hours.

The family patriarch, Peter Kirk's grandson, Leonard George Kirk, stood up and advised everyone it was time to leave for the "starting point."

Curious, thought Spock, *what have they planned?* They all quickly started leaving their home.

Leonard George asked if Spock would like to ride with him. Spock assented.

Utilizing several solar cars, vans, and pick ups, the family left home, first heading east on Greene St., then turning south on Washburn St., east on Railroad St., south again on Pioneer St., to the southern portion of the city's limits bordering on the north bank of the English River. There was a huge crowd of civilians waiting for them. The Kirk family all exited from their cars, vans, and trucks; Spock walked with them to the Starfleet checkpoint at the English River, that had been erected to maintain crowd control.

Spock heard the low murmur from the crowd, as they talked softly with each other. Then, the crowd began parting, to clear the road in front of the bridge across the English River. Crossing the bridge, was an old fashioned conveyance, being pulled by four of the largest examples of horses he had ever seen. They must be Clydesdales — all perfectly matched to the color and their markings. The conveyance was a hearse.

Leonard George cleared his throat. The crowd grew silent as the horse-drawn hearse and the horses stopped in front of Spock and Leonard George.

Someone handed Leonard George a microphone to address the crowd.

“Ambassador Spock, the citizens of Riverside wished to honor our son, James Kirk, in several ways. The craftsmen in our area made this hearse by hand just for this funeral. The horses are on loan from a nearby Amish community. Some of our citizens will line the streets of Riverside, along the path the hearse will travel, to the Trinity Lutheran Church. Others of us will walk behind the hearse. Sir, would you prefer to walk with us, ride the hearse, or have one of us drive you back to the church to wait for the cortege to arrive?”

Spock was struggling to control his emotions. “Thank you all. I would prefer to ride with the hearse,” he was finally able to reply.

Spock walked over to the security agents, and asked them to establish the coordinates of the hearse; asked them to contact the *Farragut*, requesting them to transport Captain Kirk’s casket to those coordinates. Five minutes later, a shuttlecraft approached the street, setting down behind the hearse. The honor guard stepped out of the shuttlecraft, carrying the casket, draped in a United Federation of Planets flag.

They marched slowly to the hearse, the head of the casket proceeding first, while from within the shuttlecraft, prerecorded music played the official United Federation of Planets stanza. They carefully placed the casket inside the hearse, and when completed, they came to attention smartly, saluting Spock.

They then marched slowly back to the shuttlecraft, and the craft lifted off to return to the *Farragut*.

Leonard George then walked Spock over to the hearse. He helped Spock climb up onto the driver’s seat of the black painted wood hearse. The driver doffed his hat to Spock, then signaled the horses to begin to walk. The crowd started walking along the sidewalks with the hearse. Up ahead, Spock could now see from his height advantage, that there were even more people lining the sidewalks up to where the Trinity United Methodist Church was located on East Second Street, just two blocks north of the Kirk family home.

The church bells all over town had started ringing continuously as they made their way to the church.

The journey to the church took over forty minutes. When they arrived, six family members who had been previously selected, stepped up to be pallbearers for the casket, to bring Jim into the church.

Inside, they rested Jim on a white cloth draped bier, in front of the altar. The church was filled to capacity; loudspeakers had been set up outside, to broadcast for the crowd still outside.

Flowers of every variety, color and hue decorated the church. Several wreaths were laid on top of Jim's casket.

The church bells were all silent now.

Spock took his seat at the front of the section of pews set aside for the Kirk family, on the right hand side of the church. Over to his left, he noted the number of Starfleet officers in Class A uniforms, including the command teams from both the *USS Farragut* and the *Enterprise D* were sitting together. Sitting among them was Montgomery Scott, wearing his finest kilt and gentleman's Argyll Jacket, complete with a sporran, hose and ghillie brogues.

The presiding Minister of Trinity Faith Methodist, Roger Aaron Pearl, walked over to Spock, then walked with him up to the lectern. Minister Pearl affixed a microphone to Spock's suit collar, turned it on, walked away, and sat in Spock's space in the pew.

Spock begins his eulogy.

"We come together here today to celebrate the life of James Tiberius Kirk. He was born in Riverside, grew up here, educated here. Like his parents, he set his eyes on the stars. He enlisted in Starfleet Academy, graduating in three years, in a curriculum designed for four years. He was the youngest captain ever commissioned in Starfleet at the age of thirty-two. He was the youngest admiral at the age of thirty-seven. He died in the line of duty at the age of sixty. His body was just recently recovered, seventy-eight years later.

"An official funeral service was conducted by Starfleet in 2293. We are here today for a memorial service. For those of us who may continue to mourn for his loss, please be at rest, because now Jim Kirk is at rest.

"To his family at large, please know that Jim was always proud of his family, and he loved all of his family. Later today, he will join his parents, and his brother, and his brother's wife, in their family plot.

"The greatest thing we can do to honor and celebrate Jim Kirk, is to remember him as he lived; fierce in his devotion of duty; upright in his convictions; benevolent towards those in need of assistance; judicious towards those who would confront the Federation. He led his life with dedication, honor, and an unquenchable desire to explore this mysterious and beautiful universe.

"Live your lives as he led his … reaching out for new goals and ever greater achievements, not just for himself, but for every living being.

"Jim had a favorite quote that he would share with new crew members from time to time.

"From Jacob Braude: Whoever you are, there is some younger person who thinks you are perfect. There is some work that will never be done if you don't do it. There is someone who would miss you if you were gone. There is a place that you alone can fill.

“James T. Kirk lived by, and lived up to, this phrase: ‘Space … The final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its continuing mission, to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no one has gone before.’

“Thank you all for honoring Jim. As his first officer, his friend, his *t’hy’la*, his husband … my heart and soul are comforted by your love, regard and respect for Jim.”

Spock holds up his right hand, high over his shoulder, configuring his fingers into the *ta’al*. “May you all live long and prosper.”

The congregation responds with “Peace and long life.”

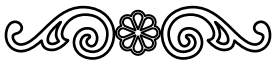
Flashback: Yosemite National Park — 2287

Immediately following the mission to Nimbus III, Kirk, Spock and McCoy returned to their interrupted vacation in Yosemite National Park. They had pitched their campground in almost the same area that Jim and Spock had camped in 2265. The park was just as lovely now as it had been then. They spent a week, Jim being a lot less reckless, and McCoy in turn, was a lot less grumpy. Spock was very content.

They had another month of shore leave left to them. After they left Yosemite, McCoy returned to Georgia. Jim and Spock returned to their home in San Francisco. Spock wanted to continue working on his research on the Fabrini, Jim wanted to finish the biography he had been writing for several years on Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, a Union Civil War hero and the thirty-second governor of the state of Maine.

At the end of the second week, Spock checked with the National Park System, and discovered there were several openings to camp in the Camp Curry area of Yosemite National Park for a one week period, starting in two days. They could camp out for another week, and return home in time for Spock to finish his final briefing from the Vulcan Embassy, on their secret mission to Qo’noS, the Klingon home planet.

In case the Vulcan secret mission “went south” (as Jim would say), Spock wanted to make sure that before he left Jim Kirk for the mission, he would leave Jim with happy memories, as “insurance” .



Spock secured the “old school” camping supplies the next day before Jim returned home from a meeting he had with his publishers. When he returned home, all the gear was in plain sight in the living room. Bemused, Jim walked into the bedroom they had converted into their office, and kissed Spock on the back of his neck, as he sat before his computer terminal.

Spock turned in his chair; reached up with right hand and caressed the side of his husband’s face. Jim leaned down again, and they kissed deeply.

Jim moved his head, whispering softly into Spock's right ear, "We're going camping, I take it?" Then kissed Spock again, this time on the forehead.

"Yes, I was reminded of the first time we went camping 'old school.' I thought we might like to recreate that scenario. Only this time … we can share one tube tent, and one sleeping bag, if you would like to."

"Oh, you'll get no disagreement from me regarding sharing. Have I told you I love you today?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, *ashayam*, but I'm always glad to hear you say it. I love you as well."

"Well, when do we leave for camping. I presume we are returning to Yosemite?"

"We have five days reserved, starting the day after tomorrow. In the Camp Curry area again," replied Spock.

"Day after tomorrow. I have an idea. How about we test out that single sleeping bag tonight? We should be certain it will be comfortable enough for us." Kirk smiled at Spock, then leaned down again to kiss his husband.

"I knew there was a reason I married you. You're an excellent strategist."

Interment — 2371

After the memorial service concluded at the Trinity Lutheran Church, six more Kirk family members assembled to be the pallbearers for Jim, carried him from the bier, back down the steps to the church, to the waiting hearse. The streets around the church were still packed with Riverside citizens, and Starfleet officers in their Class A uniforms. All the church bells in town began ringing again.

They walked behind the hearse the four short blocks to the Riverside Cemetery. Once they arrived, six more Kirk family members assembled to be the pallbearers for Jim to the family plot. The crowd had stopped at the entrance to the cemetery, only the Kirk family and invited guests (the *Farragut* and *Enterprise D* command officers; Montgomery Scott; and a variety of guest alien heads of state; including Kor, Balok, and S'slee, and the Vulcan ambassador to Earth).

The church bells were once again silent.

At the grave site, they surrounded Jim's casket.

Minister Roger Aaron Pearl, delivers the opening salutation, "We have gathered here to praise God and to witness to our faith as we celebrate the life of James Tiberius Kirk. We come together in grief, acknowledging our Human loss. May God grant us grace, that in pain we may find comfort, in sorrow hope, in death resurrection. Amen."

Then continued with the prayer, "O God, who gave us birth, you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray. You know our needs before we ask, and our ignorance in asking. Give to

us now your grace, that as we shrink before the mystery of death, we may see the light of eternity. Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you. Amen."

Those gathered replied, "Amen."

The grave attendants lowered Jim's casket into the grave vault. Once it was secure, those gathered stepped up, picked up a handful of soil, and tossed it onto the casket towards the foot area. Then they would toss a flower, or flowers, onto the head of the casket.

The new headstone was on display for those assembled to view; it would not be erected on the grave site for at least six months, to allow for the ground to settle. The gravestone was made from native Iowa rock, Sioux Quartzite, which has a pink to dark red color.

The epitaph read:

JAMES T. KIRK

Born: 2233 Died: 2293

Beloved son, husband, and father

He was one who followed dreams, stars, and ships

Etched into the headstone was the graceful silhouette of the original *USS Enterprise*.

Later that night, all the starships in orbit around Earth discharged fireworks into the lower atmosphere — earlier that day the news outlets had alerted their viewers this was going to happen. In Iowa, everyone marveled at the light show. On the other side of Earth, even during the daylight, the firework display was remarkable.

After the fireworks finished, all the ships that were in orbit, not assigned to station keeping on Earth, began their voyages home, or continued en route to their missions.

Spock spent the night at the Kirk family home for the wake. He shared photos from their missions that Starfleet had cleared for release. The family shared personal photos, some that Spock had not seen before. As the older relatives left for home, or headed off to bed, the young members of the family sat out on the back porch with Spock, as he asked each one what their plans were for the future. Some wanted to continue in their families' farming concerns. Several young people were interested in medical careers. There were some teenagers who were interested in joining Starfleet. There was an aspiring journalist, an author, a mechanic, computer specialist, massage therapist, veterinarian. Their aspirations, hopes and dreams were engaging.

Spock retired to Jim's old bedroom, and slept soundly. If he dreamed of happier days with his husband, or with his captain, he never mentioned them in the morning when he left. Francesca Kirk remarked that Spock had looked younger than when he had arrived.

Spock beamed back up to the *Farragut*, to collect his personal possessions he took with him when he left Romulus. He also wanted to take the opportunity to thank everyone again for their generosity in regards to Jim Kirk and to himself.

He was packing his possessions, when the doorbell to his quarters chimed. He went to the door, outside stood Captain Picard. Picard asked if he could speak with Spock for a few minutes. Spock allowed him entry, and then asked if Picard would like a refreshment — perhaps some Earl Grey tea?

Picard smiled, and acknowledged the courtesy. Spock had the replicator make two cups of the tea, and joined Picard at the small dining table that his quarters was equipped with.

They sipped their tea for a few minutes, and then Picard tugged at the hem of his uniform jacket, and cleared his throat. “My officers and I wanted to thank you for your courtesy in inviting us to your husband’s memorial service. It was a very fitting service. I was also impressed by the love that the Riverside citizens bestowed on you and your husband.”

“Yes, I was quite moved myself. Is there something you would like to ask of me, Picard?”

“Yes, I would. Three years ago on Romulus, I had the unfortunate duty to advise you of Sarek’s death. At that time, I offered you the chance to touch what Sarek shared with me in a mind meld five years previously. As I’m sure Data has told you, I was alone with Jim Kirk on Veridian III for several hours. Your husband talked about you a great deal…”

Picard stopped briefly, centering his thoughts. He knew Spock was a proud man, and he had to be clear in how he worded this next proposal.

Continuing, Picard said, “I offer to you now a chance to touch on what Jim Kirk shared with me. It may not be as vivid as an image from a mind meld, but they are my memories. It pleases me to offer this to you.”

Spock was startled. He knew Picard was a brave, honorable man. He was also very compassionate. “I accept. Are you ready for a mind meld at this time?” Spock asked.

“Yes, I am.”

Spock stands up, moves his chair closer to Picard’s. Then places his right hand on the left side of Picard’s face, his fingers on the psi points. Spock lowers his psychic shields, as Picard breathes out, closing his eyes. Spock enters Picard’s mind. Picard must have been thinking about this for some time, as the memories are quite vivid, and easy to access.

He watches Picard approach Jim at a remote home, he’s chopping logs into firewood. Then, he’s inside the home, where Kirk had been making breakfast. The scenes shift quickly, now Picard and Jim are horseback riding. Jim is talking about Spock now. How he has tried reaching Spock via the mating bond link.

Picard convinces Jim the danger is very real with Soran, and the inhabitants of Veridian IV are in deadly danger. They go after Soran. There is a fight, and Jim falls off the metal bridge, onto the rocks below in the gorge. Picard takes care of the missile launcher and Soran, and goes to aid Jim.

Spock can hear Jim and Picard talking, and sees Jim's broken body. His back was broken and one of his broken ribs had punctured a lung, he was bleeding out as he talked with Picard. Picard had no chance of saving him.

Kirk, "Did we do it? Did we make a difference?"

Picard, "Oh, yes. We made a difference. Thank you."

Kirk, "Least I could do for the captain of the *Enterprise*."

Kirk stares off into the distance, as if he could hear someone else talking to him. Kirk smiles, his mouth bloody, "It was … fun. Oh, my…"

And the memory stops. The mind meld ends. Picard opens his eyes.

Spock is gazing at him in wonderment. "Jim heard me calling him through the bonding link! He truly did *not* die alone. He had you with him in person, and I was inside his mind."

Spock begins to cry softly. Picard reaches out, and hugs Spock lightly, and then Spock moves further into the embrace. Picard will hold Spock until he finishes crying and finally falls to sleep. He calls Data for assistance. Between the two of them they move Spock to his bed, still sound asleep, take off his footwear, and cover him with a blanket. They dim the lights in his quarters, and quietly leave.

In the morning, when Spock awakens, he realizes he has faith of the heart again.

Flashback: Starfleet Operations, San Francisco — 2293

Most of the crew had returned to San Francisco on this day to attend the decommissioning ceremony for the *Enterprise NCC-1701 A*. Scotty openly wept, he knew that this would be the last Constitution class starship he would be chief engineer for. Doctor McCoy was leaving active service in space, and was assigned to Starfleet Medical Headquarters. Uhura finally married the commander she had been dating for years. Chekov had moved in with his love, and there were discussions of marriage. Sulu's daughter, Demora, had graduated from Starfleet Academy the year before, and was actively pursuing getting an assignment as a helmsman.

Though there had been strain on Kirk and Spock's marriage during the events of their last mission, what with Kirk and McCoy being imprisoned on the Klingon penal asteroid, Rura Penthe, for the murder of the Klingon Chancellor Gorkon, they have resolved the issues that stood between them.

Extreme stress, grief, fear, betrayal, and acknowledging that the both of them weren't as young as they used be, had been difficult to deal with, in the middle of multiple emergencies.

After the ceremony, they all met at a local restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf that they all had come to enjoy over the years. There was a small dancing area, Jim and Spock got up to dance, with Spock leading. The evening flew by quickly, and they all eventually left for their homes.

When they left the restaurant, Jim and Spock walked along the wharf, enjoying the evening. The sky was clear, the moon was out, the wind was light. It was a beautiful evening. Spock glanced at Jim, and thought the silver in his hair was very handsome on him. Jim was glad that in his old age, Spock was still in love with him.

They returned home, washed up for bedtime, and retired. Spock lay cuddled within Jim's arms, his head on Jim's chest, listening to his heartbeat.

Always touching and touched.

Delta Vega — 2255

Spock was deep inside a cave on Delta Vega. He had found material that would burn, and started a fire to warm up his 157-year-old bones. He was deeply emotionally unbalanced, and needed to get warm so that he could meditate to center himself. He hadn't been this emotionally unbalanced since his husband, James Kirk, had died, some ninety-four years ago.

The fire was giving off a lot of heat, and he was warming up rapidly. Just as he was about to prepare for meditation, he heard a loud noise at the mouth of the cave. A roar of the very same creature who had chased him into the cave. Spock picked up a large branch that was burning, and walked as quickly as he could towards the cave mouth.

As he arrives, he's surprised to see not only the creature, but another life form that the creature was chasing. A Humanoid life form. Spock quickened his pace, waving the burning branch from side to side, and chased the monster away. The Humanoid life form is projecting exceptionally strong emotions that are making Spock's head ring.

He turns back towards the Humanoid life form, looking at the young man who is lying on the ground. The hood on his jacket is down now and he can clearly see the facial features. How odd that this incarnation of Jim would have eyes as blue as Leonard McCoy's were. Spock exclaims, "James T. Kirk!"

The younger, alternative universe version of Jim asks, "Excuse me?"

"How did you find me?"

Jim asks, "How do you know my name?" incredulously.

"I have been and shall always be your friend."

The young man chuckles, "Look, I don't know you."

Very patiently, Spock replies, "I. Am. Spock."

"Bullshit."

Right now, Spock didn't know where this encounter would lead to. But he did know one thing as a certainty. No matter what happened, he would not pass up a chance of saying goodbye to James T. Kirk in this universe.

Author's Notes:

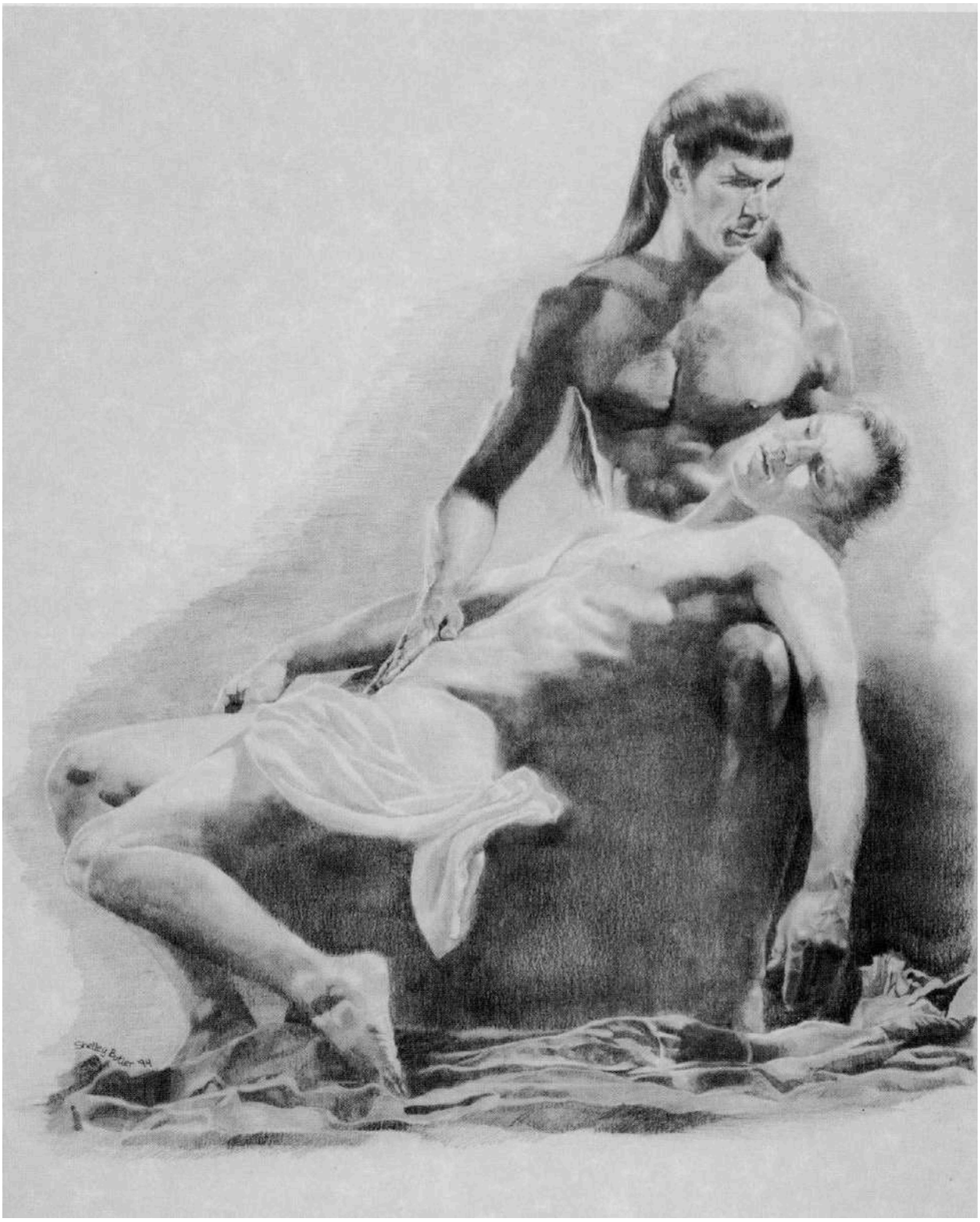
The idea for the escort of Kirk's body home is based on the ending of the 1983 movie 'Without a Trace' starring Kate Nelligan and Judd Hirsch (IMDb). The plot of the movie revolves around a kidnapped young New York City boy, and is based on the true story of Etan Kalil Patz.

The element that inspired me so much in the movie, is that at the very end of the movie, when they find the kidnapped young boy in another city in Connecticut, the investigating officer decides to drive the young boy home to New York City. The police cars from the city in Connecticut that assisted on the arrest decide to escort the young boy home. Along the way home, police cars from other cities pass through, join the escort, all with their sirens on. It was very … emotional.

The idea of the citizens of Riverside building a handmade hearse, and all the citizens lining the street to the church, was taken from the 2009 made-for-HBO movie 'Taking Chance' starring Kevin Bacon (IMDb). It is a wonderful, five-hanky movie.

For more information see this post from Marine Lieutenant Colonel Strobl, who escorted Lance Corporal Chance Phelps. Phelps was killed in action in Baghdad, Iraq in 2004. Strobl volunteered as the officer who escorted the remains of PFC C. Phelps USMC from Dover AFB, DE to his home in DuBois, Wyoming.

Pietà
by Shelley Butler



Telsu
by s0mmerspr0ssen

Summary: Throughout his childhood, Spock suffers from ‘emotional seizures’. It takes his healers and parents years to understand their cause — a special *telsu* bond: *T’hy’la*.

Author’s Notes:

It took some years, but this story is finally completed! I hope you enjoy it. Thanks to the amazing *kholly* for offering to beta my story and working out the kinks.

My sources for Vulcan, background information etc. are:

- The Memory Alpha Star Trek Wiki
- The Starbase 10 Vulcan Dictionary
- Korsaya

I also took some lines from Star Trek: TOS and used some common fandom conventions/head-canons.

Although the main set-up of the universe is that pictured in AOS, it does work as a form of AU. If you like angst, this is for you!

One

The stardate is 2233.04 when Spock experiences the first of what his healers will later describe as emotional seizures.

Spock is not quite three Standard years of age. Like all healthy Vulcan infants of this age, he has a basic understanding of communication, using proper vocabulary and grammar. He trains his memory and other elementary skills daily. Soon, he will have reached a level of knowledge that will allow him to start traditional schooling outside of his home.

Controlling his emotions, especially occasional bursts of anger, is as of yet difficult for him. But it is for all children of Vulcan descent. They are not born in control; it is something to be strived for and perfected during one’s entire life. To do so, one must follow the teachings of the revered logician Surak.

This, at least, is how his father Sarek has explained it.

The seizure, however, goes far beyond what any Vulcan child usually displays during development.

Spock is focusing on one of his preferred toys. Made of steel, it is a set of several 2D shapes connected with each other by certain mechanisms and patterns. The goal is to understand the set-up, separate all shapes, then reconnect them to once more create their original form.

Spock is very close to solving it — after which he will aim to solve a more difficult version of the same design, as his father suggested.

In the next moment, he finds himself dropping the toy on the floor. A headache, harsh and pulsing, has overcome him. Spock loses his ability to breathe calmly. His hands, seemingly on their own, reach up to cover his eyes.

His mother, having watched over him while attending to something on her PADD, immediately cries out.

“Spock?” he hears her say, her voice unusually loud. “What is happening, are you in pain?”

Spock finds himself unable to reply to his mother. In fact, he now has difficulties understanding her. A loud ringing is present in his ears and a heat not unlike that of the Vulcan suns seems to have taken over his body.

“Aah!” is all Spock can communicate, then he is toppling over and finds himself on the floor next to his toy.

He will later realize that his mother’s shouting is no longer directed at him, but at his father. He will understand that the hands prying at his eyes are Sarek’s and that his father aims to initiate a mind meld — and repeatedly fails to do so.

But in this moment of unknown pain and helplessness, he has no control over his mind, much less his body.

After the pain, the heat, and the ringing finally subside, there follows a feeling of utmost despair. Sadness, fear, and confusion in a strength that he has never felt before, take over his body.

Spock, surrounded by both his parents, starts to cry. Not just a few stray tears as many Vulcan children might shed in a moment of weakness, but multiple tears mixed with sobs and the flow of nasal mucus.

He is unable to stop for what must be over two Standard hours.

When the intense emotions finally subside, Spock becomes aware that he is already with healers at ShiKahr Medical Facility. Next to his familiar pediatrician, additional experts have entered the examination room and are observing him. He is sitting on a biobed. Data he does not comprehend is shown on four different screens.

His parents are also present, his mother showing much of the emotion Spock knows she feels even as an adult but aims to restrain while she resides on Vulcan.

Spock is acutely aware that his own face is covered in mucus and drying tears. He takes a few deep breaths, aiming to take control of his mind and body once more like his father has taught him. When he finally succeeds, he quietly asks: “May I use the hygienic facilities to clean my face?”

His voice sounds unlike himself. It is rough and weaker than before.

One of the healers silently gestures towards a door. Before Spock can slide off the biobed, his mother steps forward and lifts him off. He walks with her towards the facilities. Inside, his

mother silently helps him direct the sonic jet of the hygienic unit towards his face, adjusting the strength accordingly.

Spock diligently cleans his face and adjusts his hair.

Nothing is said by anyone until Spock returns and his mother once more places him on the examination bed.

What follows are a variety of tests, questions, and stares so intense Spock can only assume that there is some concealed meaning.

Ultimately, as far he has understood, there is not a satisfying explanation for what has happened to him.

“There is no known disease on Vulcan that causes this kind of behavior,” one of the healers informs Spock’s parents. Nobody is speaking to Spock directly, but he is avidly listening to the adults present. Acute observation, he has been taught, is a fundamental part of the learning process. “It is unlike anything recorded in our medical databases. The symptoms do not correspond with any known illness. Therefore, we can give no definite diagnosis. Some of the symptoms do resemble a form of seizure, but their manifestation is mainly … emotional.”

Spock recognizes that the last word is spoken with special emphasis, but is unsure of an interpretation of this.

“Emotional,” his father repeats. “Can you elaborate on that, *hassu*?”

“There was abnormal cerebral activity present in the scan initially made upon your son’s admission. Similar patterns have been seen with patients suffering from convulsive fits. This is usually a sign of a neurological illness affecting the muscles and causing uncontrollable contractions. Your son, however, was primarily emotionally imbalanced whereas any physical symptoms were secondary.”

“I understand,” his father answers.

“I suggest,” the healer continues, “seeking out a Human physician.”

Spock observes his father’s straight posture with interest, how it differs from his mother’s restless movements of the hands and feet.

“Spock is primarily Vulcan,” is Sarek’s response. “While Human genetic material is present, the Vulcan genome by far outweighs his Human heritage. His development so far has verified this.”

“I concur. However, extreme emotional anomalies are more common in Humans than in Vulcans. Even a small genetic variance based on his Human heritage could be the elicitor of this kind of seizure.”

“Something like this is not normal among Humans, either!”

It is the first time Spock’s mother has spoken up during this exchange. All eyes focus on her as she elaborates her point. While her voice is calm, her face has become slightly flushed. Spock knows this to be another sign of feeling.

“I agree that strong emotional displays are something Human rather than Vulcan,” his mother continues. “However, Spock was not merely crying because he was upset over something. This … seizure, as you describe it, happened spontaneously. Nothing that happened before could have reasonably triggered this volatile response. He simply started to cry.”

“I understand that emotion and reason are essentially mutually exclusive,” the healer replies.

“Emotions always have a cause,” Spock’s mother emphasizes calmly. “It might not be a logical cause, but the source can usually be traced. Sadness is caused by loss, fear by danger. Spock’s outburst had no such causes, as far as I could observe.”

There is a moment of silence where the points made are considered.

“I cannot offer a satisfying explanation,” the healer finally concludes. “I can only repeat my advice to you: Seek out a Human specialist. We cannot explain what has transpired within Vulcan norms. It is logical to consider any additional form of treatment available.”

Spock’s mother adds nothing further to the entire exchange. Her face, Spock has noticed, once more only shows calm and control.

Eventually, they return to their home in the suburban area of ShiKahr. Spock focuses once more on his toy and the day continues as it would have. The only exception to their routine is the intense conversation between his parents that Spock cannot quite follow from the parlor floor.

Spock is not taken to a Human physician.

No additional seizure presents itself in the following thirteen months. After reaching the required standards of linguistic ability, motor skills and general physical maturity, Spock now attends the communal schooling facilities of ShiKahr.

His father has informed him that his aptitude tests were above average and that the admission tests imply that Spock’s talents are particularly suited for a career in the higher sciences. The scores, he explained, align with those of individuals who would later attend the more demanding courses at the Vulcan Science Academy, the most-esteemed higher education facility on Vulcan.

Spock has accepted this information with the appropriate decorum and agreed with his father that a special emphasis on courses preparing for this particular path would be the most productive and thus most logical approach to his schooling.

After several weeks of communal schooling, Spock becomes aware of two points that have not previously been of importance while being homeschooled. For one, his Human mother seems to be a point of interest for almost any Vulcan he encounters, be it a teacher or fellow student. Secondly, the fact that Spock’s mother is of Terran rather than Vulcan descent seems to imply that Spock is lacking. What exactly this lack entails has not yet become clear.

Given his continuously over-average testing scores as well as his fine record of conduct, Spock has come to the conclusion that the repeated comments on his mixed heritage have no real basis in logic. It is most puzzling that Vulcans, adults in particular, would show such unbecoming behavior.

It is, he must admit to himself in the privacy of his mind, also a cause of emotional responses.

Mainly, the comments are a cause for anger. With the help of meditation, as taught to him by his father, he can control these feelings adequately so far.

In this regard, he also profits from the fact that the majority of time spent at school is filled with private sessions in his personal learning pod. Communal schooling means that weaker students might fall behind, whereas advanced students cannot further their education properly. Thus, Spock and other students of the same age only rarely follow a communal lesson collectively. It is most often before or after these lessons that his peers continue to remark upon his parentage.

In spite of this, thirteen months passed while Spock furthered his education and broadened his knowledge in a variety of fields.

Then, in the midst of a test on advanced algebra taking place in his pod, the burning headache he has felt before returns full-force. Like before, he immediately falls to the floor, his hands reaching for his head in an attempt to ease physically what cannot be controlled with the mind. Like before, he fails.

His incoherent shouts must alert his teachers and fellow students to his pain, but already his awareness of his surroundings starts to fade. Instead, he is slowly filled with intense emotion. Again, fear and sadness stand out from the turmoil he encounters. His body shakes with the intensity, his mind filled with a need to shout out his feelings, to scream and cry as loudly as he can.

The seizure does not last as long as his first. Still, it takes nearly one Standard hour for him to become lucid and, ultimately, controlled.

Once more, he finds himself at ShiKahr Medical Facility, both of his parents present in the room. This time, Spock can rightly interpret the dismissive and stern glances from the healers. He is by now familiar enough with the looks and nuances of vocal emphasis to realize that they disapprove of him, as well as his mother.

His father, however, does not seem to cause any disrespectful behavior or stares. Spock has come to understand that Sarek is very well-esteemed among their people, as are other individuals of their family line. As ambassador to Earth, currently residing on Vulcan for the sake of Spock's education, Sarek is well-known and highly regarded.

"We can offer no further explanation," the healers explain. "Have you sought out the help of a Human physician?"

"No adequate expert in this field is known to us," Spock's father replies.

Spock was not aware such an expert had been sought by his parents. Rather, his first seizure was not spoken of again.

“We will assist you in this, if you so wish, *kevet-dutar*.”

Sarek inclines his head to the healer’s proposal. Spock’s mother again does not partake much in the following conversation.

At sunset, after the evening meal, Spock’s mother enters his personal room. Spock saves his progress on the virtual game of chess he has been playing on his personal computer terminal, and turns his attention to his mother.

“I wanted to talk to you about what happened today,” she proposes.

“Mother, I assume you refer to the return of what the healer has described as an emotional seizure?” It must be the Human way to use more imprecise expressions, although his mother generally is a more than satisfying conversational partner.

“Indeed. I wanted to know if there was anything you had to say. That is, anything not discussed with the healers. Maybe something that you thought was more appropriate for private surroundings.”

Spock takes a moment to consider this.

“I am interested in whether you and Father will indeed seek out the services of a Human expert,” he eventually states.

Spock’s mother does not reply at once. Clearly, she, too, has been taught that any statement in a conversation should be reflected upon prior to being spoken.

“Is that something you think you would benefit from?” she asks in return.

“I have no understanding of what a Human healer would do differently,” Spock admits. “I can therefore not say if it would be beneficial.”

“Of course.” His mother pauses again. “I realize you have little medical knowledge, but you are the one experiencing these … seizures, for the lack of a proper description. May I ask, Spock: What do you think causes these outbursts? Do you have any theories at all?”

“I do not. Both experiences were sudden and the emotions uncontainable. Yet, I could not detect a common denominator surrounding the occurrences that could arguably be seen as the cause.” He hesitates, then finds himself confiding with her his inner turmoil: “I must admit, Mother, that I am unsettled by them.”

“That’s understandable,” she returns. Her lips form a smile; a show of emotion she has often directed at him in the privacy of their home. While he does not return it, he can appreciate the sentiment. She means well, and her cultural background is to be respected. “I’m worried about you. I wish we could find something to help you.”

“Do you agree with the healers’ assessment that these episodes of emotional imbalance might be caused by my Human heritage?”

There is something in his mother’s face that Spock only sees very rarely. He recognizes it nonetheless: hurt.

“I’m not a healer,” she replies. “But I’d like to believe that your Human heritage is an asset to you, not a disadvantage.”

“Vulcan is part of the United Federation of Planets, an interstellar union of currently one-hundred and sixty-six members. The aim and continuing challenge of the Federation is to unite cultures and beings that differ very greatly from each other. It is reasonable to assume that a child born of two allied species would benefit from this unique perspective and ultimately further the understanding between cultures.”

“I can only agree, Spock.”

“It has also benefited my personal education,” Spock elaborates. “I have been raised bilingually. This has resulted in me being considerably more advanced at Terran Standard, and I continue to excel in this field compared to my peers.”

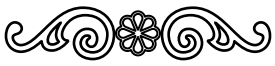
Again, his mother smiles. There are days when she is less guarded, more Human. Today is clearly one of them. “Indeed.”

“Yet,” Spock continues, “I have found that my peers as well as my teachers do not always share this perspective on my half-Human parentage.”

His mother’s smile becomes much smaller. “Even Vulcans can be mistaken,” she replies. “We are not infallible,” Spock agrees.

His mother’s nod of agreement is short and swift. “It’s late,” she says, schooling her features. “Sleep well, Spock.”

“Rest well, Mother,” Spock replies and looks after her. He cannot help but think that their conversation has left her troubled.



The seizures return regularly, but neither Spock nor his parents can find a pattern or an explanation. The fits happen in varying situations, publicly or in private, and once have occurred even during meditation. Their repeated occurrence is troubling.

In spite of them, Spock continues his education. His test scores remain above-average and his parents approve of his academic excellence.

His fellow students, however, take his seizures as an additional point of weakness that must regularly be mentioned and discussed. Spock therefore applies himself even more to his studies, aiming to finish his lessons early and depart from the schooling grounds before any of the others leave their pods. To expose oneself to an unpleasant confrontation when it can be avoided would be illogical.

According to what Spock can observe, he is not lacking. His intellectual capacities surpass those of many Vulcans who are born of two Vulcan parents. He strives to understand and implement Surak’s teachings daily. Unless a seizure occurs, he improves his control in regards to his emotions. His free time, he dedicates to beneficial activities like the game of 3D-chess. He aims to preserve Vulcan culture by mastering the *ka’athyra*, commonly known as the Vulcan lyre.

The evidence is clear that Spock has no intellectual disadvantage due to his mixed heritage. In addition, he has fully dedicated himself to the Vulcan way. Logic dictates that this fact be accepted.

It is not.

Perhaps his seizures are of more concern to them than Spock has assumed. His healers have labeled them as something based on his Human heritage, no matter how insignificant its presence in Spock's genes or cultural identity. Spock knows he cannot control the fits, but this might not be known to his peers and instructors.

Spock does not know what to expect when his parents tell him that a Human physician will arrive for a consultation at ShiKahr shortly before he reaches the age of seven. His seizures have not stopped, but their intensity has declined in terms of length. Spock's only valid explanation for this decrease would be that his maturing mind and body have become accustomed to the sudden assaults and can now induce a speedier recovery.

Still, he is open to the idea of a Human physician. The Vulcan healers have so far denied any treatment beyond advising Spock's father to further instruct Spock in the Vulcan ways of meditation and control. If these seizures are indeed somehow linked to his mother's genes, a Human expert is more likely to make a fitting diagnosis.

In addition, becoming seven years of age is considered an important step in the development of a Vulcan child. This, Spock has been taught, is a time where betrothals are arranged between families. He understands that an explanation or possible treatment for his predicament would lessen any objections a potential bondmate might raise. After all, his mental state during a seizure could affect that of his betrothed.

At ShiKahr Medical Facility, Spock meets Doctor M'Benga of Earth. He is a tall, dark-skinned Human of slender build who shows little outward emotion except for a brief smile when he greets Spock's mother with the Terran handshake ritual. It is an accepted display between Humans, but considered inappropriate between Vulcans. To Sarek, he expertly offers the *ta'al*.

Spock is surprised by his shown restraint and straight posture, but soon learns that the physician has been conducting a medical internship at Raal District Medical Center in the past year to acquire a xenobiological background in addition to his Terran training. It is rare for Humans to take this kind of position on Vulcan. It must be preceded not only by an excellent academic record, but the mastery of mental strength and emotional restraint far above average for a Human. Doctor M'Benga must be an outstanding Terran to be accepted in a Vulcan medical program.

While his Golic is adequate, the physician prefers Terran Standard for medical conversations. Neither Spock's parents nor Spock himself object.

Doctor M'Benga calmly hears out both of Spock's parents as well as Spock's own additional explanations. The physician has already familiarized himself with Spock's medical history and done additional research. After administering further tests of his own, as well as interpreting all

data gathered on Spock's unique condition, he comes to a very different conclusion than his Vulcan colleagues.

"I can't agree with the current theory that this is a form of Human illness manifesting itself in Spock," he eventually explains.

They have moved to a small but private office provided to Doctor M'Benga by the administration. Spock respects the doctor for not only talking to his parents, but seeking out Spock's gaze as well.

"How do you come to this conclusion, Doctor?" Spock can hear that his father is intrigued.

"To be honest, I doubted the idea from the start. Such intense emotional outbursts combined with the physical symptoms are not something we usually see in Humans. Crying fits might be expected in younger children, but Spock is much more mature. The only reasonable explanation would be a severe psychological problem or imbalance. Something like major trauma. As I understand it, there's no record of Spock having been placed in a traumatic situation."

"Indeed not," Sarek agrees.

"Spock's mind is also Vulcan in nature," the doctor continues. "His intellectual capacities at this age and his mastering of Vulcan meditation techniques to me make any Human psychological explanation or treatment an unfitting approach."

Spock cannot help but feel satisfied by this assessment. His father also inclines his head in agreement.

"I've reviewed all data available and compared it to several Terran databases as well as those open to me on Vulcan. Especially given the scans made during the so-called seizure, I've come to quite a different conclusion. I believe these episodes are linked to Spock's telepathic abilities."

"You mean these emotions are somehow transferred to him?" It is Spock's mother who first reacts to Doctor M'Benga's surprising proposal. "Maybe intersected from those around him?"

"It's one possibility," the physician responds. "I'm of course not completely familiar with Spock's social environment, but I doubt any healthy Vulcan would transfer emotions of this magnitude. Even you, the only Human regularly close to him, I would rule out as the source of such strong emotions. Your husband would have felt them, too."

"My wife's emotional control is sound," Sarek agrees.

Doctor M'Benga nods. "I'm sorry to say this is all I can really tell you. I'm not familiar enough with Vulcan telepathy or proper treatment to remotely be of much help in this field."

"You've been of great help," Spock's mother says. Once more, she is smiling. "It seems we did need a Human perspective after all."

"I will seek out additional advice for this matter from a Vulcan specialist," Sarek adds. "I agree with my wife — your assessment has been most helpful. Please accept my gratitude, Doctor."

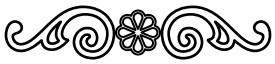
When they leave the medical facility, Spock's mother voices what Spock has also considered: "Whom do you intend to contact now?"

"My choice is the honorable T'Pau. I believe our mistake was aiming to find a solely medical solution for Spock's illness. What Doctor M'Benga suggests is that his emotional episodes might be rooted in a cause more ancient and less scientifically explored. Something even our well-trained healers are unfamiliar with."

"You want to take this up with T'Pau?"

Spock has not expected this either. He has met T'Pau only once during a family gathering to exchange the customary words that welcomed Spock into their clan. The matriarch is highly-esteemed even beyond Vulcan and sought out only for the most important questions and traditional ceremonies. Her advanced age must also be taken into consideration when asking for an audience.

His father's voice is stern when he replies: "Considering all that we know, I believe this to be the only logical solution."



The Hall of Ancient Thought at Mount Seleya is a place few Vulcans have the honor to visit. It is where the *katra* of great Vulcans is stored, as well as the very essence of all Vulcan cultural and historical knowledge.

Spock recognizes the importance of this location. It is unusual that T'Pau would choose this place for their meeting, but the matriarch's decisions are not his to question.

His father has accompanied him to this meeting. His mother, as she possesses no telepathic ability, has not joined them.

T'Pau, wearing her elaborate ceremonial robes befitting her status as matriarch and esteemed elder, awaits them in one of the many chambers adjacent to the Hall. Spock and Sarek are also wearing traditional robes. They exchange the *ta'al*, with Spock and Sarek also inclining their head as a sign of respect. T'Pau stares at them motionlessly.

"You have come to seek my advice, *pi-maat*," she declares.

"You honor us by receiving us, *pid-kom*," Sarek replies.

"To refuse would have been illogical. You seek help which I am able to offer."

"You know my son, Spock. It is he who seeks your assistance."

Spock holds T'Pau's stern gaze as she considers him. "Step forward, *kan*. I would know your mind."

It is clear Sarek has informed the elder of what it is they aim to explore. Slowly, as not to stumble over the long ceremonial robes, Spock approaches T'Pau. Her wrinkled hand rises in response. A moment later, her fingers find the psi points in Spock's face.

Spock is familiar with mind melds, something that he and his father share regularly, as is custom between parent and child. But T'Pau's presence is different from the familiar touch of his father's thoughts. Spock can sense her power and wisdom, can feel her take over his mind, seek out even the most inconsequential lines of thought.

For several moments, he seems to float, unaware of his body, his surroundings, his very identity. When it is over, it becomes clear to Spock that — considering the stiffness of his body — the meld must have lasted far longer than mere moments, longer than any meld he has previously experienced.

"You were correct in coming to me with this matter, *pi-maat*," T'Pau declares.

She seems much less affected by the meld than Spock, who is only slowly recovering from the force of her mind.

"What have you found, *pid-kom*?"

"I found Spock's mind orderly for his age. The bond has not affected his ability to apply logic and regulation to his thinking. His telepathic abilities are sound. In spite of his mother's heritage, his mind is that of a Vulcan."

Sarek's thoughts, unlike Spock's, do not seem to linger on the last words spoken. Instead, he asks: "Of which bond do you speak?"

T'Pau gestures towards Spock. "Your son has been bestowed with a most-revered connection, a bond with he who is his *telsu*."

"No betrothal has been arranged so far, *pid-kom*. Spock is not yet of the right age."

"I do not speak of the *koon'ul*. His mind is already linked to another, a bondmate not yet known to him."

Spock does not understand what T'Pau is referring to. He is not aware of any bond that formed without the knowledge of the bonded. His father also seems unfamiliar with the explanation given.

"I was unaware such bonds existed," he states.

"Your lack of knowledge is to be expected. These bonds are rare, but not unheard of among our people. It is a link forged at birth. The tradition of this bond is ancient. It is powerful and it must be honored. No other betrothed can be chosen for Spock. He is irrevocably linked to his *telsu* which the scrolls have also named *t'hy'la*."

"How can this bondmate be found, *pid-kom*?"

"I advise you to study the ancient scrolls. You will find all known information there. I can reveal nothing further to you. *Dif-tor heh smusma, pi-maat.*"

It is unsatisfying, but Sarek accepts T'Pau's words with the *ta'al* and a respectful bow. Spock imitates his father, then follows him outside.

"Father," Spock speaks up, but Sarek raises a hand and Spock falls silent.

“I can offer no additional explanation at this time, only what has been given to us by the honorable T’Pau. I will respond to your questions when I have discovered the answers myself.”

This is logical. Still, Spock finds himself yearning for a more satisfying response.

At home, his mother expresses similar thoughts after Sarek’s brief explanation of what has transpired.

“T’Pau mentioned nothing else? Did she link Spock’s episodes to this bond?”

“She did not, but I infer from her explanation that this bond is what has caused the anomalies. She also confirmed what Doctor M’Benga has revealed: Spock’s mental health is sound and he is following the Vulcan way. This is a Vulcan matter, not a Human one.”

Spock’s mother nods, but seems unsatisfied as well.

“I will immediately research all information related to this bond and inform you when I have found a satisfying response,” Sarek adds and leaves for his working space.

“And you, Spock?” asks his mother, turning towards him. “What are your thoughts on this matter?”

“In spite of the honorable T’Pau’s explanation, I do not have enough knowledge to form an educated opinion,” Spock responds. “At this moment, I prefer to draw from the wisdom of Surak: *Kaiidth*.”

“What is, is,” his mother agrees.

Two

One would assume that there is no logic in ‘gossip’. The fact that Spock must use a Terran word to name what the Golic language can only paraphrase is proof enough that the concept should be strange to a Vulcan.

‘Gossip’ does not contain valuable knowledge. Instead, sharing it violates the privacy of others. As the personal sphere is very important to Vulcan society, Spock cannot comprehend why his peers continue to make his lack of a betrothed a topic of their conversation.

“I hypothesize that his hybrid nature must be the cause.” Spock knows this voice well. It is Stonn, one of his fellow students, sitting in the row of chairs behind him. “There are numerous examples in nature where hybrid creatures become infertile. It would be illogical to enter into a betrothal under these circumstances.”

“I concede your logic, Stonn.” This voice belongs to another one of Spock’s peers: T’Pring. Spock is not surprised that she is part of this dispensable conversation. She is, after all, Stonn’s very own fiancée. “It is also doubtful that a mental bond would be possible, given his genetics.”

They are sitting in the assembly hall, which is at the center of the vast ShiKahr schooling grounds. Spock and his peers are awaiting the school examination board. Today, their teachers

will announce their final test scores. The outcome of these final examinations will determine which career paths Spock and his peers will be able to pursue. There are many honorable professions to consider, but the majority of Vulcans aim for an admission to the Vulcan Science Academy — an honor given only to those who have truly excelled.

Instead of confining themselves to the dignified silence befitting this special occasion, his peers seem to have decided that their time is better spent discussing Spock.

It is not truly surprising. Spock has always drawn attention on his home planet, and his lack of a betrothed is only one reason of many.

He is, he must admit, a unique being in Vulcan society. Most hybrid offspring reside with their parents elsewhere — on interstellar space stations or far-away colonies, where the mingling of species is far more common. As Spock has been living on Vulcan for the past seventeen years of his life, he has been forced to succumb to a variety of unwanted attention that could otherwise have been avoided.

Unusual things are interesting to observe and to analyze. Thus, he can certainly understand the basic appeal of discussing his person. Yet, he can find no logic in actions he can only describe as lewd 'gossiping'.

His fellow students are of course mistaken. Spock is very much fertile. Furthermore, he is in a sense betrothed to a potential mate. The circumstances of his own betrothal are only infinitely more complex.

Before Stonn, T'Pring and any others involved can voice further redundant statements regarding Spock, the anticipated group of teachers appears before them. Spock aims to straighten his posture to perfection as the hall finally falls completely silent.

"Students." Sevek, head of the examination board, is speaking. "Your final examinations have been evaluated. All of you who have fulfilled their potential are to be commended. In the face of infinite diversity, however, it is only logical that not every student can continue on to the highest academic pursuits our society can offer."

There is a moment of solemn silence in which Sevek's words are considered by all. "You may now come forward to receive your scores."

Almost in ideal unison, Spock and his peers rise from their seats. They continue on to form orderly lines, each of them approaching the board member responsible for their individual examination.

One after another, they receive a data chip as well as a small IDIC pin — the latter being a universally recognized sign on Vulcan that one has finished their fundamental education and fully embraced Surak's teachings.

Like his peers, Spock accepts his chip and the pin to his robes. He then exchanges the *ta'al* with his examiner, and leaves the hall in a dignified fashion. Outside, most of the students have grouped together to compare and evaluate their scores. Spock seeks out an empty bench in the shade away from these gatherings.

To feel nervous about what his data chip contains would be illogical. The examinations are finished, the scores final. All he can do is to accept the outcome of his past actions, as per Surak's teachings: What is, is. *Kaiidth*.

Calmly, Spock straightens the pin on his robes, then reaches for his personal PADD to insert the chip and read his scores.

A sharp breath escapes him as he considers the numbers appearing on the screen. His scores are distinctly high across all fields. A few touches to the screen tell him how they compare to those of his peers. He is gratified to see that he is in the top one percent in every subject.

This makes an admission to the Vulcan Science Academy very likely. His parents will be quite satisfied.

"Spock."

Spock looks up to meet the gaze of Stonn, once more accompanied by T'Pring as well as four other graduates. He rises from the bench immediately. "Stonn," he acknowledges calmly.

Even now, as they have finished their education, his peers seem to seek a confrontation. Spock has not forgotten the day his control slipped and he had succumbed to violence. It had been a shameful occurrence, and he had not had the ancient bond to blame for this particular failure.

Stonn had been the receiver of that violence. Spock can remember the green blood spilled between them. It has not discouraged Stonn from confronting Spock again and again after this incident, although he has since refrained from openly voicing petty slurs. There are more Vulcan ways to express one's thoughts.

"Shall we compare scores?" Stonn asks, offering his PADD to Spock.

Spock does not return the gesture. "I see no logic in this particular exchange of information. If you wish to see how your personal score compares to that of your peers, the relevant data is accessible through your data chip."

"I deduce from your unwillingness that you are dissatisfied with your score."

"Your assertion has no foundation."

"You could easily refute it by sharing your score with me."

Stonn's associates have formed a circle around Spock. While violence must not be expected from any of them, it is clear they will not let this go without further confrontation. Seeing no reason to provoke a lengthy argument, Spock offers his own PADD and exchanges it with that of Stonn. A quick glance reveals the satisfying truth: Spock's scores are considerably higher than any of his.

Stonn's face is controlled as he silently returns Spock's PADD. Without a word, he turns and leaves. The others follow him, also offering no further comment. They must have expected a different outcome. Illogical, as Spock has always been one of the best students in their age group.

The thought that Spock will most likely not have to endure Stonn's continuous presence in the future admittedly is rather satisfying.

He chooses to walk back to his home rather than take a shuttle. It is an exercise of approximately thirty-eight Standard minutes, but Spock finds merit in it. It is commonly known that exerting the body is also beneficial for an orderly mind.

Choosing a swift pace, he reflects upon Stonn's earlier claim that Spock is unfit to be a bondmate. None of his peers know the truth, as Spock and his family have not chosen to share it with others. It is true that Spock has not undergone the *koon'ul*, the traditional ceremony where a mental link is formed between two Vulcan children. After all, Spock is already promised to another.

His situation is unique. It is perhaps not so surprising considering Spock's identity.

His very birth as a hybrid of two species was already an anomaly. Having been born with an ancient bond rather than being betrothed at age seven to a mate chosen by his parents appears to fit with this disparity.

At its core, the bond is something very uniquely Vulcan. It has little to do with his Human heritage. According to what Spock and his parents have learned from the ancient scrolls and Vulcan elders, this type of bond is as old as the Vulcan people. One could argue that only a true Vulcan would be born with such a link.

Yet, Spock finds the situation is rather more complicated.

Ever since the honorable T'Pau informed them of Spock's unique situation, his parents have sought to find Spock's *telsu*. More precisely, Spock's *t'hy'la*, as the scrolls have named the partakers of this particular connection. But hundreds of requests at medical facilities all over Vulcan have shown no other child with similar signs of such a connection.

Although his mate must be close in age, none of his peers seem to have suffered through the emotional episodes that have accompanied Spock throughout his childhood. Neither has there been a report of a failed *koon'ul* due to an existing bond not previously discovered.

Yet, his father is convinced that the bondmate will be found in due time. He considers it logical that his *telsu* must eventually be located among the more than six billion individuals on Vulcan before Spock's first *pon farr* will commence.

Spock, however, has formed a different opinion.

It is logical to assume that a Vulcan showing similar symptoms would have been easily located through his parents' many requests. The fact that the search has not been successful might be evidence for something else: Spock's *t'hy'la* is not Vulcan.

Given Spock's unique identity as a hybrid and the unsuccessful search so far, he finds it most likely that his mate might be of Terran origin instead.

His father has not found merit in Spock's hypothesis. After all, Humans are known to have low esper scores, considered unable to form any sort of bond without considerable effort. Sarek is

of course in the superior position to make a judgment regarding this: Spock understands that his mother and father struggled considerably before making a mutual telepathic connection.

Yet, Spock believes his theory to be true. The scrolls, while describing a bond forged at birth, give no description of the kinds of episodes Spock has suffered in the past. A controlled Vulcan would not continuously transfer the kind of volatile emotions Spock has repeatedly been the receiver of.

A Human, however, might.

Spock has almost reached his home. The grand buildings of the city center have given way to smaller structures: Family homes, some several centuries old, built directly into the red rocks of Vulcan. They offer shade, cooler temperatures and serve as a reminder of Vulcan's rich history.

This time, the familiar walk from the city has not ordered Spock's mind. Rather, he finds himself apprehensive of his future.

His theory of a Human bondmate comes with complications. While a Vulcan mate might eventually attract attention, a Human would not be so conspicuous.

Spock cannot deny the facts: If his theory is correct, it is likely his mate will never be found. The universe is considered infinite. As infinite are the locations in which his *telsu* might exist in this very moment.

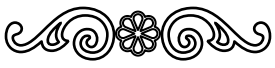
Vulcans are by no means prone to fatalistic visions of the future. Yet, Spock considers it more and more likely that he will die during his first *pon farr*. The search for his mate among all Terrans in the galaxy would need extensive resources, resources that cannot be expected to be wasted on one individual.

Surak has taught them that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Therefore, it is logical that Spock accepts his likely fate and faces the possibility that he might never know his so-called *t'hy'la*.

Approaching the entrance to his home, Spock forces himself to cease this line of thought. It is futile to think any more of this matter, he decides. Too much energy has already been wasted over it.

The only reasonable approach is to continue his education and aim to be a valuable addition to society. He will apply to the Vulcan Science Academy and further his education.

Anything else is illogical.



His parents show great pride over Spock's achievements. As they have always nurtured Spock's mind and offered him additional educational opportunities at home, he considers their pride appropriate.

Spock and his parents have finished their communal evening meal and have now come together to discuss Spock's future.

"It is reasonable to assume an application to the Vulcan Science Academy will be accepted," Sarek states. As Sarek holds a seat on the Academy admission council, his prediction is based on experience.

"I will submit my scores through the appropriate channels," Spock replies.

"I'm happy for you, Spock." His mother has shown more feeling than usual today. Finishing one's fundamental education can be considered a special occasion on Vulcan. On Earth, it seems to be not only an important but an emotional event as well. "You've worked so hard for this."

"Applying anything less than my full attention and resources to my studies would have been illogical, Mother."

It is Sarek that replies: "Indeed, Spock. Yet, your mother is correct in commending you. Knowing what is required is a feat easily accomplished. Pursuing the path is not. Your educational efforts are praiseworthy. You have accomplished what few of our people succeed in."

"And you'll do well in the Academy, too, Spock. I have no doubt about it," his mother adds. "I cannot tell you how proud I am." Her voice is full of joy, her smile wide.

In the privacy of their home, Spock can find no fault in it. Her exuberance is the Human way and to be accepted as valid. "You honor me, Mother," he responds.

They soon retire to their individual pursuits. In his room, Spock places the data stick he has received next to his personal computer terminal. He will apply to the Academy tomorrow when his body and mind have been refreshed by meditation and sleep.

Stepping up to his meditation alcove, Spock lights the traditional incense and settles into position on his mat. Closing his eyes, he adapts the required breathing technique until the familiar sense of calm overcomes him.

His focus is turned inward, away from bodily experiences. All he knows now is his mind, his thoughts, and the feelings any Vulcan strives to control. Emotions run deep in Vulcans, but Surak has given them a way to stand above them.

As always, Spock allows himself a moment to reach out to that spot where the ancient bond rests, the connection to a person not known to him. Since understanding the source of his episodes, Spock has sought to reach for it in the privacy of his own mind.

The bond has been the cause of much pain, confusion, and disapproval by his peers. Yet, Spock finds no logic in resenting it. It is part of him, irrevocably so.

In addition, understanding the source of his emotional outbursts has equipped him with superior coping mechanisms. Strong mental shields and a mind ordered daily by meditation has brought Spock from crying and shouting uncontrollably to being able to seclude himself and privately endure the transferred pain in relative silence.

Spock does not know why it is only feelings of despair that he can feel through his bond. There is never an outburst of joy transferred to him. It must be only the most volatile of emotional experiences that connect their minds over what are quite likely lightyears of distance.

Detaching himself from this line of thought, Spock pursues an even deeper trance. His thoughts grow silent.

All he knows is stillness.

Spock is suddenly violently thrown out of the achieved peace. An episode, exceedingly painful in its intensity, has overcome him.

Heat engulfs his body, he is shaking. His body slips out of the meditation position on its own and curls into itself on the floor. Breathing harshly, Spock trembles and gasps as waves of fear overcome him.

He has not felt emotions this deep, this strong in years. Already, he feels the control he has gained since the discovery of the bond slipping. He claws into it, throwing up his mental shields to fend off the worst of the emotions.

He succeeds in retaining his consciousness, pressing his face into his meditation mat to muffle most of the pained sounds that escape him. Anything else is beyond him.

Lying on the floor, all Spock does is feel. Utter despair has overcome him. His thoughts are not his own, taken over by emotion.

He is scared and knows not of what. He is grieving and knows not for whom. He is enraged and knows not why.

When the onslaught wanes, Spock is left with an intrinsic and unbearable knowledge that something horrific far beyond his imagination has just occurred.

Still trembling, Spock forces his body into functioning. He rises from the floor and stumbles away from his alcove and out of his room. There is something inside of him, an instinct, a drive, telling him to leave, to run, to seek out his *telsu*. His *t'hy'la*.

A moment later, he collides with his mother. “Spock!” she exclaims.

The shock of their collision shakes him up. Spock becomes truly, fully aware of his surroundings. He is standing in the hallway and his mother has grasped both of his arms.

“Spock, what is happening?” she asks, peering closely into his face. “Mother,” is all Spock can reply, his voice hoarse and pained.

“Oh, Spock. Again?” Her face is full of worry. “You're crying.” She lets go of his arms. But not, as usual, to calm her own thoughts and respect a Vulcan's need for distance.

Instead, in a moment of raw humanity, her fingers seek out Spock's face and brush away the tears Spock has not been aware he has shed. His mind, open and violated by what has just occurred, instantly connects with hers.

Again, he is hit by feelings that are not his own. There is worry and sadness, but there is also love. A warm, all-encompassing love that comes over him in waves.

Before he can draw back and order his mind, Spock feels himself move forward and lean into his mother's touch. Her hand goes flat on his cheek; her other arm touches his side. She must feel his accelerated heartbeat.

"Oh, Spock." Her voice breaks as she, too, leans in.

There is silence between them and an intimacy so strong, it cannot compare to the mind melds Spock and Sarek have shared in the past. Although he has always been aware of his mother's love, feeling it strongly, this closely is overwhelming. He has never felt an affection of this intensity. Even as a child, his mother has seldom touched him like this, respecting the Vulcan way.

It is hard to let go, but he eventually succeeds. "Mother," he repeats, still unable to say anything more.

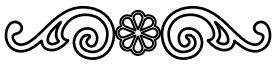
She smiles at him, her own eyes glistening as she draws back. "I'm sorry. I know you prefer your distance, but I couldn't help myself. You're hurting."

Spock, his mind still overwhelmed, finds that logic has no place here. "Do not apologize," he replies. "Your touch…" He trails off, unable to describe what has transpired. His mother nods as if she understands what remains unsaid. Perhaps she does.

"You should seek out your father," she advised him after clearing her throat. "He'll help you order your thoughts."

"Of course."

For a moment, they simply look at each other. Then Spock turns and walks away, willing any remaining trembles as he removes the traces of tears from his cheeks.



Spock awakes to a headache the next day.

His mind is ordered and calm, but only on the surface. A deeper look would reveal the truth: emotions, intense feelings, suppressed only by sheer force of will.

Yet, he coerces himself to continue in accordance with his routine. He uses the hygienic facilities, briefly seeks out his parents attending to their own affairs in the parlor, then returns to his own room to sit at his personal computer terminal.

He transfers his test scores from the data chip, accesses the application gateway through the open Vulcan network and submits them through the proper form. No additional information is necessary. Any data on his aptitude is saved within the file submitted.

The next logical step would be to shut down his terminal and pursue a calming and beneficial activity. He could exercise, read, or play his lyre. He could meditate further until his headache fades.

Instead, Spock finds himself idling, still staring at the screen. His acceptance at the Vulcan Science Academy is likely. He will attend alongside Vulcan's greatest minds, furthering his education and carrying out research that will advance their society.

And yet…

Spock's breath hitches as he thinks of the night before, the urgency he felt upon his mate's transferred emotions. Spock is convinced that whatever has caused this level of despair must have been unspeakably horrific. Were it not for the continuing presence of the bond, Spock would have thought his *telsu* dead.

The thought is unbearable.

For quite some time Spock has accepted the idea that his mate would most likely remain out of reach. That this unknown Human, living on Earth or a Terran colony, would live their life ignorant of Spock's very existence. That Spock might die during *pon farr*. And that all of this is of no consequence.

He has told himself that there is nothing he could logically do. *Kaiidth*.

Now, he can find no comfort in logic. He remembers the horrifying pain instead, and he remembers his mother's love, so intimately shared with him.

Is this not what the bond might offer to him, too? True affection and a union deeper than any other connection? Is staying on Vulcan, further pursuing the Vulcan way, and merely enduring the presence of the bond really Spock's only choice?

Logic dictates this path. Spock knows he should meditate until the emotions clouding his judgment have truly calmed and he has once more found inner balance.

But at this moment, he cannot be rational. In this moment, he desperately seeks a way to find the person who has caused Spock's confusion. What he wants, what he needs, is at least a chance to find the person that has shaped his life so thoroughly already. A way to leave Vulcan behind to pursue the search on his own.

Opening a connection to the interstellar network provided by the United Federation of Planets, Spock carefully types out his query: Application process for Starfleet Academy

Three

Mother,

As already noted in my last messages to you, my health is sound. Be assured that I will inform you if my physical well-being is deteriorating in any significant way.

I have finished my first week of seminars and lectures at Starfleet Academy. I can now report to you that thirteen of the fifteen courses required of first-year cadets cover material I have already mastered on Vulcan. Thus, I plan to inform my Academy advisor today of this matter and seek to enroll in more advanced courses.

While I understand your reasoning, I have as of now no need of what you have named a 'Vulcan care package'. I have taken all necessary belongings on my journey to Earth and am capable of sustaining myself on what nourishment and equipment Starfleet Academy provides. To ease your concerns, I assure you that I will ask you for help should the need for any supplies or provisions from Vulcan arise.

As for your inquiry about my experiences on your home planet so far, a short message such as this is hardly suitable for a detailed account of all I have seen and done on Earth. However, I am able to say that life on Vulcan differs greatly from life here.

Live long and prosper,

Your son Spock

After encrypting the private letter as Starfleet protocol dictates, Spock sends off the message, logs off the public subspace communication panel and leaves the Academy science library.

As he walks swiftly across the vast campus grounds, Spock considers his words to his mother. Earth is indeed very different from Vulcan.

Of course, Spock knew this long before he first set foot on this planet. Yet he finds that he has not been fully prepared for how significantly humanity's home world differs from his own.

His mother, although a stranger on Vulcan, had always shown very little discomfort or confusion while residing on her husband's planet. Calmly, she had accepted the social norms and rules of Vulcan society and only on rare occasions displayed what might be called unusual behavior. Spock cannot remember a single instance in which she had embarrassed herself in front of others or gravely offended a Vulcan with Human peculiarity.

Even in the privacy of their own home, she had hardly insisted on Human traditions. Occasionally, there had been the smell of a Terran meal or a short burst of melodic laughter floating through the house. Apart from such a few exceptions, Spock's mother had adapted more than adequately to the Vulcan ways.

From all this, Spock had falsely concluded that Human and Vulcan culture, while very dissimilar, were still somehow compatible.

After a week spent in the Terran city of San Francisco, Spock is no longer convinced that there is any significant level of congruence between Vulcan and Earth. His mother, in fact, must have sacrificed a significant amount of her Human identity for her new life on Vulcan.

Among the most outstanding differences is the almost constant presence of noise. On Vulcan, a basic level of silence is preferred by all. It is beneficial for thinking and crucial for meditation. Rarely does a Vulcan raise their voice, and shouting is reserved for alerting people to emergencies, or for those few occasions in which direct communication at significant distance is required.

On Earth, loud music from shops, signals from passing vehicles, and the buzzing of personal communication devices constantly irritate Spock's ears. Humans often talk with shrill voices,

forcing others to overhear their private conversations. Sudden shouts and bouts of laughter have startled Spock on several occasions.

Humans also touch frequently. Logically, Spock knows this is appropriate behavior for Humans. Openly embracing friends, publicly exchanging affections with a lover, or rubbing away a stain on a child's cheek with one's bare hand is completely acceptable on Earth. Yet, Spock finds it hard to overcome his almost instinctual discomfort at seeing his own culture's norms so blatantly disregarded everywhere he goes.

It becomes especially difficult when he himself is touched by a stranger. While Humans do seem to own a basic sense of personal space, Spock has already encountered situations in which this invisible sphere is not fully respected. On a crowded street, for example, arms are carelessly brushed against his. A stronger impact is merely acknowledged with a quick word of regret — if at all. And while his mental control is still sound, Spock finds the constant presence of complete strangers at the edge of his thoughts unnerving.

After four experimental excursions into the Terran city, Spock has decided that the campus of Starfleet Academy is easier to endure than the streets of San Francisco.

In work rooms and study groups, most Starfleet cadets adhere at least to a basic level of quietness. The libraries especially are places of peace which Spock has quickly learned to use both for his study time and a brief rest.

The daily interaction with a significant number of different beings also ensures that most members of Starfleet are more considerate of other species. Given Spock's physiological features, most people recognize him as Vulcan and know enough of his kind to keep a more appropriate amount of distance.

In addition to this, Starfleet Academy has from the start displayed a surprising amount of consideration regarding Spock.

He had not expected any form of special treatment after his decision to attend the Academy was final. After all, Starfleet is a body made up of numerous and vastly different species. It would be impossible to accommodate all of them. Nonetheless, Spock has been the receiver of some adjustments.

Many of them are small changes. For example, Spock has been issued special thermal garments to wear beneath his standard cadet uniform. This has greatly increased his comfort on this often cool and wet planet.

Other changes are more significant. While most first-year cadets are expected to share living quarters with at least one fellow student, the Vulcan need for privacy has been taken into consideration. Thus, Spock has been allotted a room for himself.

Starfleet also entrusts every cadet to a tutor, most of which are chosen from older and more experienced cadets. Spock's advisor however is Commander Christopher Pike, a distinguished Starfleet member currently residing on Earth after a longer off-planet posting. Serving as both a member of faculty and a recruiting officer, he has recently been given the task of supervising Spock's progress.

Pike has been very forthcoming with his time so far. Approaching Pike's office, Spock trusts that he will aim to find a satisfactory solution for Spock's less than challenging academic schedule.

The green light at the slide door indicates that the commander is in his office and available to visitors. Spock announces himself by waving his Starfleet identification chip in front of the sensor and waits for Pike to open the door from inside.

"Cadet Spock!" Pike greets him from behind his desk.

Having learned the required protocols for Starfleet cadets during his first day at the Academy, Spock straightens in front of the table and salutes.

"Sir."

Pike acknowledges his salute with a nod, then gestures towards the chair in front of his desk. "Have a seat. Just give me a minute."

Silently, Spock waits as Pike finishes typing on his personal PADD and sets it aside. "Now, Spock. How can I help you out today?"

"I have finished my first week of classes and attended all the fifteen courses required of first-year cadets, sir. However, I must report that the majority of content covered by these lectures and seminars has already been part of my education on Vulcan."

"Is that so?" Pike replies evenly. Spock appreciates greatly that the commander, unlike many other Humans he has met so far, is rather calm of character — undoubtedly a valuable trait for the command branch. "Which classes do you mean?"

"I am referring to thirteen of my fifteen scheduled courses. Only the seminar Introduction to Transporter Technology as well as the lecture on Starfleet History will cover material that I have not previously encountered."

Pike leans back in his chair, folding his hands in the process. His eyes assess Spock's frame. "Really, thirteen classes?" he finally repeats.

As Spock knows that Pike is not weak of hearing, he takes the meaningless repetition as an odd Human mannerism. "Indeed."

Again, Pike seems to assess him. Knowing his posture is regulation-perfect, Spock does not move under his scrutiny.

Eventually, Pike leans towards his desk again. "Doesn't make sense to bore you with stuff you already know," he states. "It would be a waste of time for everyone involved, but especially for you."

"Such a waste of resources does indeed seem illogical, sir," Spock offers in return, as Pike seems to expect an answer.

A smile appears on the commander's lips. "Well. I'm happy to help you out on this. However, I must admit I'm not sure what an ideal alternative schedule would look like for you."

“I am willing to provide any assistance or information necessary, sir.” Spock hesitates, then adds. “If a change of schedule is not possible, I am of course willing to submit the required coursework and will aim not to hinder my fellow classmates in their learning progress.”

“Don’t worry, we definitely won’t have you sit in classes you don’t need. I’ll have to talk to some of my fellow staff and see how we can solve this. My guess is, you probably could take some exams early to get the required credits done now.”

“Of course, sir.”

A nod of acknowledgment. “How about I inform you as soon as there is a solution?”

“That is satisfactory, sir.” Rising from the chair, Spock adds: “I appreciate your efforts.”

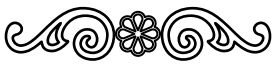
“I’m here to help.” Pike stands also. “I know I’ve said this before, but Starfleet has every intention of keeping you happy and advancing your career. Vulcans rarely enlist as cadets, as you’re probably aware.”

“I understand that it is uncommon for my people,” Spock acknowledges.

“Everyone thinks you’ll be a big asset, and I agree. To pass on a place at the great Vulcan Science Academy to become a Starfleet cadet at seventeen — well. You’ve got the attention of the admiralty already, that’s for sure.”

“I will aim not to disappoint either their or your expectations,” Spock states and salutes. “Good evening, sir.”

“Enjoy your afternoon, cadet.”



Spock tests out of the thirteen courses in the following week with perfect scores. This results in Spock being advanced into the class of second-year cadets.

The second-year courses are more demanding and show less overlap with his Vulcan education. While Spock is confident, he could easily test out of four more early with little studying, he decides not to.

Rearranging his schedule and exams to advance him has been a significant coordination effort for Pike, he understands. Spock has also missed three units in each course due to the changes made and needs to make up the already covered contents.

Therefore, he deems it wise simply not to attend the less interesting lectures and let his fellow students advance their knowledge at their own pace. This gives him enough time to focus on the more challenging seminars and his additional tasks.

His early advancement has drawn the attention of several instructors to him. Based on his scores and clear aptitude, Spock has been asked to tutor other cadets in several science courses. He now also assists in the advanced Vulcan language courses for the communication tracks.

His schedule is busier than that of most cadets at Starfleet. As Spock requires less rest than they do and does not attend any of the social gatherings commonly referred to as ‘parties’, he is confident that this will not be a problem.

Commander Pike does not agree with Spock’s assessment, however.

“There is such a thing as overdoing it, Spock,” Pike tells him during their next meeting. “I’m glad you’ve been able to attend more demanding courses and you’re certainly an invaluable asset to your instructors. But up to fourteen hours of classes and work, six days a week? You’re going to run yourself into the ground.”

Spock needs a second to decipher the colloquialism. “It is not a burden, sir. Vulcans are used to attending to multiple tasks and dividing their energy, time, and resources in such a way that none of those tasks will suffer.”

“Fine. But what about free time? Surely, Vulcans have hobbies? You know, recreational activities. What do you do to relax, Spock?”

“Vulcans seek calm in daily meditation.”

Spock watches Pike rub a hand over his face, possibly to hide the expression on it. “I meant for fun — um, enjoyment? Activities with other people. Certainly, you would like to find some common ground with your fellow cadets.”

Spock has in fact found very little common ground with his classmates during the brief conversations they have shared. Their interests and lives seem to differ too greatly. However, Spock must not raise more concerns with Pike. So, he responds diplomatically: “Many Vulcans prefer solitary activities.”

“Like what?”

“I play the Vulcan lyre,” Spock offers, uncertain which answer might appease Pike’s unnecessary concerns. “I also aim to improve my skill at chess whenever possible.”

“Chess!” Spock is startled by Pike’s uncharacteristic shout. “Perfect, there we go. Join the chess club, then.”

Spock hesitates before asking: “Is that an order, sir?”

“An order? Of course, no—” Pike stops, clearing his throat. “Yes. It is an order. I’m making it a mandatory requirement for you to graduate.”

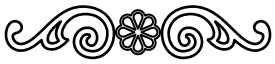
Spock cannot find any logic in this order. What critical skills could a chess club provide that make it an obligation? But Starfleet is built on a chain of command, which a cadet certainly is not to question. “Then I shall join the club. Is there any information as to where or when this club meets?”

“Look it up on the network. I think it’s a couple of nights a month. You might have to reschedule some of your tutoring, but I’m sure you’re more than capable of doing that.”

“Of course, sir.”

Nodding, Pike gestures to his office door. “You’re dismissed.”

Spock has no choice but to leave and seek out information on the now mandatory meetings of the Starfleet Academy chess club. Why Commander Pike believes adding an additional meeting to his schedule could lessen the burden of work, will likely remain a mystery.



Mother,

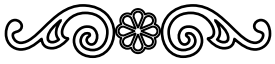
As always, I assure you that both my mental and physical state are adequate. To ease any further concerns: Tomorrow, a mandatory appointment with a Starfleet physician is scheduled in order to get a full medical appraisal. I understand that this should have occurred directly after my admission to the Academy, but was postponed due to a lack of doctors adequately trained to attend to my Vulcan physique. I shall inform you should this medical appraisal result in any relevant diagnosis that would contradict my initial statement.

In reply to your query about 'any news', I can inform you that in addition to the already mentioned tasks as a tutor and student lecturer in my last message, I have now also been asked by my supervisor to engage in a social and recreational activity. This has resulted in me joining the Academy chess club.

As I expected, most players who are part of this club would not be considered remotely advanced players on Vulcan. Terrans also use a vastly different ranking system which easily places me at the very top as a so-called 'Grandmaster', although I know from practical experience that there exist many more advanced players than myself on Vulcan alone. I do not, however, consider it redundant to attend as many of the club members seem to enjoy the challenge of playing against me and have profited from it strategically. It would be illogical to spoil an opportunity for others to learn and improve their skill.

I have nothing further to tell that could reasonably be considered 'any news'. Live long and prosper,

Your son, Spock



Spock is surprised to recognize the name displayed next to the examination room at the Starfleet Academy medical facilities: Doctor M'Benga, Medical Officer. It is unlikely that there is another Terran doctor by the same name whose knowledge would qualify them to be Spock's primary physician on Earth.

Spock remembers the man well. After all, it had been Doctor M'Benga whose competent examination had ultimately led to the discovery of Spock's dormant bond.

As Spock enters the room for his appointment, the doctor present looks up from the screen he has previously been studying. While Doctor M'Benga certainly matured in the past decade, the

man's focused look and calm demeanor have not changed over time. It is indeed the same man.

"Lieutenant Commander," Spock salutes with a glance for the stripes on the doctor's uniform.

"Cadet Spock." The doctor returns the salute with practiced ease, his eyes running up and down Spock's frame in a quick assessment. "I saw your name on my roster last night and was very surprised. I can honestly say I didn't expect to see you again under these circumstances."

"It was not a likely scenario," Spock agrees readily. "You joined Starfleet after your residency on Vulcan?"

"Yes, I'd always planned on it. With a xenobiological background, this is the place to be. Please sit down." The doctor gestures towards one of two biobeds in the room. "I'll pull up your file right now."

Spock follows his orders and sinks down on the biobed. Immediately, the screens attached to it start up and begin calculating his weight, height and other basic medical data.

"Patient species: unknown," one of the screens announces promptly to the room.

"Not surprising," the doctor comments before continuing more loudly. "Computer, add preliminary species identification to register: Vulcan-Human hybrid."

"Information received. Patient species updated to: hybrid, Vulcan, and Human."

Spock waits quietly as the doctor accesses Spock's file from the database and reads over it. "Well, there's not much here at all," M'Benga finally concludes.

"I understand ShiKahr Medical Facility was not willing to provide any sensitive data to Starfleet that could infringe on the Vulcan need of privacy."

M'Benga nods. During his residency on Vulcan, he undoubtedly became familiar with this problem. "I'll contact some former colleagues on Vulcan to see if we can figure this out. Maybe if we encrypted the file and limited access to but a few medical officers already familiar with Vulcans — we'll see. For now, we'll take what information Starfleet tech can provide."

M'Benga has Spock lay down and starts a line of diagnostics, assessing Spock's general fitness, including mobility, eyesight, hearing, and immune response to common pathogens.

"As far as I can tell, you are perfectly healthy," M'Benga finally concludes. "Some of these readings — well. Your unique genetic make-up seems to confuse some of our sensors."

"I understand my Vulcan healers encountered similar difficulties," Spock replies as he leaves the biobed to sit on an offered chair.

M'Benga types some additional information into his work station, then once more turns towards Spock. His face is as calm as before, but Spock can tell from his changing posture that the next line of questions might be sensitive.

"I know this might be a delicate topic for you, but as your physician — and given my previous knowledge on this matter — I have to ask: What information do you have on the seizures that troubled you as a child?"

Spock stiffens. It is indeed a very private topic. “An explanation has been found.”

“A medical explanation?”

“No. It is a private matter. “

M’Benga must know enough of Vulcans to realize that Spock is unwilling to give more information, but he continues: “A private matter that could have consequences for your ability to function as a member of Starfleet?”

Spock hesitates. He has so far not suffered an episode on Earth. There is some risk that he could suffer one during a vital experiment or an important lecture. However, he has managed to control his response to them much better than during his childhood. Starfleet would also not be able to provide him with anything to further lessen the discomfort.

Dishonesty is not the Vulcan way. However, Spock can find no logic in divulging this private matter if it does not severely affect his standing as active Starfleet personnel. He will not lie. He will retain information he finds to be irrelevant at this point of time.

“My performance will not suffer.”

“Very well,” the doctor replies. “I’m clearing you for full Starfleet service.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Spock stands and salutes, and the doctor mirrors it. “Keep an eye on your schedule for your next routine check-up.”

“I will. Good day, Lieutenant Commander.”

“Oh, and Spock?” Spock stops to look back. “I’m a bit late, but: Welcome to Starfleet.”

Four

In the aftermath of his first seizure on Earth, Spock’s initial assessment that their occurrence will be mostly unproblematic is proven not quite accurate.

The mental assault itself is no greater than it was on Vulcan and occurs in the privacy of Spock’s dorm room, far away from the prying eyes of strangers. Just like on Vulcan, Spock’s mental control is sound enough. He can wait out the wave of emotions until the bond settles into familiar silence and deep breaths are possible once more.

Afterwards however, there is no Sarek to ease his mind and soothe the ragged edges left behind by the invading force. Family bonds are the most natural and vital tools to ensure a Vulcan’s mental health. To be separated from this healing connection is a difficult feat even for those Vulcans who do not have a volatile ancient bond in place.

The headache is the least important consequence. Although this particular pain is immune to common medical remedies, it is endurable and does not affect Spock’s academic performance in any significant way.

Less endurable is the emotional imbalance Spock feels for the following days. It is only due to a sharp increase in meditation and avoidance of any closer contact with other individuals that Spock can perform his daily duties without any incidence.

However, it quickly becomes clear that even a low-esper species like Humans has a certain prowess in deciphering another person's general mental state.

"What's his problem today?" Spock overhears two cadets after he has dismissed his Golic tutorial group. "I mean, he's always been a bit rigid, but today he was mean." "Yeah, did you see DeSalle's face? He was close to tears after that comment about his accent…"

It takes almost a full week for Spock to regain full control of his mental state and function adequately once more. He must clearly find a better coping mechanism now that the support of the family bond is missing.

As it turns out, the problem rectifies itself in the following months, but not in the way Spock would have expected.

He has suffered through four more seizures, none of which have occurred in public, when his first year at the Academy is ending. He is scheduled for his end-of-semester counseling session with Commander Pike which means he must leave his science tutorial group early. As they are all busy studying for their final examinations, they can certainly use the extra time to revise.

He arrives at Pike's office precisely at 1600. The slide door, usually closed, is wide open. Spock can see the commander inside, staring at the screen of his work station. Spock can tell by the familiar voice from the speakers that he is watching the Starfleet news broadcast. Spock knows Humans well enough by now to be able to decipher the look on his superior's face: a mix of concern, shock, and anger.

Unwilling to wait outside and inadvertently pry on this emotionally vulnerable moment, Spock makes his presence known.

"Spock," Pike says, only looking up briefly before turning his attention back to the screen. His voice sounds uncharacteristically weak. "Sorry, come on in. You must see this … just terrible … a tragedy."

Spock follows his invitation and enters the door, waving in front of the sensor to close it and give them both privacy. He then steps around the table he usually sees only from the front, and comes to stand next to the commander.

A banner runs through the bottom of the broadcast, simply stating the location of the events which are being reported on: Tarsus IV, Terran colony.

"…starship *USS Exeter* was hailed by what has turned out to be a make-shift emergency beacon, crudely constructed by a group of survivors. Over four thousand people are presumed dead, including at least eight hundred minors. Some of the first interviews conducted with the remaining colonists point to mass-murder, not starvation due to the fungal infection of their crops. The whereabouts of the former leader of the colony, Governor Kodos, remain unclear…"

With a shaking hand, Commander Pike turns off the broadcast with a few touches to the screen until it displays nothing but the Starfleet insignia. “Just terrible,” he repeats his earlier sentiment.

Although Spock has not heard the entire broadcast, he can deduce enough from what he has gathered to agree: “Indeed.” He turns to retreat from the commander’s side to sit in his usual seat in front of him.

They go through the necessary questions that are required during the counseling session. It is clear Pike’s mind is not fully focused after having received the news of the colony. Perhaps he knew somebody who resided on the planet, or his Human mind in general reacts strongly when he becomes aware of such tragedy. Spock, too, is somewhat stunned by the news of the colony’s plight, but he is not emotionally compromised by it. He has no connection to the people or place involved.

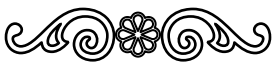
As Spock finds most of the required questions to be illogical, the commander’s distraction actually is welcome. The session turns out quite short and Spock is dismissed only eighteen minutes later.

On his way to the student dormitories, Spock overhears several agitated conversations from other cadets. The news of the events of Tarsus IV seem to have spread quickly across campus.

“…and they even killed the children!” “…that the fungus wasn’t native to the planet, maybe they brought it in with the seeds…” “…called my mother immediately because I thought my cousin was there, but his colony is called Talos, not Tarsus…”

In his room, Spock contemplates reading up on the tragedy himself. As a Starfleet ship is directly involved in the investigation, it is relevant knowledge. Information is still coming in as the event is investigated, though. It seems logical to wait until tomorrow when more definite answers are available.

Satisfied with his decision, Spock sits and starts to revise some material for his own final examinations.



The next thing he can remember is waking up on a biobed at the Starfleet Academy Medical Center.

He feels — nothing. Spock blinks, swallows, then quickly sits up. He feels strangely numb, blind and deaf even, although he is clearly nothing of the sort. He can see the white surroundings of a hospital room, can hear the familiar sounds of the biobed, and can feel its artificial surface against his skin. Still, the world around him seems flat, sterile, like he cannot fully grasp it.

Is this a simulation of some kind?

The biobed suddenly beeps loudly above him, mirroring his accelerating heartbeat and the oncoming nausea. Spock swallows again, fighting his body's symptoms. He understands that his body must be experiencing a kind of instinctual panic mode, but for some reason his mind does not mirror it. He takes deep breaths and his stomach settles down.

What is happening to him? Why is he here?

But before Spock can get up and examine his surroundings, the door to the room is opened and in comes a familiar man — Doctor M'Benga.

At least he looks familiar. But he is also different. Just like the room, he appears flat. Not only flat, but fake. He seems like a bad copy of the doctor he knows. Spock blinks rapidly, trying to shake off the strange sensation, trying to feel.

"Spock," the doctor says, skipping any Starfleet formality. There's a strange edge to his voice Spock cannot decipher. "Please stay put."

Unsure of the situation, Spock deems it wise to follow the instructions. His heartbeat is slowing down again, the biobed announces with its beeping, but Spock can still tell it is quicker than usual.

Has he fallen ill? Is this why everything seems so bizarre?

"Listen to me, Spock," M'Benga continues. His voice is calm, but his face is wrinkled in certain areas. Spock thinks he should be able to understand this expression, but for some reason he cannot do so. Maybe he is indeed part of a simulation, a badly constructed one. "You need to remain calm."

"I am calm," Spock responds. Because he is. He believes he is. For some reason, he cannot feel whether he is calm. Perhaps he is not?

"Okay," M'Benga says. Again, such a strange tone of voice. What does it mean? Spock thought he understood Humans better by now. "Listen. I have given you some medication. Psi-blockers, to be exact. I'm sure it must be very confusing for you."

"I am not confused," Spock replies honestly. Because he is not. He is not much of anything. He just is. *Kaiidth*. What is, is. The Surakian proverb echoes through his hollow mind. And it is hollow, isn't it? Because Doctor M'Benga has made it so. Has blocked his psionic abilities.

"You're experiencing the bare minimum of psi abilities still tolerable for a Vulcan," M'Benga continues his explanation. "I know it must feel like a violation, but I had no choice. I'm sorry."

Logically, Spock thinks he should indeed feel violated. He understands that what the doctor has done could be labeled assault under different circumstances. He has cut off Spock's connection to the world. This is why everything feels flat. It is inherent to his identity to be connected and now he is not. But whatever M'Benga has given him, it makes it impossible to have any sort of sentiment about his current situation.

"I am sure it was necessary," Spock responds. "How long will this effect last?"

"A few more hours, I believe. Honestly, it is hard to say, given your hybrid make-up." M'Benga comes closer, looks at the readings of the biobed. "If you feel up to it, I can explain."

“Please do.”

“A fellow student found you in your room, unconscious. You didn’t show up to a scheduled tutoring session, so one of the cadets went to find you. Luckily, you hadn’t locked your door.

When you were brought here, your readings were … well.” A pause. “Alarming, to say the least. Your mind, it was … well.” Another pause.

Spock notes that the usually very eloquent doctor is having difficulties expressing himself.

“When we finally managed to wake you up, you screamed and you also became violent. I don’t think I have ever seen a Vulcan behave like this. So we put you back to sleep. But your readings … Spock, it looked like something was getting damaged. So I decided to give you the blockers. I’m sorry.”

“From what you have told me, I conclude that it was necessary.”

“Yes, but…” M’Benga looks at him with wide eyes. And Spock understands it. Giving psi-blockers to a species like Vulcans is a severe transgression. He is sure there is little precedence, as any severe mental problem would have been handled quite differently on Vulcan. A mind-meld with a healer or a family member might have been the more natural, less invasive solution. Having been trained on Vulcan by Vulcans, there is probably nobody on Earth who understands this better than the doctor.

But there is also nobody on Earth able or qualified to act as a Vulcan mind healer or a family member. Therefore, logically, M’Benga made the right choice. Preventing long-term damage is a just cause.

“How long should I remain here?” Spock asks.

“Until the medication is out of your system, at least,” the doctor responds. “Do you have any idea what might have caused this? Is there something you didn’t tell me about your mental state?”

Spock knows that he was unwilling to disclose this before, but it does not seem logical now. “My mind is connected to another,” he answers.

“Your mind … you mean a bond? Like a family bond?”

“Not like a family bond, no,” Spock explains. “Something ancient, something even Vulcans do not fully understand. A bond to a person unknown to me.”

M’Benga shakes his head. “I don’t understand.”

“I do not understand it well, either,” Spock responds. “It is not common, even among Vulcans. It is similar to the bond made during a betrothal, but it was not consciously put there. It just is.”

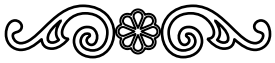
“And you can feel this person in your mind?”

“I can usually sense the presence of the bond,” Spock agrees. As he speaks of it, he tries to reach into his mind to find it. But he cannot reach anything. His mind is numb and hollow. Psi-blockers. “There is also reason to assume that this person might be Human. Sometimes their emotions are transferred to me. Strong, volatile emotions. This is what causes my so-called seizures.”

“I see,” M’Benga says. Spock does not think he truly comprehends it, but neither does he fully understand it himself.

His body seems to grow tired now. His arms and legs are heavy. He follows his body’s wishes and lies down. “I must rest,” he informs the doctor faintly.

“Of course. I will check on you every thirty minutes.” Spock’s muted mind slowly fades away.



The pain is bearable.

Spock calmly accepts the hypo sprays M’Benga administers and lets him take readings with different instruments. It gives him time to reflect on what happened.

When he woke up, his mind was connected to the world once more, the psi-blocker’s effects having disappeared overnight. He feels raw and ragged and strained and he has the worst headache he has ever experienced, but his mind is sound.

Except for the great nothingness that was once the bond. The first thing Spock searched for upon awakening and feeling lucid was that familiar connection. But he could not find it.

Spock has already found a likely explanation: the person bonded to him has died and the assumption that Spock might die or go mad without the bond was wrong. Little is understood about the ancient connection. It should not be surprising that they had come to a wrong conclusion, especially given Spock’s specific circumstances.

As he has told M’Benga about the bond, Spock feels it is necessary to inform him about this new development as well.

“I grieve with thee,” the doctor replies solemnly, in flawless Golic.

Spock accepts the ancient words with a stiff nod. Although he has never met his *telsu*, and now never will, he had known them in some way. Had been connected to them and had been aware of their most volatile emotions. It is acceptable to acknowledge the loss.

“It definitely explains your blackout,” M’Benga continues after a respectful pause. “Losing a bond like that, it takes a toll on you.”

Spock silently agrees. Even on Vulcan, mental instability after such a severe loss is considered normal and not shameful.

“I know this is a delicate topic,” the doctor says. “But I believe you should inform somebody on Vulcan. You will need another … when the time comes.”

M’Benga knows their culture and does not mention anything explicitly. Spock understands his vague words well enough.

“I will make arrangements,” Spock replies, cutting off any further conversation about this matter.

“Well, your readings look better and you appear stable. You may go, but you’re on medical leave until the end of the week and you have to check in with me in three days. Earlier, if something — anything — seems off. You can make-up for any exams you missed, I’m sure.”

Spock is dismissed with four hypo sprays he can administer himself at home.

He returns to his dorm alone. The PADDs he had studied before the incident lie strewn on the floor — undoubtedly a result of his fainting and the subsequent events. He gathers them, places them neatly on the table and stares at them.

He breathes heavily. He knows his feelings of unrest and confusion are to be expected in the face of what has happened. It is normal to be shaken by the loss of a bond, even one that has never been fulfilled. Meditation will ease his continuing pain, and will restore order to his violated mind.

He unrolls his meditation mat on the floor, settles into the familiar position. For some time, Spock simply sits and breathes. Somehow, he is unwilling to explore his mind now that something so familiar, so vital has been taken from him. He has grown up with the bond in place. And although it has made him suffer greatly through his life, he has accepted it as part of his identity. Had even cast logic aside for a moment and left Vulcan to pursue this connection.

It is indescribable, not having it. Spock’s hands curl into tight fists and he finds he must force himself to relax. In accepting the inevitable, one finds peace, Spock recites silently. Yet, he does not find peace in that moment.

Unable to overcome his irrational hesitation, Spock finally decides to write to his father. They have not talked since his rejection of his place at the Vulcan Science Academy, but this is a family matter. As head of their household, he needs to know what has occurred. Arrangements will have to be made. His father will have to inform T’Pau as well.

Sa-mekh.

As is my duty, I write to inform you that the bond that was present in my mind has been severed. I was temporarily compromised by its loss, but my mind remains functional.

I have concluded that my potential mate has perished and I am now once more unbonded. Live long and prosper,

Spock

Five

>Starfleet Personnel Database

>> file no. 72/045825

>>> name (Standard approximation): S’chn T’gai Spock

>>> name (simplified formal): Spock, Son of Sarek

>>> name (preferred appellation): [rank] Spock (he/his) […]

>>> stardate 2255.243 — promotion to Lieutenant Commander

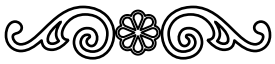
>>> recommendation by: Captain Christopher Pike

>>>> […]

Lieutenant Spock continuously placed in the top 1 percent in any given aptitude test except for Interpersonal Relations (50th percentile) — adjusted for his more dominant Vulcan cultural background, this score is still above average. Since entering the Academy at the age of seventeen, his conduct has been entirely professional, his academic record flawless. His unmatched attention to detail, the remarkable diligence and speed with which he approaches any task given as well as his extraordinary efficiency rating make him a prime candidate for an accelerated promotion to Lieutenant Commander. […]

>>> physical and psychological assessment by: Lieutenant Commander Doctor Geoffrey M'Benga

>>> […] … in perfect health. Regarding his psychological state, Lieutenant Spock has recovered adequately from [[redacted, classified]] as well as [[redacted, classified]] and remains [[redacted, classified]]. However, his attempt at purging all emotions as per Surak's teachings of the *kolinahr* [[redacted, classified]]. […] There are currently no medical findings that would be reason to bar Lieutenant Spock from being promoted. […]



Nearly all of the seats in the main auditorium are filled. Most chairs are occupied by the newly sworn-in class of Starfleet cadets, some of which are still entering through the doors in the back of the room and approaching the few spare seats. All of them are dressed in their newly acquired red dress uniforms. Other seats have been taken either by third- and fourth-year cadets who are to serve as their tutors or their future instructors — like Spock himself, who sits amongst his colleagues in the first row.

Spock endures the loud blend of voices, laughter and rattling as the last chairs are being claimed. They are waiting for Admiral Archer to give his welcome address for this new generation of Starfleet members, after which they will briefly hear from Captain Pike — who has taken over recruitment and tutelage of this year's class — before the cadets will group up to be introduced to the campus by their assigned tutors.

Spock remembers the procedure well from his own first day although Christopher Pike had neither been captain nor head of recruitment back then. He had sat amongst his peers, calmly listened to the promises made and expectations outlined by his superiors as the cadets around him freely emitted a mix of apprehension and anticipation.

It had made his younger self's skin itch, the unfamiliar sensation of hundreds of people who did not follow the Vulcan way in such close proximity.

Even today, Spock can almost feel the nervous energy the crowd is radiating with. Even now when his control is stronger than it has ever been, steeled by years of practice while living on Earth.

It seems to be prickling at his neck, crawling across his arms, and now — tugging at his shields?

Spock shifts ever so slightly in his seat. The sensation is making him uncomfortable. He doubts his colleagues next to him have noticed it, though a more observant person might have picked up on his sudden unrest.

He turns his head, observing the nearby crowd for an explanation.

Perhaps a Betazoid or Lumerian, too occupied to shield properly? Nobody stands out of the predominantly Human crowd as Spock is scanning the rows. The only outward telepath in closer proximity seems to be a Haliian female and her species' telepathic abilities are usually not strong enough to upend a Vulcan's controls unless she were to use her crystal.

Spock turns his head back to the front. Curious.

He had meditated in the morning, once more strengthened his control to brace against the usual onslaught of carelessly projected emotions so common on Starfleet campus.

He focuses on his shields and the uncomfortable sensation of another person's apprehension subsides immediately.

Once more at ease, Spock calmly waits for the speech to begin.

His thoughts stray back into the past. He had not been fully convinced back then that he had made the right choice by refusing his place at the Vulcan Science Academy to join Starfleet. His father's disapproval of this decision had been intense. In fact, Sarek had come as close to anger as a full Vulcan could reasonably allow himself to be in the given circumstances. His father's reasoning against Spock's refusal had been logical, Spock's own explanations lacking in reason, he knows this. But a glimmer of illogical, irrational hope had compelled him to—

Enough! Spock silently chastises himself and a particularly grating Human laughter from amongst his colleagues helps him anchor his thoughts in the present.

He breathes deeply, calmly. In. Out.

It has been months since Spock has allowed himself to think of this. Weeks since he has dared to remember why—

No! That line of thought is futile. *Kaiidth*.

Spock again collects himself, gathering his shields, lowering his pulse, strengthening his mind. His control is lacking today, this much has become clear. He makes a mental note for more extensive meditation just as the auditorium falls silent.

Finally, the admiral has taken the stage.

Four weeks pass before Spock is overcome by the same unnerving, prickling sensation.

He is seeking out fourth-year cadet Thelin in the Academy general mess. It is well-filled as most students have a scheduled lunch break at 1200 hours, but the blue face of the Andorian can easily be found in the crowd of formal red uniforms and casual black dress.

The cadet's antennae are twitching wildly as he seems to make some humorous point to the group of laughing first years which he has been assigned to as tutor, but the appendages still as he looks up and recognizes Spock coming to a halt a few steps away from his chair.

The table immediately falls silent. The cadets straighten up and either salute or quickly murmur "sir" as they notice his stripes.

Thelin is the only one who rises and stands at attention, as per regulation. "Lieutenant Commander Spock."

"Cadet," Spock acknowledges and motions for Thelin to ease up and step aside for a brief conversation. He is half-way into his explanation why he found it necessary to disturb the Andorian's break when it starts again: a faint sense of it at first, akin to the feel of tiny needles against one's skin.

Spock tenses a little but calmly continues his conversation.

But the sensation is intensifying, slowly but surely tingling away at the nape of his neck until it increases and gently but pointedly prods against his shields to reveal the carelessly broadcast emotions: amusement, mirth, growing into exhilaration.

Mid-sentence, Spock pauses and turns his head to scan the crowd. Again, nobody stands out, none of the particularly happy faces seem familiar to him, no telepath makes themselves known.

But something, somebody here is projecting. Not loudly, but pointedly. Enough to affect Spock's Vulcan controls. Spock feels his eyes starting to narrow and must consciously force his face to remain relaxed.

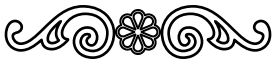
"Sir?" Thelin masks his confusion well enough, though his antennae give him away as Spock turns his attention back towards him.

"I apologize, cadet," Spock replies. "I was momentarily distracted."

He wraps up the conversation quickly but then takes his time to leave the mess, again scanning the tables for an explanation as he slowly makes his way towards the exit. While he is walking, Spock lowers his shields ever so slightly. Perhaps this will allow him to garner a sense of direction. However, the opening only increases his perception of the general mix of emotions emitted by the crowd and Spock closes up again, ever so slightly shaking his head as he leaves the hall and the tingling starts to subside.

Is it the number of people in one place that makes him lapse like this? Admittedly, his classes are usually much smaller than a crowd of this size, and Spock avoids throngs of people as much as possible otherwise.

Perhaps his meditation is still not adequate. He must improve his shields even further.



“Lieutenant Commander Spock, reporting for the annual physical examination.”

The nurse at the counter checks a PADD, then nods. “Please take a seat, sir. Doctor M’Benga will be with you shortly. He is with a patient now.”

Spock inclines his head in return and sits down in a chair in the area indicated by the nurse. It is not unusual that medical appointments cannot be adhered to when more pressing matters take precedent. Such prioritization is only logical.

The Academy medical facilities are busy this morning. It is not only the general medical staff that is reading files, carrying supplies, and tending to patients. The occasional pair of red scrubs indicates that a group of medical cadets are on duty as well, just as they are required to as part of their program.

As he awaits his physician, Spock notices two men nearby, standing just outside a treatment room, clearly having a heated conversation. Despite the general noise present in the medical facilities, Spock cannot help but overhear what is being said.

“Be reasonable for once!” The rougher, older voice belongs to the cadet in red scrubs, the patch on his sleeve indicating that he already is a fully-trained doctor.

Spock does not find his tone to be particularly professional, although this might be since the patient is also a cadet, albeit not a medical branch.

“You be reasonable,” is the irrational response from the younger man. “I came voluntarily to ask for some painkillers and now you’re threatening me with the full arsenal!”

“You stubborn little shit! I don’t have time for this. Just take the damn hypo!” Profanity. Distasteful.

“Bones, listen to me,” the other man implores, seemingly unfazed by the doctor’s crude way of expressing himself. “It’s not that serious. I only fell down four meters or so…”

“Only four meters? Well, if that’s all I guess I’ll just…” But the man merely pretends to acquiesce as he turns away. Then suddenly, he produces a hypodermic spray from a pocket and administers it right into the other man’s neck before his patient can voice any more protest.

“Ouch! You suck!” is the dramatic reaction. A moment of silence passes.

“Better?”

“…yes.”

“Told you.”

Their argument seems to have been settled and a moment later, the doctor raises his hand, tenderly splays his fingers against the other man’s face where a scratch has broken the skin and whispers something Spock cannot quite make out. The other man smiles in response and

moves closer, places a hand on the doctor's shoulder, strokes his arm. Suddenly, their public show of anger has turned intimate and the affection between them seems almost tangible.

Spock realizes he has been staring unbecomingly and looks away, feeling more agitated than the scene warrants. His heart rate has picked up and he feels the faintest of flushes on his cheeks. And a feeling he usually manages to control comes to the surface: annoyance. Irritation at the suggestive nature of their touching.

He breathes in deeply, briefly closes his eyes to collect himself.

Of course, a Vulcan would never act like those two, especially in a public setting. But Spock has seen lewder exchanges of affection between Humans, as their public display is perfectly normal on Earth according to most Terran customs. Touch, so intimate on Vulcan, often means little here.

Why this exchange seems to trouble him so after all his years on Earth is beyond his understanding.

Perhaps it is just as well that Doctor M'Benga will complete a thorough check-up shortly. His strange reaction to this scene seems to stand in a long line of small but not insignificant lapses in control for the past ten months.

Every time Spock believes he has now adequately strengthened his shields, something once more seems to cast doubt on him being in full control.

A drizzle of nervous energy descends upon him as he passes a classroom, almost causing him to stumble. A small wave of amusement lapping forcefully at his shields, trying to draw him in as he makes his way towards the officers' lounge. A tendril of anger poking through his thoughts as he has a conversation with a cadet in the hallway, making his own words harsher than intended.

And in addition to these unnerving outside influences that he cannot simply shake off, moments like this, when his own feelings simply are not quite in check.

This must end.

"Spock."

Spock looks up to see Lieutenant Commander M'Benga — his equal now rather than superior in terms of rank — approaching his chair. A few more years, and Spock will likely pass him.

"Doctor," he replies as he comes to stand.

"Follow me."

Doctor M'Benga starts with a series of routine questions as he fills out a form on a medical PADD, then asks Spock to move towards the biobed for some tests.

Once more fully in control, Spock now questions the logic of confiding in the doctor. Are his lapses truly bad enough to involve his physician? It is such a private matter. He has not lost control in any way that would be truly detrimental to his work.

The irony of this line of reasoning is not lost on him. He used this very argument once before. And then—

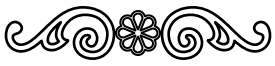
No. Not those thoughts. Not here especially.

The biobed beeps in an unfamiliar way. Spock looks up but if the noise is indicative of a problem, it is not shown on any of the screens accessible for patients. He turns to check Doctor M'Benga's facial expression but he has been trained well on Vulcan. His thoughts are his own as he studies the machines. Only the length of his observation could be interpreted as something being unusual.

No explanation follows and the doctor moves to the last part of the exam to assess Spock's mental health.

The questions are phrased in a way not to be too personal but for a Vulcan, nearly all of them are on the very edge of what can still be considered medically necessary. On Vulcan, this would not have been spoken about, would have been shown through a light medical meld.

But this is Earth, so Spock endures and answers honestly. At least as honestly as logic dictates. He does not mention his lapses.



Spock misjudged his walking speed and arrived four minutes early for his meeting with Pike at 1100 hours.

Although he has long finished his Academy training, Spock and Pike are still meeting weekly, now to discuss Academy matters as well as Spock's additional projects, with Pike remaining his direct superior.

Due to his promotion to captain, Pike has an office with a yeoman at the front desk who tells Spock that there is another visitor and their appointment will likely start a few minutes late. Spock does not get the chance to acknowledge the yeoman's words as the door to Pike's office slides open at that very moment to reveal a cadet. An angry cadet.

It takes Spock a moment to remember why the flushed face with blazing blue eyes looks so familiar. He is not one of his own students. It is the younger one of the cadets whose argument — and intimacy — he had observed only three weeks ago at Starfleet medical.

At first it looks like the cadet will pass without even noticing him, but his eyes flick up just in time for him to straighten up and salute as he walks by, his "sir" a snap rather than a show of respect as he leaves the office at rapid pace.

But Spock hardly notices the impudence. As the cadet rushes past him, Spock is hit by such a hot wave of anger, followed by a shock of cold disappointment that it takes all his Vulcan strength not to stumble backwards.

He can control his movement but his face, he knows, must show some of his surprise before he can school his features back to adequate indifference. The disturbingly potent mix of emotions has already left with the man who has emitted it and Spock's controls immediately

snap back into place. They did not touch but the intensity of emotions Spock has just felt makes him temporarily doubt this simple fact.

That level of projection cannot come from a species so low on the extrasensory scale, Spock determines. Humans generally are expressive with their emotions, but that man was radiating them. Almost as if on purpose.

As he steps into Pike's office, Spock's face and general demeanor are calm. The same cannot be said for the captain, whose face is dotted with patches of red. He inhales deeply, lets out a heavy breath, then answers Spock's formal greeting and offers him a chair with a shake in his voice.

Although Spock deems it inappropriate, he finds himself asking: "Who was he, Captain?" But Pike does not seem to think his interest is unusual at all.

"My worst nightmare," he answers drily, which Spock infers to be a strange sort of Terran humor. "May I introduce James Tiberius Kirk?"

The name sounds Human — but then, few people would ever deduce that Spock is not fully Vulcan himself, so some telepathic heritage cannot be ruled out at this point.

Pike sighs, then continues. "He is my protégé, if you will. The son of an old friend. Brilliant kid, but…" He makes a motion with his hand that he seems to believe finishes the sentence adequately.

Spock's curiosity has not yet subsided.

"He is a first-year cadet?" Spock asks, careful not to overstep some boundary of propriety as he pries for more information.

"Technically, yes, end of first year," Pike confirms and any left-over anger vanishes from his features as he smiles. "But he has been testing out of a number of classes early and wants to fast-track the Academy. He'll probably make it in three years." Pike cocks his head. "A bit like you in this regard, but I doubt he can beat your record of two and a half."

Spock knows Pike does not want to offend when he compares Spock to the turbulent, uncontrolled man that has nearly single-handedly upended his shields. He decides to let the topic of James Tiberius Kirk rest and turns his attention to the Starfleet business they need to discuss.

But it takes a rather thorough meditation that evening to purge any lingering impression of the angry cadet from his thoughts.

Six

Spock goes over the basic structure of his planned lecture in his head, rearranging and finishing parts as he approaches the lecture hall. A colleague has taken ill and Spock has been asked to take on her Interstellar Ethnology class for the short remainder of the semester.

“Cadets,” he calls out as he enters the room precisely at 1300 hours. Any cadet who has yet to take their seat takes one look at him and hurries to their chair. Silence descends immediately and Spock nods approvingly at the group. “I have taken over the class from Commander Gabrielle for the foreseeable future. If you do not yet know me, I am Lieutenant Commander Spock. You can access my office hours as well as any additional relevant information via the Academy network.” He steps behind the podium, docking his PADD at the station, and his presentation appears at the wall behind him.

“Be prepared to take notes diligently. I will not provide a handout.” He pauses a moment and watches six or seven cadets hurriedly take out PADDs. They avoid his gaze. “Following my colleague’s roster, today’s unit will cover ethical considerations as well as Starfleet regulations as they pertain to first-contact missions. Let us start with a definition…”

He covers basic knowledge for the first third of the class, aiming for an appropriate pace that allows for meaningful but not too comprehensive notes. Still, about a third of cadets look strained when he is finished with the outline and prepares to delve into the finer points of today’s material. Commander Gabrielle must have handled the class differently, but the cadets will have to get used to Spock’s teaching.

“Additional problems arise when a civilization — which seems at first glance to be well-established and advanced enough in technology to be pursued by the Federation — suddenly moves towards upheaval,” Spock explains towards the end of his lecture. He can tell that two cadets have spaced out and another four are close to it, but the majority of the class seems well-focused. “If the civilization is experiencing extensive civil wars, religious or spiritual crises, or severely destabilizing natural disasters like super-volcano eruptions or wide-spread famine, Starfleet will postpone or abandon its first-contact mission. Examples include—”

A voice interrupts his lecture sharply: “How does that conform with the Starfleet ethical code, Lieutenant Commander?”

Spock’s head snaps up and recognizes Kirk, Captain Pike’s protégé. He must have overlooked him at the very edge of the last row where dysfunctional overhead lighting has cast a dark shadow over some cadets. Now, standing up with his arms crossed before his chest, his face agitated, he is of course impossible to go unnoticed. His peers’ heads turn towards him and the majority do not seem surprised nor particularly annoyed that Kirk interrupts their class. In fact, he is even receiving the attention of the dozy cadets Spock has noticed earlier.

“There will be ample time for discussion at another time, cadet,” Spock tries to censor the man. “Sit down.”

But Kirk seems immune to the severity in Spock’s voice. This is unusual. Spock has been commended for his natural authority.

“I understand and support the Prime Directive, sir,” Kirk continues, seemingly unfazed. “But once it has been established that a civilization is advanced enough for first contact and preparations have been made, abandoning a mission just because it’s suddenly inconvenient seems unethical to me.”

Spock realizes Kirk will not be silenced. He changes his strategy and engages him instead: “A war is hardly a mere inconvenience. What alternatives do you offer, cadet? Would you have Starfleet personnel risk their lives in a civil war so a first-contact mission must not be abandoned?”

Kirk’s face hardens. “No, sir. In case of a full-blown war, I understand the need for caution. But an ill-timed super volcano eruption? A famine?” His voice seems to change at the last word, but Spock cannot fathom why.

He uses Kirk’s pause for a rebuttal: “I do not see how this goes against Starfleet moral code, cadet. In fact, the Prime Directive perfectly applies here: Any interference would directly contradict its main goal to respect an alien culture’s autonomy and natural development.”

“In the case of a society vastly less advanced than us, I agree,” Kirk concedes, but there is an edge to his voice now. An edge Spock almost seems to feel in the air. “But once contact is established and a planet is on friendly terms with the Federation, reaction to distress calls and supply runs are every-day occurrences. Nobody would bat an eye if Vulcan asked Earth for food to forestall starvation of its entire population.”

Spock blinks, but does not fall for Kirk’s attempt at flustering him with his choice of example. “Your analogy is ill-chosen,” he returns evenly. “Vulcan was a founding member of the Federation and is fully capable of supporting itself. A famine of the magnitude we speak of here is such a statistical anomaly that any given assistance would not unduly interfere with the planet’s natural development. In addition, contact — so to speak — has already been established at this point. We are speaking of worlds not yet approached by Federation species.”

“Not yet,” Kirk repeats hotly. “Even though they already qualify.”

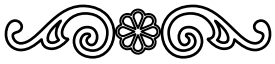
“My point is still valid. A line has to be drawn somewhere and that line is stated clearly in the Prime Directive.”

The Human idiom has some impact on Kirk, who stares at him with wide eyes: “You’re saying that it’s just bad luck then. We didn’t make contact in time for you to qualify for a supply run so, sorry, but we’re going to watch your people starve.”

Spock would point out his childish rhetoric, but something else has caught his full attention. Kirk is projecting again. Anger and something else, just out of Spock’s reach. Before Spock even has time to ward off the intrusion, a chime indicates the end of the period. Kirk abruptly retreats, and with him the tension crackling along Spock’s shields.

“You will find this week’s assignment has already been made accessible to you,” Spock addresses the full class. “Dismissed, cadets.”

When he looks back at the last row, Kirk has already left the room.



Spock's interest can no longer be contained. After his day of lectures has ended, he sits down in his office and accesses the database housing all of the cadet files, drawing up information on Kirk.

There has to be an explanation for his impact on Spock. He is sure now that it has been Kirk all along who has upended his controls. The timeline fits. His lapses of control coincide with Kirk entering the Academy nearly one Standard year ago. If he can establish that the cadet has telepathic abilities and refuses to shield properly—

But Spock finds no such evidence in Kirk's file. He is the son of George Samuel Kirk, lieutenant commander and first officer of the famously ill-fated *USS Kelvin*, and Lieutenant Winona Kirk, both deceased, both fully Human. No indication of other heritage. Low esper rating, average apperception quotient as per his last physical.

Although he has already checked the relevant parts, Spock finds himself reading the rest of the file.

Stellar academic performance, extremely high aptitude scores. His record of conduct — not quite clean, but clearly outweighed by the impressive number of recommendations given his short time at the Academy.

Spock now comprehends why Captain Pike called him a 'brilliant kid'. He scrolls. Interesting.

A large redacted section follows at the end of Kirk's file. Technically, Spock could override the restrictions and access the passages. He has the clearance. But his superior would be notified. Captain Pike would wonder why Spock is prying. And he would be correct to reprimand him, Spock reasons and closes the file.

Kirk speaking out in his class and getting angry enough to spear Spock's shields is not a logical reason to do so.

The latter is not Kirk's fault, that much has become clear from what information the file offers freely. It is Spock's own weakness, as he should have known all along. His control is inadequate and he is looking for excuses, blaming a Human for his own shortcomings.

He shuts down his panel and is about to leave his office when a signal indicates that somebody wants to enter. These are not his official office hours, so Spock checks the visitor's identification.

Cadet James T. Kirk.

Surprised at this unlikely turn of events, Spock needs a moment to gather his thoughts and mask his face so as not to give a single thing away. Then he buzzes Kirk in.

The cadet looks different. Controlled. Spock realizes that so far, he has only seen Kirk in emotional turmoil of some form. This is the first time he can observe him in a more sober state of mind. His uniform is orderly, his light hair slightly tousled in contrast. He is of slender but muscular build. His bronzed skin shows his regular pursuit of outdoor activity. There is no hint of emotion trying to penetrate Spock's shields.

Kirk approaches his desk, stands at regulation-perfect attention, salutes, his gaze focused somewhere behind Spock. “Lieutenant Commander.” His voice is steady.

“Cadet,” Spock replies. “At ease.” Then he falls silent. It is Kirk who has come to him.

Kirk relaxes, meets his eyes. Spock realizes now that he has time to examine the man, that he looks exhausted. Although he tries to hide it the dark circles and harsh wrinkles give him away.

“I have come to apologize,” Kirk offers. “I shouldn’t have interrupted your class. I spoke out of turn, sir.”

This, he had not expected. “Indeed,” Spock agrees. Kirk eyes him apprehensively and Spock inclines his head, knowing what he is waiting for. “I accept your apology.”

Kirk’s mouth loses an edge Spock has not realized had been there. The cadet looks even more exhausted now that some of the tension has disappeared, although his lips have taken the shape of a small smile.

“For what it’s worth,” Kirk continues less formally, “it actually was one of the most interesting lectures I have attended at Starfleet so far.”

Spock is unsure of Kirk’s intentions. He has already accepted his apology. Flattery is unnecessary. He tells him so.

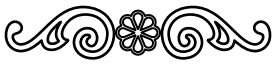
And once more, Spock finds this curious, confusing cadet in his head. This time, a shower of amusement is lighting up Spock’s mind as the smile on Kirk’s mouth widens.

“Of course, sir,” he replies. “I will refrain from any form of flattery in the future.” Spock realizes that Kirk is engaging in Human teasing. The crinkles around his eyes are now less tired and more joyous. It suits him better than anger.

Alarmed at his own line of thought, Spock stands. He needs to meditate. Again.

“I must leave,” he says curtly and this shakes Kirk as well. The amusement disappears from Spock’s thoughts as the man nods, salutes, and leaves the office.

It speaks of Spock’s continuing loss of control that he would have preferred for the cadet to stay.



No level of mental discipline he can manage is enough to purge all thoughts of James Kirk and at his next meeting with Captain Pike the following week, Spock cannot help himself.

“Your protégé,” Spock begins after Academy business has been discussed, then stops. There is no logical way to approach this conversation and he is unsure how to continue his query. Spock is not even sure what exactly he wants to achieve or uncover by broaching this topic.

Pike raises his eyebrows. “What has the fool done now?”

At a loss, Spock answers honestly: “He has spoken out of turn and disrupted my class.” Though what he means to say is much different and more difficult to grasp.

Pike rubs a hand over his face. “I didn’t know he was taking one of your classes.”

“He is attending Commander Gabrielle’s Interstellar Ethnology course.”

“Ah.” He sighs. “I’ll talk to him, Spock.”

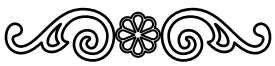
“That is not necessary,” Spock replies quickly. In fact, it is the last thing he wanted to achieve.

But Pike ignores his protest: “Don’t worry about it, you are not the first instructor who has come to me to complain about him.”

“I made no such complaint,” he interjects, but Pike seems to have made up his mind.

“Really, it’s fine, Spock. I only hope you’ll also get to see his other, more brilliant side.” He rises. “Please excuse me, I have a meeting with the admiral lined up.”

Spock has accomplished nothing, only risked another confrontation. He should have followed logic and never mentioned Kirk in the first place.



It is inevitable that Kirk approaches him again.

At least, the cadet manages to restrain himself until after his lecture is over instead of disrupting it again, although by that point Spock has almost developed a headache due to Kirk’s smoldering irritation prodding at his shields for the entirety of the class.

His control is truly abysmal. This is not the Vulcan way.

“Lieutenant Commander,” Kirk says, but he might as well have ridiculed Spock’s Vulcan heritage or insulted his mother, given the blatant lack of respect in his tone of voice.

The mix of emotions now assaulting Spock’s protections from proximity almost makes him heady for a moment. His control must have become even worse in the past twenty-four Standard hours. The logical thing would have been to approach Doctor M’Benga. He has been foolish.

“Cadet,” he responds. At least his voice is not yet affected.

Through gritted teeth, Kirk continues: “I apologized to you.”

“True.”

“You accepted the apology.”

“Your recitation of our last conversation is not necessary as I remember it in its entirety.”

“Well, could have fooled me!” Kirk retorts and disappointment bleeds through his anger, almost eliciting something like guilt from Spock. Again, his own thoughts alarm him. He needs to step away from this conversation now.

“Clearly state your business or leave, cadet,” Spock says in a perfectly cool tone, attempting to hide his own emotional compromise.

“Why did you write me up with Pike? I thought we had an understanding!” Kirk’s eyes, though cerulean in color, seem ablaze with fire. The heat of his anger now washes over Spock in waves and he has the irrational thought that he might drown in it if he stays too close to Kirk for an extended amount of time.

The logical thing to do would be to explain the misunderstanding and immediately dismiss the cadet. But reason escapes him. Spock has a sudden, almost primal urge to provoke Kirk and incite a fight.

“Your conduct was unbecoming,” Spock hears himself say, “and your anger has no place here. If you want to succeed at Starfleet Academy, you must learn to control yourself.” Ironic. “Otherwise, it would be wise to consider a change of career paths.”

Kirk’s fury flares to new heights and it feels good. The cadet steps closer, leans forward, narrows his eyes. Spock braces himself. Any moment now, any moment he will breach Spock’s personal space and—

But just like that, their connection ebbs. Kirk, clearly realizing that he has been close to attacking one of his instructors, has averted his gaze, swallows once, twice as he brings an appropriate distance between them. His hot anger has turned to harmless sparks of irritation at the edge of Spock’s shields. Spock almost reels from the sudden loss.

“Sir, I…” Kirk shakes his head and although he can no longer feel the brunt of his emotions, Spock recognizes guilt in his eyes when he looks back at him. His face is pale. “I didn’t mean to … I’m sorry.”

The cadet flees the room with the barest hint of a salute.

Which is just as well. Spock draws in a shaky breath and uses the controls at the podium to keep anybody else from entering before allowing himself to lean against it for support, closing his eyes.

He has been wrong to exclude his lapses from his physical with Doctor M’Benga and now, he is past even the doctor’s expertise. A few moments longer, and he might have — Spock does not know what he might have done and the thought draws up an emotion he has not allowed himself to feel in a long time: fear.

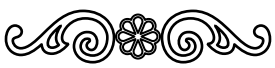
It has become clear to him what is happening, what his body has built up to in the past months. This has nothing to do with James Tiberius Kirk — the man is only the unlucky catalyst of Spock’s imminent descent into madness.

It has been nearly seven Vulcan years. Seven Vulcan years since he lost the bond.

Seven Vulcan years since his he has tried to purge all memory of the connection from his mind.

And now, in his seventh year … The cycle of seven … *Pon farr*. It must be so.

He will rectify his error in judgment at once. He must return to Vulcan.



“Medical leave?” The query gives Doctor M’Benga’s surprise away, despite his neutral face.

“Immediately,” Spock adds. He is standing in the doctor’s office, already out of his normal instructor’s uniform and changed into Starfleet-issue blacks.

“What is going on here, Spock?”

He closes his eyes, wills his hands — clasped behind his back — to stop their tremor. In the past three Standard hours in which he has written a note to Pike to notify him in advance of his leave, another to his parents to announce his imminent arrival, has secured a place in a direct shuttle to Vulcan and packed any necessary belongings, his shields have not improved even slightly.

In fact, Spock’s general state seems to be in steady decline and Spock will not wait to find out at which point he will become a danger to his fellow Starfleet members.

“It is impossible to take personal leave during the semester on such short notice. Thus I must involve you, Doctor.”

“So you’re not sick?”

“I do feel … compromised,” Spock offers. “I require Vulcan assistance.”

M’Benga stares at him. “I’m sorry, but I can’t just put you on medical leave without a diagnosis on record.”

“Most of my medical files are classified—”

“Still, I must give a medically sound reason.” M’Benga allows for concern to bleed into his voice. “Spock, what is this about?”

“It is time,” Spock states shakily.

And M’Benga understands. Nods. “You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

He sits at his desk and starts to type at his terminal. “I’m putting you on indefinite medical leave, then,” he says. “In retrospect, I shouldn’t have been surprised. Your last readings … well.”

Spock stares at him. “To what do you refer?”

M’Benga ceases his typing. “During your last physical I saw some unusual activity in your brain. The kind I haven’t seen for a long time.” He pauses. “Not since…”

Spock must force himself to breathe. “Ah,” is his only reply.

The doctor inclines his head. “I’d assumed you entered into a relationship and were unwilling to share the news. As it seemed to have no impact on your work performance, I deemed it a private matter and didn’t mention it. I’m sorry I missed the signs. It’s my own fault.”

“Have you not been trained to recognize these very signs on Vulcan?” Spock demands shakily. The news that where once the bond thrived — no. Still, he cannot dare think of it. The pain is too much to bear.

“I have,” the doctor says and has now resumed typing. “And they do look different in full Vulcans, but with your unusual physique, and your history, I’m not surprised to find that it might manifest differently for you, especially in the earlier stages.” He pauses, presses a button. “There. You’re on leave.” He looks up at Spock. “Safe travels.”

Spock nods and leaves the office without another word, his thoughts whirling as he rushes down the corridor. The doctor’s readings — the madness—

Pitifully unaware of his surroundings, he nearly collides with somebody. An electric jolt runs through his entire frame as his hand makes contact with the arm of another, briefly brushing bare skin on skin. He stumbles backwards, momentarily disoriented by the contact.

It is Kirk, staring at him with those expressive blue eyes. Again. Spock is too far gone to react within reason. “You,” he hisses and Kirk is an open book.

Surprise. Worry. Guilt. Fear. And, as always, a simmer of anger. Spock’s shields might as well have fallen completely. His mind is filled with James Tiberius Kirk.

“Sir, I didn’t…” the cadet starts but Spock is overcome.

“Why are you here?” he demands angrily. His voice is uncharacteristically loud, laced with raw anger and Spock, illogically, can feel the eyes of people around them turning on him. “What do you want?”

“Lieutenant Commander, I swear—”

Spock has had enough. Suddenly filled with the desire to touch, to fight, he grabs Kirk by his collar with a roar from somewhere deep within and shoves him into the nearest wall.

Kirk lets out an undignified squeak as the air is forced from his lungs, and it feels good, it feels right. Spock presses him even firmer against the wall, crowding him with the entire length of his body and leans closer to—

He feels pointed pressure at his neck. His strength suddenly leaves him and he is forced to let go of Kirk’s clothing as he crumbles to the ground. From his new position on the floor, Spock recognizes through his sudden haze: M’Benga with a hypodermic spray and a determined expression on his face. He must have placed it just so to imitate a Vulcan nerve pinch. Imperfect, but effective.

As he turns his head weakly, he sees Kirk who has slumped against the wall right next to him. The cadet doctor Spock has seen once before prods at him, touching Kirk’s face.

Spock feels an urge to shout at him to keep his unworthy fingers to himself, but the world goes black.

Spock knows his father is present even before opening his eyes, their familial bond aglow with new strength. They melded while he was unconscious, he remembers faintly, Sarek a soothing

force at the ragged edges of his turbulent thoughts. A deep calm which has long been absent has engulfed his mind and Spock feels at peace.

Momentarily.

As he sits up, he recognizes his surroundings as the sleeping alcove of his private quarters. He has been moved here from Starfleet medical where he attacked—

His heart rate accelerates as he rises from the bed. Memories come rushing back, until they are soothed by another wave of calm immediately. His pulse slows.

His father stands a few steps from his bed. Spock greets him with the *ta'al*, adding the most formal and respectful way of expressing gratitude: "*Nar'voh neruk klem t'nash-veh.*"

Though Sarek's face is distant, impassive, Spock feels his calming presence inside of his mind, radiating calmness through their newly strengthened connection.

"Your gratitude is unnecessary, *sa-fu*," Sarek replies, putting special emphasis on the last word: son.

Spock had not realized just how much he had been lacking in the past years. His mind had suffered. His people are not meant to live separately from one another, thriving only with steady telepathic connections.

"You should have visited Vulcan," Sarek admonishes him, still aware of Spock's thoughts.

"You are correct," Spock acknowledges his own failure. His muscles are stiff, his throat dry, he comes to realize. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Over three Standard days. Doctor M'Benga's has kept you sedated until my arrival." Sarek watches him for a moment. "You are in control?"

Spock takes a moment to assess himself. "It is adequate."

His father retreats to his own mind, leaving Spock to his thoughts. A pause while Spock gets accustomed to the sensation. No madness.

"How can this be?" he asks. "I thought I was…" He does not finish. The topic is too intimate, even within the privacy of family.

"It was not your time," Sarek states.

"But my lack of control — my aggression—"

"Think before you speak," Sarek admonishes him for his stammering, but the sharp edge of censure that would have usually accompanied the words is missing. "Your problems were rooted in the same cause as they have always been."

"How? The bond is gone."

"It is not."

"Impossible."

“Your denial is to be expected after all this time. Had you visited Vulcan and undergone guidance as I had advised, T’Pau would have discovered that your bond is in fact intact, only dormant for some time. Much pain would have been avoided.” He pauses. “But what is, is.”

“*Kaiidth*,” Spock says in return. It has been his mantra for so long. His bondmate was dead. Their connection was lost. His mind was hollow without it. Nothing could be done. Illogical to curse his fate like a Human might. Despite his agony, he was alive and he had focused on his chosen path at Starfleet, even after his attempt to purge all emotions through *kolinahr* had failed.

And now—

“Kirk,” he whispers shakily. He can see the man’s face before his inner eye, filled with naked fear as Spock pushed him violently against the wall.

“It is him,” Sarek acknowledges. “He has agreed to attend the *koon’ul*.”

A formal negotiation for a possible betrothal, the very ritual the ancient bond had denied to him when he was a child. Why Kirk would agree to it after their last encounter is beyond Spock’s comprehension.

“I hurt him.” His voice is thick with emotion and he should be shamed for it, but his father does not chastise him this time.

“In spite of what has transpired, your intended was open to logic,” Sarek explains. Spock can hardly pay enough attention to notice the air of approval in his father’s words. “You have much to think about, *sa-fu*. Remain here. You will be informed of the appointed place and time. Your mother will join us.”

Sarek leaves and Spock is alone with his thoughts. His bondmate is not dead.

His bondmate is Kirk.

Spock blindly stumbles forward, out of the bedroom and sinks onto his mat, but a meditative pose momentarily escapes him. On his knees he trembles, reminiscent of the times when the bond would overwhelm him with its intensity and force him to the ground. Something he had once suffered through, then yearned for when it seemed to be halted forever. There was a chance. He could have this. The ancient bond.

The glimmer of hope helps him ground himself. He feels himself slipping into a meditative pose as he closes his eyes. He breathes deeply until he has calmed enough to turn his attention inwards. Carefully, tenderly, he reaches out to that part in his mind he had avoided for so long. He had expected a festering wound, a gaping hole.

But there it is. Not as raw and open as it once was, much more subdued, perhaps easily missed: a promise rather than fulfillment. But it is there, an irrevocable connection to another. The ancient bond that has accompanied him since he was a young child.

His mate has never been dead.

“*Telsu*,” Spock whispers and loses himself in the sensation of the faint presence in his mind. “*T’hy’la*.”

Seven

His meditation ends abruptly and it is a testament to its depth that Spock cannot tell exactly how many Standard hours have passed.

As he opens his eyes, Spock at first does not know what has disrupted it. His relaxation had been deep, more intense than any other meditation in the past years. Spock had forgotten what a mind truly rested and energized felt like. His body must have been heavily compensating for his lack of telepathic connections.

Then, he feels it. The now familiar tingling at the back of his neck. Anxiety. Kirk's anxiety. He is close.

Spock throws off the traditional posture in one swift movement and is at his door in four long strides. He activates the sensor and as the entrance slides open, he steps out just in time to see a person walk away from his door.

Kirk.

The man turns as if Spock had said his name aloud and what Spock sees in his face disturbs him.

Kirk has always looked unusually tired during their short time of acquaintance, but the dark circles underneath his eyes are especially prominent tonight. Deep lines have appeared between his eyebrows and on his forehead, his face and lips are pale. Exhaustion is evident in his slumped shoulders.

Kirk freezes when he notices him and stares, showering Spock's mind with a drizzle of fear. Spock is starkly, painfully reminded of their last encounter.

"Do not be afraid," he states though he knows such a statement is an ineffective attempt at easing somebody else's fright.

Kirk shakes his head, as if to say that he is not. But no words are spoken and Spock picks up on a tremble in the man's hands. Had Spock not meditated so successfully, he would be swept away by the intense feeling of helplessness that overcomes him. This is his intended, his mate. *Telsu*. And he is frightened of him.

"Please," Spock softens his voice even further, "I will not harm you again." This seems to shake Kirk from his stupor.

"You didn't harm me," he replies.

"Vulcans have three times the strength of Humans," Spock returns evenly. "And I used all of it when I attacked you."

For some reason, this seems to amuse Kirk. The corners of his lips are now twitching upwards and he cocks his head to the side. "I'm not that delicate. A few bruises, and they've been taken care of." He speaks as if the pain he has suffered is of little consequence to himself. It is not to Spock. "Besides," he continues before Spock can voice that thought, "it wasn't an attack."

“What other term is there to describe my despicable behavior?”

“I’m here, right? Can’t have been that bad.” Kirk doesn’t offer an alternative descriptor, simply shrugs. The odd Human mannerism somehow prevents Spock from further pursuing this line of conversation.

Instead, he straightens, takes a step back and motions inside his quarters. “You may come inside, if you so wish.”

“I don’t want to intrude…”

“It is impossible for you to do so. You are always welcome here.”

Kirk clears his throat, the arising flush easily visible on his pale skin. Spock expects him to refuse after this open display of discomfort. But Kirk surprises him and enters Spock’s rooms without another word.

Spock lets the door slide shut behind them, leaving the locks disabled, unwilling to frighten the man again.

He watches as Kirk’s eyes wander about the room and observe the few personal items that adorn the otherwise bland, Starfleet issue quarters. Spock follows his gaze. A small statue of Surak next to some incense. *Ka’athyra*, the Vulcan lyre. His meditation mat, hand-woven by a skilled Vulcan artisan. A holographic picture on a shelf.

Kirk’s eyes linger there and Spock offers the information freely: “My mother.”

The surprise is evident in Kirk’s voice when he responds: “She’s Human?”

“Indeed.” Spock hesitates. “You will meet her, if you desire it.”

Kirk turns his tired eyes back towards him. “I’ve already met your father.”

“So, he has told me.” A heavy pause. “Look, Lieutenant Commander—”

Spock’s skin prickles at Kirk’s way of addressing him. “I would offer you my name,” he interrupts him. “Spock, son of Sarek.”

“Right. Spock. Thank you.” He hesitates. “You can call me Jim, if you like.”

“I would be honored, Jim.”

This seems to resolve some of the tension in Kirk’s — Jim’s frame. In fact, his whole body seems to slump as he rubs a hand over his tired face. “Sorry, give me a minute. This is … a lot to take in.”

“I did not mean to overwhelm you. If you prefer the formality, we can return—”

“No!” he is interrupted quickly. “Sorry,” Jim adds more softly, “First names are fine. I didn’t mean that.”

Spock understands. “You have been made aware of our bond.” Jim nods, although Spock is merely stating facts. “And you accepted my father’s invitation to a formal meeting.”

“The *koon’ul*”, Jim elaborates, his pronunciation awkward but not incorrect.

“You are well-informed.”

“Well, I’m not in the habit of entering marriage negotiations based on ancient scrolls without at least reading up on them,” Jim replies drily, and finally Spock can feel him again. The smallest sprout of amusement lighting up in a corner of his mind. “And let me tell you, those are not light reading.”

“You have questions.” It is not a query. Now that he has opened up again, Spock can feel Jim’s restlessness and anxiety, barely hidden by his attempt at humor.

“You think?” Jim shakes his head. “Sorry, I don’t mean to be rude.” He pauses, narrows his eyes. “Are you reading my thoughts right now?”

Spock tries not to feel offended. His intended is frightened and confused. “I would not pry into your mind without permission.”

“But you could,” Jim pushes.

“The current state of our connection does not provide me with any other information than a sense of your emotional state. Your thoughts are your own.”

Jim swallows, his relief tangible. “Our connection,” he eventually repeats. “I read the scrolls, but this part I didn’t quite get. Maybe it was lost in translation… Where does this *t’hy’la* bond come from? We’d never met before I joined Starfleet as far as I know.”

“Vulcan understanding of this matter is sparse,” Spock admits. “The choice of one’s mate, the process of bonding are deeply private matters and not considered suitable subjects for scientific research.”

“I’m not even Vulcan,” Jim states, as if this fact was not known to Spock. “How is this even possible?”

Spock can offer no satisfying answer and so he remains silent.

“Look, Spock…” Jim trails off. A nervous sort of energy has joined the buzz of emotions Spock can sense from him. “Your father can be very convincing, so I agreed to his proposal to meet, but…”

Spock’s hands clenched into fists involuntarily as he heard those words.

“You have decided to reject me,” he states as he tries to quash a sense of icy panic rising from deep within.

Jim looks at him in a desperate sort of way. But it does not match the level of desperation Spock feels at the thought that his yearning to finally feel whole, complete his mind by joining with his intended might never be fulfilled. His stomach lurches. It seems that where his intended is concerned, he can lose all pretenses that he follows pure logic and eschews emotion.

“I don’t think I’m husband material for a Vulcan,” Jim says with a strange, self-deprecating smile, but his words cut like knives across Spock’s very soul.

Anger joins the rising panic at Jim’s careless dismissal. “Do not make light of this,” Spock says, more heatedly than he has intended.

Jim quickly raises his hands in a conciliatory fashion. “I don’t mean to offend,” he hurriedly adds and Spock can feel another rise in anxiety and fear on Jim’s side.

He forces down his own feelings, aims for reassuring calmness: “I am not offended.” Hurt would be a more fitting term.

Jim swallows audibly. “I read up on Vulcan relationships. As I’ve understood it, bondmates are perfectly attuned to one another, aware of each other’s feelings, their thoughts, even if they’re physically apart.”

“Correct.”

“So if one partner is happy…”

“…the other partakes in that happiness.” Spock fails to see how this can be construed as a disadvantage.

“Right.” Jim licks his lips. “But when one suffers…”

“I see. If this is what worries you, I may ease your concern. As a Vulcan, I am fully capable of controlling myself so that you may not feel any discomfort because of me.”

But Spock can tell that Jim’s anxiety is not lessened by this declaration. “The same can’t be said for me.”

Spock feels his face soften. “Jim, feeling your sorrows is not a hardship for me. I would ease your pain if you let me.”

His words have not the intended effect. They are meant as reassurance, but Jim takes a step back and sickness returns as he distances himself. Spock gets a glimpse of the very pain his *telsu* is so afraid to transfer to him.

“Spock, we hardly know each other.”

“On the contrary. In a way, we have known each other since you were born.”

A laugh escapes Jim, but Spock can sense no humor from him. “Look, I get what you’re saying. M’Benga explained it to me, that you’ve had problems as a child because I’m in your head or whatever, that you could feel me all the time and it sometimes got too much.”

In any other circumstance, Spock would have been appalled at the doctor’s heinous breach of privacy, but there should be no secrets between *telsu*.

“I learned to control the side-effects,” Spock offers.

“But,” Jim continues as if he hasn’t heard him, “that’s not the same thing as knowing me. I mean, come on, Spock! This is the first time we have had an actual conversation.”

“And we will have many more in the future, if it is what you need.”

Jim’s face seems to crumble and he turns away. Sadness pulses against Spock’s temples, igniting an urge to embrace this man, to soothe any pain his intended might feel. “This is not about what I need…” Jim whispers shakily.

Spock senses that this is the opening he has been waiting for without knowing it.

“Your needs are my own,” he states and approaches Jim, gratified when he does not seek to distance himself again. “Look at me.” He does. “If you seek comfort, I will provide it. If you are sick, I shall provide care—”

“—Are those vows?” Jim interrupts breathlessly.

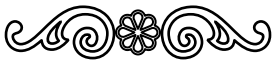
“They are promises,” he replies fervently.

For a second, it seems as if Spock has convinced him. Jim’s mind is wide open, awash with a wonder that seems to ease his negative feelings, and a thread seems to form between their minds: The bond, ready to be fulfilled. Spock would only need to raise his hand, splay his fingers against—

The thread disappears when Jim shakes his head, averts his gaze once more.

“What I need,” he says, exhaustion evident in every syllable, “is sleep. And time.” His mind is closing, his emotions are a mere hum in the air, as if he has learned how to draw in his feelings and shield them from Spock. Perhaps, instinctively, he has. “And honestly, you need time, too. You don’t know me,” he raises his hand when Spock wants to protest. “No, you don’t.”

He pauses. “Read my file. The whole thing. Think it over. Then we can meet.” Spock accepts, though his whole body aches with want as he watches Jim leave.



> Starfleet Personnel Database

>> file no. 72/048823

>> declassification granted for: Lieutenant Commander Spock

>> reloading information

>>> name (Standard): James Tiberius Kirk

>>> name (preferred appellation): [rank] Kirk (he/his) […]

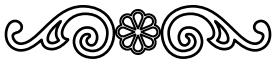
>>> in-depth psychological assessment by: Commander Doctor Kosmol Grax

[…] signs of emotional neglect in childhood […] juvenile delinquency […] intellectually gifted

[…] reports the use of strong psychotropic drugs to relieve the immediate stress following his experiences on Tarsus IV to reduce common symptoms of post-traumatic stress such as paroxysmal anxiety and parasomnia, followed by psychological counseling with civilian Betazoid psychiatrist, Doctor Leammi Azaax […] overall prognosis is positive and recruitment possible […] further counseling is strongly recommended. […]

>>> follow-up assessment by: Commander Doctor Kosmol Grax

[…] Cadet Kirk reports episodes of anxiety and insomnia. His stress-levels remain in medium range, amplified by the patient’s extreme academic ambitions. Further counseling is recommended. […]



Everything fell into place when Spock finished reading Jim's file.

The dates align perfectly. Not only Jim's birth — dramatic enough by itself, his father's life lost just as his own began — but the timeline of traumatic events he has been subjected to since then, culminating in his months-long suffering on Tarsus IV. The subsequent use of drugs to numb his mind — and thus, numb their bond so that it no longer connected through lightyears of distance, causing Spock to believe him dead as their connection was cut off. But it had been buried for a time only, waiting patiently to reemerge.

Spock grieves with his intended while cursing those who have hurt him.

He is more determined than ever to pursue the maturation of their bond. His mate is suffering, has been suffering for most of his life. Jim deserves peace.

He cannot wait until the *koon'ul*.

Spock rests until the morning, mindful that unperturbed sleep is a valuable commodity for Jim, then lets his mind guide him across campus. Now that he knows what he is looking for, it is easy to follow the merest inkling in his mind until he can feel the now comforting prickles against his neck.

Jim is close.

Off-duty and wearing non-descriptive Starfleet blacks, Spock attracts less attention than the last time when entering the general mess. Hundreds of Starfleet cadets have settled down for breakfast. Spock only has eyes for one.

Jim sits at the far edge of the hall, the table before him covered in several PADDs as well as two old-fashioned paper books. His only sustenance seems to be a cup of steaming hot liquid as he quickly types on yet another tablet in his hand. He is accompanied by the cadet doctor Spock has seen before, who seems to be staring into space somewhere beyond Spock until his eyes suddenly snap right onto his frame.

As he approaches, Spock watches the doctor's eyes widen as he nudges Jim with his elbow. He startles, looks up from his work and nearly knocks over his hot beverage as he locks eyes with Spock.

"Good morning," Spock says as he comes to a halt next to the table.

"Um, hi." Jim's greeting is little more than a squeak. He still looks exhausted.

"You did not sleep?"

Jim blinks up at him. "I did. A bit."

The deliberate imprecision in Jim's words naturally is not lost on Spock. His eyes cross over to the other man at the table who says nothing. The doctor's eyes seem challenging as he folds his arms before his chest.

"Um, sorry. This is Leonard McCoy. My roommate."

“Cadet,” Spock says, inclining his head as he memorizes the name.

“Lieutenant Commander.” The doctor’s voice is tense. Spock is not wearing any insignia, but of course Spock is known to him. “Calmed down, have we?” Clearly, he is alluding to the violence he witnessed only a few days ago.

“Bones, shut up,” Jim chastises him at once.

But Spock deserves to be publicly shamed for his behavior. “I deeply regret my loss of control,” he answers quietly, though the words are meant for Jim rather than the doctor.

His statement seems to satisfy the older cadet for now, as he does not offer any further comment. His posture and face, however, remain reserved.

Spock would prefer some more privacy for the rest of their conversation, but Jim’s nervousness is tangible and he does not seem uncomfortable with the doctor’s presence.

Spock finds himself hoping that friendship is all there is between them. He had never considered that his intended might already be spoken for. He remembers their intimate exchange when Jim had sought a cure for his pain from Doctor McCoy — Spock understands now why he reacted so strongly to their display.

He forbids himself any further thought on the matter.

“Jim,” Spock continues and the doctor lets out a noise of surprise at the use of Jim’s first name. He quickly tries to mask with a cough. “I did as you asked.”

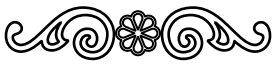
Jim clearly understands his meaning. “Oh,” is all he offers in return but his emotions press against Spock’s shields and he lets them in willingly: anxiety, apprehension.

“I wish to discuss it, if you are amenable.”

He watches Jim exchange a glance with his friend. They seem to have a silent conversation with their eyes and Spock feels a pang of irrational jealousy in his chest. This is what they should have: an understanding that does not require words.

“Well, I’ve got class and we’re pretty close to finals,” Jim eventually tells him. He must see some of Spock’s pain at his dismissal as he hurries to add, stumbling over his own words: “I mean — yes, I am — amenable, that is, as you say. Just not right now.” He clears his throat as embarrassment hovers between them. “After class? I’ve got Advanced Tactical Analysis until 1500 and then I’m free.”

“I will be there,” Spock promises him, relieved.



“I didn’t think you meant you’d wait right outside the classroom,” Jim tells him as they walk down the hallway and out of the building.

“I embarrassed you,” Spock assumes.

“No.” A small laugh, then quieter: “Have you looked at yourself?”

Spock does not understand what he means. Jim's feelings seem opaque, more difficult to read than ever before, he suddenly realizes.

"Are you shielding?" Spock asks him abruptly.

"I kinda know how," Jim answers and his tone is neutral. "I was taught in therapy. My doctor thought it might help with my anger issues. I just didn't see the point before."

Spock tries not to ascribe too much meaning to his sudden change of heart. Their connection is not cut, only muted. It will do.

It is summer in San Francisco and the temperatures are unusually tolerable for a Vulcan. They walk in silence until Jim gestures towards a lone bench in the shade. They sit, with space between them.

"So." Jim draws out the vowel. Spock does not need to be able to read his emotions to recognize his apprehension.

"You suffer from trauma."

Jim gapes at him, then shakes his head. "Gee, I know Vulcans tend to be blunt, but…"

"I have offended you."

"Offended? No. You're direct. I like it." He sighs. "And you're perfectly right. I am traumatized."

"I grieve with thee."

The ancient words seem to have the desired effect, even in their Standard approximation. "Thank you."

"I am grateful you allowed me to partake in your pain."

Jim averts his eyes. "Well, it's all in the file, anyway. It's not like I personally invited you to one of my nightmares."

"If we were to mature our bond, I could guide you out of them."

"Yeah?" A self-deprecating smile. "I doubt that would be a fun exercise for you."

"It would be my duty as your bondmate."

"Well, I wouldn't like you to do anything you don't want to do."

"You misunderstand me. It would also be my privilege to do so."

"Some privilege." There is confusion in Jim's eyes. "Spock…" He stops, sounding helpless.

And Spock finally understands Jim's intention, why he invited him to read the file, why he is trying to shield him now.

"You want me to be repulsed," Spock says and he knows sadness has bled into his voice. "With the contents of your file, you meant to show me that you are not a suitable partner. I mistook it for a sign of trust, when it was an attempt at rejection."

Jim's silence, the way he is avoiding Spock's eyes again are answers enough. Spock should be offended, but he thinks he finally starts to truly understand this man, his *telsu*.

“You seem to labor under a misconception, Jim,” he explains, pained, grieving. “You must not prove your worth to me. Regardless of what happened in your troubled past, you are my choice.”

“But it wasn’t a choice, was it?” His shields are not good enough to hide his temper, anger bleeding through his defenses. “You didn’t choose me. You just woke up one day and there I was, messing up your head and now you’re stuck with damaged goods!”

“Is this what you think of yourself? That you have been damaged?”

“Because I have. I am damaged, Spock.” Jim’s voice is as raw as the pain he is radiating, his unskilled protections waning. “Is there another word you’d rather use? You said it yourself, I’m traumatized. I haven’t had the best life so far and I’ve just started to figure out what I want to do with the rest of it. And frankly, ruining another person’s existence with my fucked-up brain permanently linked to theirs wasn’t on my fucking bucket list!”

His voice has risen and a group of cadets passing nearby has turned their heads towards them, perhaps having overheard the expletives used. Spock yearns for privacy. But even more, he wants to comfort his mate.

“Emotions are difficult to talk about for my people,” Spock tells him. “If only I could show you—”

“I don’t want you in my head.”

Spock ignores the hurt the words cause and pushes on: “Because it would be an intrusion of your privacy? Or because you fear your effect on me?”

“I know what it would do to you,” Jim says hoarsely. “I talked to M’Benga, remember? He told me what it was like for you as a child. Unconscious, in pain, cast out by other Vulcans for losing control, because of me. Think just one second about what I made you do just last week. I provoked you with my anger issues until you snapped!”

Spock shakes his head at Jim’s many fallacies. “Please,” he implores and raises his hand, “let me show you the truth.”

“I know the truth,” Jim says and gets up, steps away from Spock’s outstretched arm. He is rubbing his eyes. Tears, Spock realizes. “I can’t do this.”

Spock stands as well. If Jim will not let him in, his words must be the substitute for a meld, however inadequate.

“Jim, you are correct. I have suffered because of our connection, but the suffering I feel at this moment is even greater.” Finally, Jim looks at him again. His eyes are rimmed with red but no tears seem to have been shed. “I do not know which words to use to convince you of your own worth. But you are worthy.”

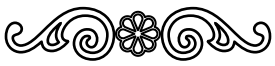
“You can’t want this.”

“I have never desired anything more.”

A silence that stretches on as Jim stares at him. For a moment, it seems like his tears will be spilled until he clears his voice, draws in a shaky breath in a desperate display of control. Spock can feel through their connection how much strength this costs him.

He realizes that Jim wishes distance. Spock should fulfill his mate's silent request, even if the thought of another minute separated from his *t'hy'la* causes him a very primal sort of devastation.

"I know of no further words that would ease your pain," Spock says solemnly. "The *koon'ul* is tomorrow." Jim only nods, but the motion soothes the sharpest edges of Spock's fears that he will not attend the ritual. "We meet at the appointed place."



When Sarek comes to pick him up, Spock is ready. He greets his mother at the door. Her eyes are emotional. They remind him of Jim.

Spock walks with his parents. Starfleet has arranged for a sandy stretch of private land, exposed to the hot summer sun, a distant reminder of Vulcan. Under normal circumstances, Spock would have been a child, would have walked behind his parents and they would have spoken for him.

But this is far from usual. A bond like theirs is rare, the *koon'ul* a mere formality as no seed must be planted in their minds: the connection is already there. All Jim has to do is agree or deny.

Spock is relieved beyond words to see that Jim is waiting. His back is turned towards them.

As his parents are deceased, he has chosen others to accompany him. Christopher Pike, Spock is not surprised to see, as he has taken Jim on as a protégé. The other person is Leonard McCoy. His lined face is serious as he murmurs something to Jim, but he stops and looks up as Spock and his parents walk onto the field. His eyes are disapproving.

Finally, Jim turns. His mouth is a carefully neutral line as he studies Spock from across the sand. Sleep has clearly escaped him again. There is no tingling at the back of Spock's neck, no emotions testing his protections, nothing that would indicate a connection between them. He is once more shielding.

Spock quashes any feelings of his own as he exchanges a glance with his father, allows his mother to touch his arm and murmur words of reassurance.

Kaiidth. The mantra still applies.

Under normal circumstances, his parents would speak and Spock would be a bystander, only a child. This is different. His parents are witnesses rather than negotiators. Spock steps forward and stops halfway in between the two parties.

After a moment of hesitation, Jim does the same.

Absolute silence descends. For a moment, all they do is look at each other.

Spock makes the first step: *"I'na'shau nash-veh odu.* Greetings to you."

He is surprised when Jim answers in Golic. His pronunciation is not perfect but his efforts to adhere to Vulcan tradition are appreciated more than he can possibly understand: *“Kaing I’puna’shau kesaing*. You are equally greeted.”

Spock cannot take his eyes off the man. His hair is not of one color, Spock notices for the first time, but a myriad of gold, yellow, white, and light brown strands, and his skin is not quite even, adorned by small scars and darker freckles. Spock wants to know all his imperfections. Outside and inside.

“I would offer you my mind.”

Jim’s eyes give nothing away, his feelings unfathomable as they once more hide behind his crudely erected barriers. “You have no idea what you’d be getting yourself into.”

“I am prepared.”

“You’d be unhappy.”

“Impossible.”

A strange, hoarse laugh. “You’re impossible. How can you be so sure of this?”

“It is the Vulcan heart. It is the Vulcan soul.”

“You’ll regret this,” Jim whispers and the shift in tense is not lost on Spock.

“I would offer you my mind,” he repeats, urgently, desperately.

Jim swallows. A pause that stretches into eternity. “Do it.”

Spock is blinded by relief. He has not been rejected. He is wanted. Jim has accepted him. *Telsu. T’hy’la.*

He steps forward, raising his hand, hesitating. “May I?” Jim tilts his face.

“Jim, parted from me and never parted,” Spock recites. “Never and always touching and touched.”

Spock’s fingers tenderly connect with Jim’s face and they are finally whole.

Epilogue

The air reeks of decay.

Dead crops. Dead people. Dead planet. He’s hungry.

And so very afraid. And exhausted.

He can feel his bones aching with every step. He looks down at his frame. Dirty. Skinny.

Where are you?

Tarsus IV.

It’s dark.

He walks over the dusty prairie steadily losing soil. A few months ago, people started to eat the weeds and it shows.

Where are you going?

He's approaching a fire, with burly men lying next to it, weapons ready on their backs. They have food. One guard is watching it.

He's so hungry.

He waits until the fire burns to embers and the guard dozes off.

He is fishing a sausage and three crabapples from a bag when the guard shifts. He runs off, hears a shout, but they do not follow him.

Meat.

When was the last time he had meat?

Come to me.

He cannot share the meat.

He crouches behind a rock and devours the fatty sausage. His stomach churns as he continues to their hide-out.

Hungry eyes. Grateful eyes. Small hands that take the bitter fruit from him though they know it'll make their stomachs hurt.

He shouldn't have eaten the sausage alone. Selfish.

You are dreaming. Come to me.

His stomach churns again.

He goes outside and throws up. He cries over it.

This is hell.

He wants out.

I am here. Follow me.

Where? There is nothing left out there.

Away from here.

Where?

To safety.

And they stand under scorching sunshine, on red sand. Ragged mountains rise in the distance, a beautiful, wild landscape before their eyes.

His pain subsides. His mind is at ease. He feels at peace.

He is not alone.

When You're Going to San Francisco
by Naug

If you're going to San Francisco
Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair
If you're going to San Francisco
You're gonna meet some gentle people there
For those who come to San Francisco
Summertime will be a love-in there
In the streets of San Francisco
Gentle people with flowers in their hair…

("Are You Going to San Francisco"—Lyrics & Music by Scott McKenzie, 1966)

Between Gods And Men
by Cate Adams

Summary: Captured by a mysterious force, Kirk and Spock are brought to an isolated world and given an incredible task, only to be offered forever at an impossible price.

AOS, K/S, Action/Adventure, Romance. Rated: Teen for violence, swearing, and sexual situations.

Smoke already hung heavy in the low-ceilinged alien space, the structure practically vibrating with coiled energy. The captain of the *Enterprise* ignored the sweat streaming down his face and the acid catch in his throat as he peered at a single flashing panel, one of many arrayed along the room's perimeter.

"Spock," he grated, "are you absolutely certain that it's this one?"

The Vulcan had already lowered his tricorder and was stepping forward. "Positive, Captain." He began to manipulate the strange indented symbols arrayed across the dingy surface.

Jim rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand. Communication with their ship was impossible, the entire complex was under attack, and the fire from the most recent round of explosions was spreading rapidly. And none of that would matter one bit if they couldn't pull this off. He reached out and placed a hand on his first officer's shoulder as the smoke thickened.

"I can barely see," Jim said. "We've got less than two minutes until this doomsday weapon goes off. The ship won't be able to escape the blast radius." He didn't need to mention the countless millions of souls on Cygni Twelve itself.

"One point seven five," Spock replied, his voice hoarse but steady. His hands were moving quickly now over the alien material.

When Jim turned away to clear his throat something shimmered bright gold in the periphery of his vision before melting away into the dark smoke. He blinked, but couldn't clear his vision enough to look closer. Everything was acrid, billowing darkness and looming death. Jim's grip tightened on his friend's shoulder as the Vulcan's hands stopped their motion and a single rectangular tile began to flash on the panel in front of him.

"Spock—"

Spock had gone eerily still, and Jim felt something shift in the space between them. "What's wrong?" Jim choked. "We only have seconds left!"

"The kill sequence is keyed in." Spock looked into his captain's eyes. "I am sorry, Jim."

Gravity seemed to shift and Jim realized he'd been pushed away to land on his back against the hard floor. He sprawled, disoriented and coughing, as Spock reached for the tile and the bright blue flash of a focused energy beam illuminated the room.

"Spock!" The captain scrambled forward toward the now-dimmed panel; the heavy buzz that had filled the room was starkly absent. The Vulcan had fallen to the floor, the front of his blue tunic charred. Jim blinked through the smoke. "Spock!"

His communicator beeped, and the captain flipped it open. "*Enterprise*!" Jim gasped, gagging over the smoke.

"Captain!" Uhura's voice was faint and staticky. "Captain … did it! The … is offline!"

"Emer…" Jim coughed. "Emergency beam-out," he managed. "Medical alert."

"Captain?" Her voice was even further away. "We can't … a lock. We're trying … interference … can … boost … can't hear you…" The device spat static and went silent and by now Jim could hear the low roar of approaching flames behind the relentless smoke.

"Spock?" He dropped the useless communicator and gently lifted his friend's head into his lap. The Vulcan was deathly pale, but his eyes had opened. "Spock."

"There … was one … final defense mechanism to ensure … to … ensure…" Spock murmured. "No time to … no time." A thick line of blood ran from the corner of his mouth; more blood steadily soaking the front of his tunic. "The weapon?"

"It's alright," Jim whispered. "It's off. You saved them." The infrastructure creaked overhead ominously, dust raining down onto the two men.

"The ship…" Spock grimaced, one hand clutching uselessly at his chest. "The ship…"

"They can't lock on," Jim said. There was a low rumble in the direction of the corridor: the sound of the building beginning to collapse. He could feel the heat increasing all around them, sweat dripping into his eyes. "We're trapped."

"Jim, Jim." Spock reached for Jim's face and then his arm, weakly pushing at the captain.

"You must … go. You must … try."

Jim blinked, the sweat on his face now mixed with tears. He offered a tender smile. "Would you leave me?"

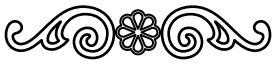
"No," Spock whispered. More blood trickled from his mouth, creating a garish pattern on pale skin. "Never."

Jim caught the Vulcan's hand, holding it close. They were out of time, and yet there was one hidden, precious thing left to say. "I have to tell you…" He choked again on the smoke and curled protectively over Spock's body as if it could possibly matter. "I have to tell you that I love you," he whispered raggedly. "I love you."

Spock's lips moved almost soundlessly. "And I … I you, my *t'hy'la*."

Jim curled even closer, pulling his friend to him, pressing dry lips to the Vulcan's forehead. "I love you," he said again, desperately. He could barely breathe, and he could feel Spock's body

convulse in his arms, fighting for ebbing life. The flames danced so close to them now: deadly, strangely golden arcs that undulated and reached and beckoned—



One breath was filled with smoke and grief and death and the next was shocking in its chilled freshness. Jim lifted his head, staring into near-darkness.

He was still holding Spock, now a lifeless weight in his arms, half-lidded eyes vacant and blood smeared across his face. The closing inferno was gone, replaced by frigid stillness; sweat was drying rapidly on Jim's body, tears cold on his face, and he was beginning to shiver. Confusion tore at his mind and he clutched his friend's body closer as his own breath condensed in clouds in front of him, illuminated by the light of a moon.They were in a clearing, the high forms of trees surrounding them in the night.

Transported? Jim thought back to that terrible room, remembering odd golden streamers through the advancing flame. But Cygni Twelve didn't have a moon. And he had dropped his communicator on the floor of that burning room. Now, though, holding his lost friend's body, it didn't seem to matter. "Spock," he whispered mournfully, reaching out to stroke the other man's hair. "I'm so sorry, my friend. My love."

A harsh, catching sound erupted from the body in his arms and, impossibly, the Vulcan shuddered. Spock pulled in a tortured breath and then another, holding it for a handful of seconds before releasing it, his eyes focusing and his head lolling to the side.

"Spock?" Jim moved his hand to support the other man's head. He gaped as, impossibly, Spock slowly rolled away from him to gingerly sit upright. The Vulcan gently probed the blood-soaked, burnt patch of fabric over his chest and wiped at his mouth. He continued to draw in deep breaths, becoming more regular, his expression as open and confused as Jim felt.

The captain stared at him, suddenly recognizing that his own lungs no longer stung and his own eyes were no longer swollen. "Spock, you're—"

"Alive," Spock finished roughly, lifting his gaze to meet Jim's. "And healed. Fascinating." He reached with shaking hands to his belt. "My communicator and phaser are missing." He touched his chest again; he hadn't looked away, his dark eyes wide.

Jim nodded, still in shock. He could still smell the char and smoke on their clothes; even in the moonlight he could see marks of ash across their uniforms and skin. "You were dead." The quiet words came out sounding broken. "You knew what would happen when you touched that panel."

Spock swallowed. "A system failsafe. It was the only way to prevent ignition."

Jim made a small noise, impulsively leaning forward to cradle his friend's face in his hands as he brought their lips together once and then again, holding the contact for the space of a breath before gently withdrawing. "I should have told you before. I'm so sorry."

Spock reached out to capture one of Jim's hands. "We were perhaps both too cautious of a friendship that has … has always resisted traditional … traditional bounds." He slumped forward abruptly and Jim shifted to catch him.

"What's wrong?"

Spock's head turned against Jim's neck. "The wound has evidently healed; however, my blood volume remains depleted and m-my core temperature is dropping rapidly." His entire body had begun to shake.

Jim wrapped his arms around the other man, trying to lend vanishing warmth, trying and failing to stop his own shivering. "Okay. We're in a bad way. No equipment or survival tools, no food or water or medkit, and no fucking idea where we are in the first place. We have to get warm. Find shelter of some kind."

"In-indeed."

Jim felt Spock's breath against his skin, their bodies held tight together as the Vulcan's arms encircled him in kind. There was a moment of shared incredulity, of shared gratitude, of lingering shock and a stubborn desire to cling in the face of everything that had happened and everything that had been revealed. Jim let his hand stray into his friend's hair again, caressing, cherishing each movement, each breath, the warmth of Spock's scalp against his fingers.

This close, Jim could sense his friend's mental presence: its depth, its familiarity, and he didn't hesitate to reach out for it, given this unbelievable second chance. Part of him wondered still if this could be a delusion: some fragment of his consciousness desperately trying to escape the reality of death as his body burned, as his love burned beside him. A frisson of fear ran down his spine as bright light curled in his peripheral vision and he fought against an instinctive desire to close his eyes. The light flickered again and, reluctantly, Jim turned his head to confront it, whatever it was.

A wispy golden glow had appeared across the clearing, seeming to emerge from the very ground and gradually coalesce as it rose higher against the trees. Flashes of brightness came and went in its interior as it hovered, neither approaching nor retreating. It made no sound.

"What is that?" Jim whispered numbly, his words condensing in the cold air.

"I d-do not know." Spock had lifted his head, his features bathed in the object's soft light.

Thin tendrils of light stretched and contracted as the thing hovered, and Jim winced as his head began to pound. Adrenaline surged, and he felt *watched*. Studied. Seen. Whatever it was had invaded somehow; he could feel it inside of him, tugging at him, slippery and insistent.

Spock had pulled away to lean in front of Jim, an almost ridiculous attempt at protection considering his depleted state. But Jim was in no position to defend himself, either. His head hurt, and fatigue and sudden dizziness weighed down his limbs. He must have made some noise, and Spock turned back to him, open desperation, and dismay on his normally impassive features. The Vulcan's right hand snapped out, fastening to the psi points on Jim's face and *pushed*. Jim gasped as the violating alien sensations abruptly disappeared. The object in front

of them flashed silver, its movements becoming frantic for an instant before it simply dissipated into thin air and Jim fell backward onto the dirt.

“Jim?” Spock had broken their connection and was bending over him.

“I’m … I’m here,” the captain managed weakly, his teeth chattering.

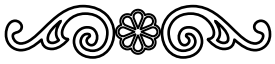
“That entity is a powerful empath,” Spock said, his own words slurring together. “I could sense sentience … that it h-has some p-purpose. I extended my mental shielding to you.”

“Empath? Emotion?” Jim blinked slowly, disoriented. “No wonder it appeared when it … when it did. I felt … I feel you, and it can feel me and I couldn’t … can’t stop it.”

He was babbling, hardly noticing as Spock rose next to him on shaky but determined legs and slowly pulled the captain up, lifting Jim to hold in his arms.

“Entity…” Jim mumbled. “It must have … it must know why we’re here. Brought us here? Why?”

His questions hung suspended, unanswered. Spock was stumbling but walking somehow, taking them through the cold and darkness. They both knew they wouldn’t be able to get far.



Flames crackled again with sharp, close heat and Jim snapped awake, fear curling again down his spine. But the source was a small fire, confined to an ordered pile of what looked like branches, and Spock sat next to him, one hand clasping Jim’s own.

“It is alright,” Spock said softly. His grip was firm, possessive, his skin warm against Jim’s. He was not looking at the captain, though; his gaze was fixed into the darkness surrounding them.

Jim licked dry lips and pushed himself up to sit next to his first officer. The cold was now definitively banished, the small fire providing an extraordinary amount of heat for its size.

“Perhaps a relatively higher oxygen content in this atmosphere,” Spock said, as if he had heard Jim’s thought. Perhaps he had.

“The entity?” Jim asked.

“It is here,” Spock replied. “Keeping a consistent distance and moving steadily.” He inclined his head and Jim looked beyond the flames to a sullen golden flicker slipping among the dark branches.

“You were unconscious for twenty-two point six minutes. I could not carry you any further and collapsed.” Spock swallowed. “I, too, lost consciousness. When I awoke again, this fire was burning. Despite our travels, our surroundings do not appear to have changed.”

“I see.” Jim watched the entity as it hovered in place. “It helped us? Possibly for the second time.”

“Jim, my observations of the physical forms here, as flawed as they may be due to my own incapacity, suggest that this reality may be constructed.”

The captain's mind went to the most obvious place. "For example, the fire isn't consuming its fuel."

"Affirmative. Additionally, the sediment beneath us is quite uniform, both in grain size and shape and," Spock gestured to the sky above, "there has been no change in lunar or stellar positioning, which may have a legitimate physical explanation, however—"

"However," finished Jim flatly. "But we, ourselves … we're—" He paused. "I don't even know how to phrase it."

"I am myself," Spock said. "As far as is possible to tell through introspection alone. My mind is my own, and, from what I sense of yours, your mind is your own."

"Okay." Jim got a foot under him and stood up shakily, eyeing the entity. "I feel better," he said. He glanced over as Spock slowly rose next to him. "You?"

"Weak," Spock replied, "but much improved. The source of heat has helped."

Jim nodded. The entity hadn't approached, poised, gold amongst the black skeletal branches. He turned to the other man, reaching for the hem of Spock's charred tunic.

"May I — ?"

Spock inclined his head, and Jim gently pushed the blue material up, exposing pale skin dusted with dark hair. Where the deadly wound had been was now an even paler patch, hairless, with splotches of dried green blood still clinging to obvious boundaries. Jim hummed, letting the shirt fall back and smoothing it carefully with his hands. Spock was watching him.

"Our medical science—" the captain began.

"—could not have allowed for such healing," Spock finished.

"Damn." Jim licked his lips, reaching down to capture some of the regolith at their feet. The grains were almost uniform spheroids, and gleamed translucent amber in the firelight. The smoke from the fire rose in a perfect, white ribbon into the darkness, undisturbed by any ebb or flow of a breeze. And the silence around them seemed eerily empty.

The captain squared his shoulders and faced the entity, stepping past his first officer to the very edge of the firelight. Here he could feel the cold again, and he took one more step before stopping and waiting.

The entity now seemed to rise and fall with imagined breath, and a shiver of anticipation crawled across Jim's skin. "My name is James Kirk," he said clearly. "This," he gestured to the Vulcan, "is Spock. We greet you in the name of the United Federation of Planets."

There was no response at first; no additional movement aside from the hovering motions and no change in coloration or intensity. As Jim took another step forward, the entity finally moved, flashing an intense bronze before slipping away amongst the tree forms and disappearing away into the black.

The captain exhaled, his shoulders slumping. "I don't suppose we should risk chasing it into the unknown," he said. There was no response and he turned, seeing Spock peering into the darkness to their right. "Spock?"

“There,” Spock said, pointing. “I hear the sound of running water over rock.” He looked at Jim. “The sound was not present before.”

“I’ll bet it wasn’t,” Jim muttered, tilting his head. He could hear it now, too. He extended his hand. “Apparently an invitation?”

“If the entity is indeed responsible for our current situation, it is learning our physiological needs,” Spock said. “Heat, and now water. Perhaps food.”

Another light bloomed meters away behind obscuring tree forms. Not the entity. Another fire?

“And light,” Jim added. He stepped forward, Spock at his side.

Outside the immediate radius of the first fire, the ground and stark forms around them became a study in shadow and shade under the cold lunar light. Jim trod carefully; the regolith quiet beneath his boots. Seized by an impulse, he reached out, grasping Spock’s hand. Long fingers closed over his own.

Shapes seemed to slide around them to form a path where there had been none before; the bounding tree forms stretching even taller in places and receding in others. Jim was reminded of a play he had seen years before, where the set pieces had slid smoothly across the stage, back and forth, framing the action.

“I hate not knowing what the hell’s going on,” the captain muttered, craning his neck as they approached the newer firelight.

“After all,” Spock replied softly after a moment, “the knowledge of your affection towards me is quite significant.”

“Affection?” Jim smiled wryly. “It’s a bit more than that.”

The Vulcan glanced at him, his bearing suggesting that he was struggling to enunciate something wrought with feeling. “Granted. However, Jim, even if I had known with certainty, my actions in that room would have been the same.”

The captain’s smile faded. “I know.”

Spock stopped, caught between the two glimmering fires, the silence surrounding them, their hands still clasped. “My culture does not use the same vernacular, nor the same outward demonstration, Jim, but the underlying emotion is the same. *Taluhk nash-veh k’du*. I cherish you. I grieved when I realized that you would not have been able to escape the flames. I fought not to leave you behind, alone. I wanted—”

“What did you want?” Jim had lifted his other hand to trace his partner’s upswept eyebrow. Even in the sterile, monotone light, Spock’s dark eyes held beauty.

“I wanted to join your mind. To touch you, with the deepest intimacy, just once.” A whispered confession.

“There was no time.” Jim watched him, suddenly captivated by the idea and motivated by a need to forge their own certainty in this strange and shifting place. “How about now?”

Spock’s eyebrows arched. His fingers flexed against Jim’s.

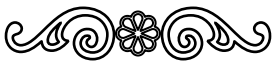
“Well? Why not now? This … constructed reality, as you put it, could disappear. That thing could come back. We could be dust in another heartbeat. Meld with me, Spock. Even for just a moment. I want it, too.”

Jim tilted his chin up, meeting Spock’s hand as it stretched forth, and the cold, odd reality around them fell away almost instantly into the depths of something far closer and more familiar. They’d melded before in the line of duty, but now any pretense of professional separation was gone. The contact was intense and helpless, a powerful draw that couldn’t be denied, meeting and entwining and then rising just as quickly, breaking into reluctant consciousness with each other’s hands on their faces and each other’s souls still held in an unbreakable embrace.

“*Telsu*,” Spock whispered. “If there is nothing else for us, then this moment was more than sufficient.”

Jim kissed him, bringing their mouths together fully, following the impossible closeness that was still somehow held between them. And then the kiss abruptly broke as he was pushed back and away and he opened his eyes to see the entity looming in front of them, its glow bathing the lusterless surroundings and casting everything into useless relief. There existed the entity and the two men, and all else seemed to fade rapidly away.

Its power had increased, and even Spock’s hastily shared mental barriers couldn’t stop it now. Jim whimpered, stumbling away as his head screamed, as the emotions held between them were now pathways directly into their minds: chased, followed, burned into with relentless, curious energy. He was turned inside out, and his beloved with him, and then the entity was gone and they were left curled on the ground, cradled by frozen silence.



“Jim.”

His name, spoken in that voice. He couldn’t help but respond. But it was difficult and his body was heavy, and all he could do was moan.

“Jim, *t’hy’la*.”

The warmth of the fire was back, and the sound of water. But he was lying on something far softer than the strange soil. Jim finally opened his eyes. He was lying on a pile of blankets. The Vulcan held a cup to the captain’s lips.

“Drink this,” Spock said quietly. “Water. There is also a type of bread.”

Jim sipped at the liquid, but the thought of food twisted his stomach. He gently pushed the cup away and rolled up into a seated position.

“More amenities?” he asked weakly. “I suppose we earned them.”

“The entity is learning,” Spock replied. “I was able to discern that much, from its contact with us. It is learning from us; from our emotional responses, from our unspoken needs. It is responsible for our surroundings.”

“So, it can manifest all this,” Jim said. “It must have tremendous power.” He grimaced as he looked beyond the small circle of light to see the same blank tree forms and predictable darkness. The same moon. The same chilled silence. Simple. Flat. Hopelessness licked at his thoughts. “Why the hell would it go to all this trouble for us?”

“There is nothing ordinary about what we share,” Spock said somewhat obstinately.

Jim’s lips curled, and he reached forward to brush two fingers across the Vulcan’s cheekbone. “I know that, my friend,” he sighed. “So, it’s learning from us. Were you able to learn anything more from it?”

Spock had turned his head to brush his lips across Jim’s fingers lightly before responding. “It is oddly tentative,” he replied. “Keeping to a distance unless strong emotion is expressed, and then, approaching with an overwhelming eagerness. Our meld was a significant draw for it.”

“But why? And where are we? In some figment of its imagination or in an actual physical place somewhere?”

“That is unknown. However, I perceived some degree of underlying uncertainty,” Spock said. “It may wield tremendous power, but its sense of control is lacking. I sensed … reluctance. Hesitation. Perhaps, even deference.”

Jim furrowed his brow. “Deference? To us? That hardly makes sense.” Spock made a motion close to a shrug.

The gesture was endearingly Human and Jim couldn’t help smiling again, saying, “Even if I had known what the entity would do, I’d want to touch your thoughts again. I’ve never felt that kind of … of closeness. Of desire, even. Of longing and needing and finally, *finally* reaching it. There aren’t words for any of that.” He let out a guffaw. “Well, no Human words, anyway.”

“There are barely Vulcan words either,” Spock said, “and then only in the ancient texts, before Surakian reform.”

“You called me *telsu*. Bondmate.”

“That is now accurate.” Spock tilted his head slightly, holding heat and promises between them.

Jim nodded. “Good,” he said. “Excellent.”

He shifted closer to Spock, to sit next to him and watch the fire-that-wasn’t. To contemplate the darkness and the hard outlines of trees-that-weren’t. Any kind of control over their situation felt like a fanciful concept and understanding a bridge too far. And, as he sat, the silence broken by the sounds of their breathing and the dribble of manufactured water, Jim sensed his own lingering fear slowly fading, replaced by growing frustration and serrated anger. It wasn’t Human to simply accept, and he had everything to fight for: his very heart’s desire here at his side.

Jim lifted his chin, holding the thought of trying something ridiculous if only to *try*, when Spock made a warning sound and that familiar golden light appeared toward the edge of the tree forms yet again.

“Back for more?” Jim snapped loudly at the thing, sarcasm cutting his voice. He pushed himself up to stand, feeling Spock’s hand firm and supportive on his upper arm as the Vulcan rose next to him. “What the hell else do you — ?”

It swooped in far more rapidly this time, deliberate and intense and directly at Jim, and he had barely drawn a shocked breath when he felt it suddenly inside of him, his vision touched by gold, all feeling somehow gone and nothing but numb coldness in its wake. He had no control over his body, his voice. He was staring, unable to blink, seeing Spock’s face, his hands, but there was nothing else; the sense of his partner had gone completely and it was terrifying.

Jim was floating; his body was rising, his boots leaving that strange spheroidal dirt. Golden light infused him and he fought against panic and sharp fear. Somehow, he knew that these strong emotions were exactly what the entity wished to touch.

He could breathe; he felt that air was coming in and out without hindrance, and he focused on that. In and out, and Spock’s expression had only looked like this twice before: once when his mother had just died and the second time when Jim was about to do the same behind a pane of transparent aluminum.

It’s okay, Jim thought, hoping that the mental energy would reach his bondmate. *It’s okay; I’m breathing; I’m alive.*

He couldn’t sense the entity either, except for a slight tingling sensation in his limbs and a deep feeling of crawling eagerness. His hand rose on its own accord in front of his face, fingers curling one by one into a fist and back out again. His knees flexed. His head rolled to one side and then the other. His eyes closed. Feeling poured back amidst a rush of adrenaline, and he hit the ground unexpectedly, falling forward on hands and knees. His eyes opened again and he saw Spock kneeling at his side, but the golden tinge was still crackling over his own skin and he felt his spine crawl with vertigo.

He had some control now, though. He could feel the ground beneath him. He could feel the sudden iciness of the air around him. He could feel Spock’s hands on his upper arms, and he could feel something else.

Burgeoning arousal lanced through him, growing fast and powerful and he felt his penis harden, becoming uncomfortable within his trousers. His hand reached clutching for his startled bondmate and, from somewhere, Jim found strength enough to stall the forced motion, his fingers caught in mid-air, straining along with a disturbing physical need that seemed harshly inhuman.

“No!” Jim gasped, practically spitting the word. “No!” He gritted his teeth, fighting. “Not that! Not you! My … my choice; mine!”

The entity vacated his body as abruptly as it had come, and Jim collapsed into Spock’s arms. Exhaustion wrung every part of him. His ears buzzed, his head was pounding and his heart

raced; sweat soaked his tunic and he tasted blood where he had inadvertently bitten his cheek. The forced arousal had gone, too, and for a moment, all the captain could do was lay in the other man's arms, staring at the entity where it now lurked at the edge of the facsimile clearing. The fire still burned and warmth crept back to his limbs. And he could hear Spock's voice again through the ringing in his ears.

"—you? Jim, are you able to understand me?"

The sense of the Vulcan's mind was slowly returning as well, sliding gingerly over what felt like a fresh wound. Jim winced and managed a nod.

Spock let out a tight exhale, his shoulders slumping in obvious relief. Whispers of Vulcan cascaded through the captain's head, sounding strangely like a prayer or a mantra.

"I w-wouldn't let it," Jim slurred, his tongue feeling dull and misshapen in his mouth.

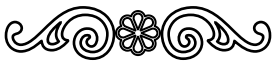
"Wouldn't … let it touch … you."

"I know." Spock gently caressed Jim's features with the first two fingers of his left hand.

Finally, the entity disappeared, and the darkness loomed flat and stalwart and complete beyond the predictable flicker of the fire. Jim tilted his head, seeing the pile of blankets now strewn and twisted in the dirt: thin, uniform in texture and design, as uninspiringly plain as the landscape around them. He curled his toes, grateful to be able to do so of his own will.

"It's not real," Jim murmured, exhaustion forcing him towards unwanted sleep. "None of it, except you."

"Except *us*," Spock said, his voice distant. "Except us," Jim repeated.



Dawn was breaking on this imaginary world. Jim sat cross-legged next to his bondmate, watching the cloudless sky change color from gray to purple to red. The tree forms somehow receded away as a brilliant yellow sun broke the horizon, sending light and warmth across a barren landscape. They drank the water and ate the spontaneously presented bread-like food as well as what appeared to be a plate of brightly-colored fruit.

The fire still glowed, but it had seemed to recede as well in the new light, its necessity spent. Jim held Spock's hand clasped tightly in his own, refusing to relinquish precious contact. He watched the horizon, but his mind was stubbornly focused on his partner and the tender connection perceptible between them.

"A sunrise," Jim said quietly. "Possibly representative of what the entity just experienced through me." He made a soft huff. "A new day? New knowledge? No longer trapped in darkness?"

Spock hummed. "Our environment does appear to reflect the entity's growing experience with regard to us."

“The symbolism is a little heavy-handed,” Jim commented. He glanced at the other man with a smirk. “A bit overly dramatic? What do you think?”

Spock lowered his eyes. “I find that my capacity for analysis is presently lacking.”

“Too much emotionalism?” Jim quipped again, grinning, finding humor even in this situation.

Spock gazed at him. “Perhaps.” The Vulcan lifted his other hand to lightly touch Jim’s mouth. “Jim.” A world lay behind the name: depth and complexity and devotion and sadness. Their slender mental connection throbbed with it.

The captain’s smile faded. “*Kaiidth*,” he said, pronouncing the Vulcan word delicately.

“What is, is.” Spock tilted his head. “Jim, I—” His words ended in a gagged sound, his eyes going wide and his hands going rigid. He pulled away, his body curling against the dirt as Jim stared in horror.

“Spock? Spock!”

“Stay back!” The Vulcan’s voice was muffled. Any connection between them had definitively, abruptly collapsed and Jim knew it was because Spock had acted to make it so.

And that meant…

“*No*.” Jim was left kneeling before him as Spock’s body shuddered and then rose with disturbing movements to stand, legs braced and hands outstretched.

The Vulcan’s posture was all wrong, tendons standing out and muscles twitching, shock twisting his face. His eyes glowed gold and he took in slow, deliberate breaths, ribcage expanding and contracting. He was and was no longer the man Jim loved.

“No,” Jim whispered again, horrified.

The entity lowered Spock’s eyes to meet Jim’s, hands falling to his sides and posture easing. “I … may now communicate … in … this way with … you.”

The Vulcan’s stolen voice was pitched higher than usual and contained an odd vibration that seemed to creep across Jim’s skin, like nails on a chalkboard.

Fiercely, Jim rose to face the entity, summoning his command persona from somewhere. “My name is Captain James Kirk. I represent the United Federation of—”

“Jim,” Spock’s voice corrected breathily. “Your name is Jim. It is what he calls you. It is how he describes your very essence.”

Jim’s breath hitched, but he controlled his expression. “*You* may address me as Captain Kirk.”

“Captain Kirk,” the entity repeated, lips curling in an unpracticed smile. A hand rose to explore its own facial muscles. “So, this … is humor.”

“Who are you?” Jim asked. “Where are we?”

The entity’s hand dropped again. “Your hypothesis of a constructed reality is somewhat correct. I have paused temporal flow and caused you both to be displaced to a concordant physical plane.” The entity slowly rolled its head. “I have no name because I have not yet been given one by the people I will serve.”

Jim licked his lips and crossed his arms. “Explain.”

“I am … new. I am … learning.”

“What are you learning?”

“What it means to be a being such as yourself. How it feels.” The entity closed its eyes and breathed in deeply. Your emotions are projected to the surface. His are not; his run far deeper. He fights me, even now. He fights for you, as you fought for him.”

“Why are you learning from us in this way?” Jim wanted to keep the entity talking, especially if it seemed inclined to answer. “What people do you serve?”

“Your people. Primitive, passionate, beautiful beings. Your kind populates this galaxy, even as they take different shapes and paths. They make up your Federation and even beyond that. I seek to serve them.”

The entity opened Spock’s eyes. Gold had now fully engulfed any trace of brown.

“Throughout time, your people, and people like yours would, in their distress, call for a god. My kind answers and serves, often by merely our presence alone. Or a single word, or a comforting touch.”

The entity’s gaze sharpened. “Sometimes, though, a god’s answer helplessly and catastrophically reflects the strong emotion from which the god had been invoked. The people are no longer served but instead become subject to the god’s tyranny. Our purpose fails when we interfere too strenuously in the natural path of things.”

Jim blinked. “So, you are a god.”

“In a way, yes.” The entity flexed its elbows, studying Spock’s hands. “When my kind is new, we must learn directly from people. We must learn weakness and strength; anger and love: how it *feels*; how it hurts and aches and exhilarates! Before we can serve, we must demonstrate our mastery of the emotions that we absorb from people, so as not to fail in our purpose.”

It rubbed Spock’s hands together. “I can feel his own emotions clearly now. His love for you. It is a powerful, terrible, incredible thing. I sense that he tries to control what he feels.” Another crooked smile. “He tries, even now. Anything to push me away. He fears that I will hurt you using his body, as you yourself feared, for him.” The eyes focused and the expression grew serious. “I will not hurt you.”

Jim could feel a familiar chill down his spine. “Then what *will* happen to us once you’ve finished learning from us? Will you take our bodies? Our minds?”

“I will take nothing but knowledge and experience. I chose you both as my teachers because of the depth of your emotion and of your situation of self-sacrifice.” A beatific smile.

“A sacrifice which would have been sorely wasted will now serve its own important purpose.”

“Wasted? Spock stopped the countdown! The device was deactivated and the planet was saved!”

“Only to destroy itself in another way at another time. And that is why that planet and those people were selected for my own test. My final demonstration will not disrupt the natural flow of events.”

Jim could feel his heart rate increasing at the ominous phrasing. He opened his mouth again, but the entity interrupted.

“So many questions, Captain Kirk! Your curiosity is insatiable! It pervades your being.”

Jim gritted his teeth, thinking of his ship, thinking of those millions of people paused in the temporal flow: suspended, vulnerable, helpless. “Just tell me what you meant by ‘final demonstration’. What’s going to happen to that planet?”

“You see, Captain Kirk, once one of our kind has learned to experience, to *be*, we must then demonstrate mastery over our new feelings by allowing that which we’ve learned to love to die. We must not interfere. It is a similar principle to your own Prime Directive.”

Jim blurted, “You mean that once you’re done with us, you’re going to destroy that world? Isn’t that interference?”

“On the contrary. I will simply enable their terrible device to function again. They have sought their own destruction, repeatedly. And will accomplish it themselves in the near future even without my hand.”

Spock’s expression shifted, and Jim saw grief mirrored in the entity’s face and body. “It is not inconsequential for me, Captain Kirk. I will do this with full experience of their demise. I have felt your fear of death and your concept of the finality of it, the loss entailed in it. It is how you believe love to finally end. It is nearly beyond comprehension, even for one such as myself. I will allow this and endure this and demonstrate to my kind that I am fit to exist in selfless service.” The entity stretched out a gracious hand, palm-up. “And for your own service to me, you and Spock will remain here in this place, alive and together, for time outside of time.”

Jim’s mind raced. “I can’t accept that.”

A dismissive snort. “It is not for you to accept.”

“I believe that it is!” Jim insisted stubbornly. “Tell me, must an entire world die, or is the demonstration complete with the experience of death on another scale?”

The entity blinked and tilted Spock’s head in a rolling motion. “You propose—”

“I offer my death in the place of the death of that world! If you’ve … if you’ve paused the temporal flow, then I haven’t died yet, in that reality. Return me. Return me to that burning room. You’ll allow me to die. You’ll have fulfilled your demonstration without having to reactivate that device!”

The captain swallowed, stepping forward aggressively. “In fact, you’ll have more than demonstrated it! You know me and my emotions more intimately than you do any of those other people. You’ve *experienced* me; you know the depth of my love for Spock. You know what will be lost with my death!”

The entity was silent for the span of a Human breath. “You were brought together, Captain Kirk: you and Spock. You must be returned together or stay here together. It is the way of it.”

“I can’t speak for anyone but myself, but there has to be another way—”

“There is not.” The entity paused again, its expression shifting. “It does not matter. Spock understands and offers his life as well, to spare the planet. I will consider your proposal.”

Spock’s body folded and Jim leapt forward to catch him, holding tightly as he himself collapsed to the ground. The Vulcan was shaking, his eyes wide but, mercifully, returned to their normal soft brown.

“Spock,” Jim whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Your logic is sound, *t’hy’la*. It is my choice as well.”

They stared at each other in the hollow light. The sun had stalled just above the horizon and everything was poised on some desperate knife’s edge.

Jim shook his head, one hand caressing his partner’s hair. “And I choose you. I choose now, Spock, to be with you.” He lowered his head as Spock reached for him in turn and their mouths met in a powerful, impassioned kiss.

They had loved each other. Quickly, intensely: kisses fraught with inevitability and hands pressed against hands, against faces. Spock had joined their minds and they had fallen together euphorically, holding tightly with everything that was held true and inviolate between them. And when Jim opened his eyes again, it was all he could do to keep a semblance of control over overwhelming grief. If his suggestion was taken, they would be returned and he would burn to death, choking on ash and grief, his beloved’s body lying lifeless again in his arms. A terrible price to pay, but worth it, for a world full of souls.

Jim looked at Spock, seeing understanding and acceptance in dark eyes. If only such a choice could have saved Vulcan. There was, indeed, no choice at all.

“It shouldn’t be so scary,” Jim said brokenly. “I’ve died before. I’ve done this … this…” he gestured broadly, “this thing before. You have, too. It shouldn’t be so hard.”

Spock was silent, dark eyes memorizing every facet of his beloved’s features.

“I know it’s different now,” Jim continued. “We didn’t have each other in this way before. There was no choice, and there was no time.”

“I have known your mind, *t’hy’la*, in the most intimate way. I cherish you. All of you.”

“*Telsu*,” Jim murmured, placing a gentle, chaste kiss on the other man’s mouth. It was so bright all around them; even the dirt gleamed in glassy amber tones. The sun had begun its climb into the heights of the sky while they had held each other and now bathed them in warmth and light.

The entity was suddenly with them. Gone was the amorphous golden glow and absent was any hesitation or temerity. It now appeared as a Humanoid shape in shades of bronze, but its movements mimicked the pull of muscle and the limitations of skin and bone, wrapped in new confidence and maturity. Its face, recognizable as some strange mishmash of the two men's features, clearly portrayed a heavy expression.

"I have communed with my kind. I must ask you again if you accept the terms of your return." Its voice was oddly breathy, anticipatory, and accompanied by that same subtle, invasive vibration.

Jim's voice finally failed him, and Spock spoke instead. "We accept the terms."

"Each of you is aware of the consequences of your choice?"

"We are aware."

"Then you will be returned to your death. The demonstration shall be completed and the world will be spared."

Jim's eyes found Spock's again, and they reached out together for the other's hand.

"I am … sorry," the entity continued haltingly. "I do not wish this. Here, at the moment of the very realization of my purpose, I am … most reluctant. I know you. Both of you are kindred to me. I have felt your being, your love. Captain Kirk, you were correct that this is the more difficult test." It paused. "Will you not stay? It would be forever, or as close enough to it that you would perceive it as such. You would have each other. I would manifest more for your comfort."

Jim swallowed. "But we would also have the knowledge that we allowed the sacrifice of other lives for our own, and that's something we could never accept." He chuckled dryly, gazing at Spock's calm face. "If it helps at all, at the very precipice of death we were spared and given this time together. We find the experience well worth it."

The entity had begun to shimmer, lights flashing around it, and golden arcs began to play in the sky, on the ground.

"I will remember you," it intoned. "I will remember this."

Sparks now played at the edges of Jim's vision, and the captain held his bondmate's hand tighter. "I love you," he whispered.

"And I love you, *t'hy'la*. Always."

Gold collapsed to black and red. Fierce heat ignited on all sides. Silence broke to the ominous creak of infrastructure and the roar of flame. Fresh air thickened instantly into choking smoke and the smell of burning. And they held each other, arms wrapped tightly as death closed in, Spock's hand lifting to press against Jim's face. The superficial meld formed quickly, and they clung together within their bond as well.

There was a moment out of time, when Jim recognized that, despite the reappearance of the room, of the flames, despite their soiled and blood-stained uniforms, that Spock's chest seemed whole. Strange, but Jim couldn't dwell on it, a well of emotion surging through him.

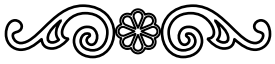
They were still going to die and he screamed out in frustration and grief and anger and fear: a primal sound that was simply absorbed in this terrible place. He curled into a spate of breathless coughing. Distantly, he heard the roar of the flames joined with the final sound of the building's collapse. Pressure built against his body and then he felt an unexpectedly familiar tug and—

"Captain! Commander! My God, that was close. Bridge! Bridge, we've got them!"

"Everyone out of the way! Let the med team through!"

"Jim? Jim, can you hear me? I need oxygen here! Jim?"

He could barely breathe; he was barely conscious. He could still feel Spock's arms around him, and through stinging and tearing eyes he could see that it was indeed the familiar transporter pad beneath their bodies. "What," the captain choked, coughing uncontrollably, "the … fuck … just happened?"



Jim forced himself awake, sweat cooling on his skin and the sheet a tangle around his body. "No," he whispered, breathing hard. "No."

It always took a moment to orient himself and to sense the bond again, warm and strong and true at the edge of his thoughts. He felt his heartbeat begin to slow as he met his bedmate's brown eyes.

"The same dream?" Spock murmured.

"Yeah," Jim said. He drew in a deep breath and then released it. "Not a dream, though. It's a memory. I remember … everything." He rubbed his hands over his face and exhaled again. "I'm okay."

Spock leaned forward slightly, one hand tracing the shell of Jim's ear, one eyebrow lifted.

"I'm serious," Jim said. "And if I'm not completely fine yet, I definitely should be after our vacation." He waved a hand around the sleeping area of the civilian ship. Nearly as compact as a long-range shuttle but hardly lacking in amenities, it had been lent to them by Admiral Sing, delivered in the wake of the Cygni Twelve incident along with commendations and orders to take at least three weeks for themselves.

"It is officially classified as medical leave," Spock said pointedly. "To account for our new status as *telsu*."

"You and Bones can call it anything you want," Jim countered. "But it means that you and I are alone and off-duty for a good long while." He glanced at the chrono. "We've still got another day and a half to Terserah Colony and nothing to do but stare at star trails."

Spock was watching him, paired fingers now moving to caress Jim's face in a delicate pattern. "You are all I see, Jim."

His words were accompanied by a swell of emotion between them, and Jim's lips parted. He could feel the love that Spock held for him cradling his very innermost self. Their kiss was deep and full, gasping, and desperate, and Jim kicked away the thin sheet between them, wanting to feel their bodies together, wanting to sink into his bondmate's mind, wanting to immerse himself in the very *feeling* of being with this man.

They made love fiercely, their bodies moving together, the passion building only to scream out along their bond as Spock melded them. And Jim came down from inhuman pleasure with the salt of tears on his cheeks as he always did, clutching his bondmate's body, as he always did.

"I love you," he whispered breathlessly against Spock's skin.

"You are my cherished one," Spock murmured. "Brother of my soul." But his breathing was shallower than it should be, and, as Jim's hold tightened, he let out a soft grunt of pain.

"Shit." Jim released him immediately. "I'm sorry."

"It is alright, *t'hy'la*."

Jim pushed himself up on one elbow, his other hand gently gliding over his bondmate's chest where hairless, too-pale skin still defined the boundaries of that horrific wound. "I suppose I should be grateful that the entity didn't completely rip your chest out again when it sent us back, but leaving you like it did holds its own particular cruelty."

"It is alright," Spock repeated. He held out a hand. "Please."

Jim shook his head but eased himself back down, and Spock's arms came around him again. "We're a mess," he mumbled, shifting uncomfortably against the sheets. "Want a shower?"

"I find I do not care to move," Spock said.

"You will if we fall asleep. And I should probably check you with the med scanner again, just in case."

"The doctor was able to treat the remainder of the internal damage," Spock said quietly. "Similar to how the ship was able to breach the interference window just in time to beam us aboard. We were given a chance."

Jim snorted. "The entity cheated. I suppose I can guess who it learned that skill from."

"Your guess would be accurate, Captain Kirk."

Both men sat up at the same time, recognizing the voice and, now, the being who sat casually in an armchair across the room, reflected starlight shimmering on its bronze Humanoid form.

Jim narrowed his eyes, pushing away Spock's arm as the Vulcan tried to lean protectively in front of him. "Alright," the captain snapped, swinging his legs out of bed and standing unabashedly naked in front of the entity. "I can't say I'm completely surprised to see you. I'd like to have your explanation as to why we're still breathing."

"I fulfilled the requirements of the demonstration," the entity replied, the corner of its mouth curling wryly.

“As I remember, your demonstration required our death. We survived. How did that fulfill anything?”

“When I returned you both, there was only a three point two percent chance that you would survive. You and Spock believed that you would perish. I calculated that you would do so. I grieved for you. I felt what you felt as it happened. I demonstrated that I could permit your loss.”

Jim exhaled and crossed his arms. “You still had hope, though. Three point two percent? You healed the worst of Spock’s wounds. You negated the interference that prevented our ship from transporting us. Is that why you’re here instead of out being a new god?”

It tilted its head flippantly. “I, as you said before, cheated. It is novel among my kind to act in such a way. So, I now exist, separate and unable to serve. My kind consider it another type of lesson, but perhaps I have assimilated too much from you. My independence is … unexpectedly enjoyable.”

Jim and Spock exchanged a look.

The entity straightened in the chair with a very Human motion. “You need not fear my interference in your paths or those of others. My way lies outside of people, and I will not trouble you again. I simply wished to acknowledge your part in my evolution. I will continue to remember you and perhaps will look in on you from time to time.”

The entity slowly stood, its features now creased with an open grin, strikingly similar to Jim’s own. “In another universe, you received a commendation for original thinking for a similar type of action. This is mine. Farewell, Captain Kirk. Farewell, Spock.”

It was gone as quickly as it appeared, a slight breeze rippling across the room in its wake.

“Fascinating,” Spock commented.

Jim exhaled loudly and sat down on the bed. “It’s still never truly faced death.” He shook his head. “It’s not just the fact of death, or the anticipation of it.” He looked back at his *telsu*. “It’s the aftermath of it, too. The actions and the reactions that happen in the wake of it.”

“Control in the wake of death is particularly difficult,” Spock said reflectively, “especially given a psychic tie. I can speak from my own experiences.”

Jim winced and turned fully, crawling over the disordered sheets and blankets to sit next to his bondmate.

“Remember when you said you sensed deference from the entity? I couldn’t imagine what that meant at the time, especially given the fact that we seemed to be existing in the thing’s personal playground. Now,” Jim sighed, “I wonder what it says about us that our own existential experiences are enough to fuel the education of a new type of deity.”

“I believe it says that we are quite fortunate to be alive to consider the possibility,” Spock replied, settling closer to his Human.

“A wandering god,” Jim mused, “discovering freedom for the first time and perhaps all too Human.” He sighed, leaning his head against Spock’s shoulder. “Do you believe what the

entity said, back in that other reality? That our sacrifice for Cygni Twelve was for nothing? That they would just destroy themselves again, regardless?"

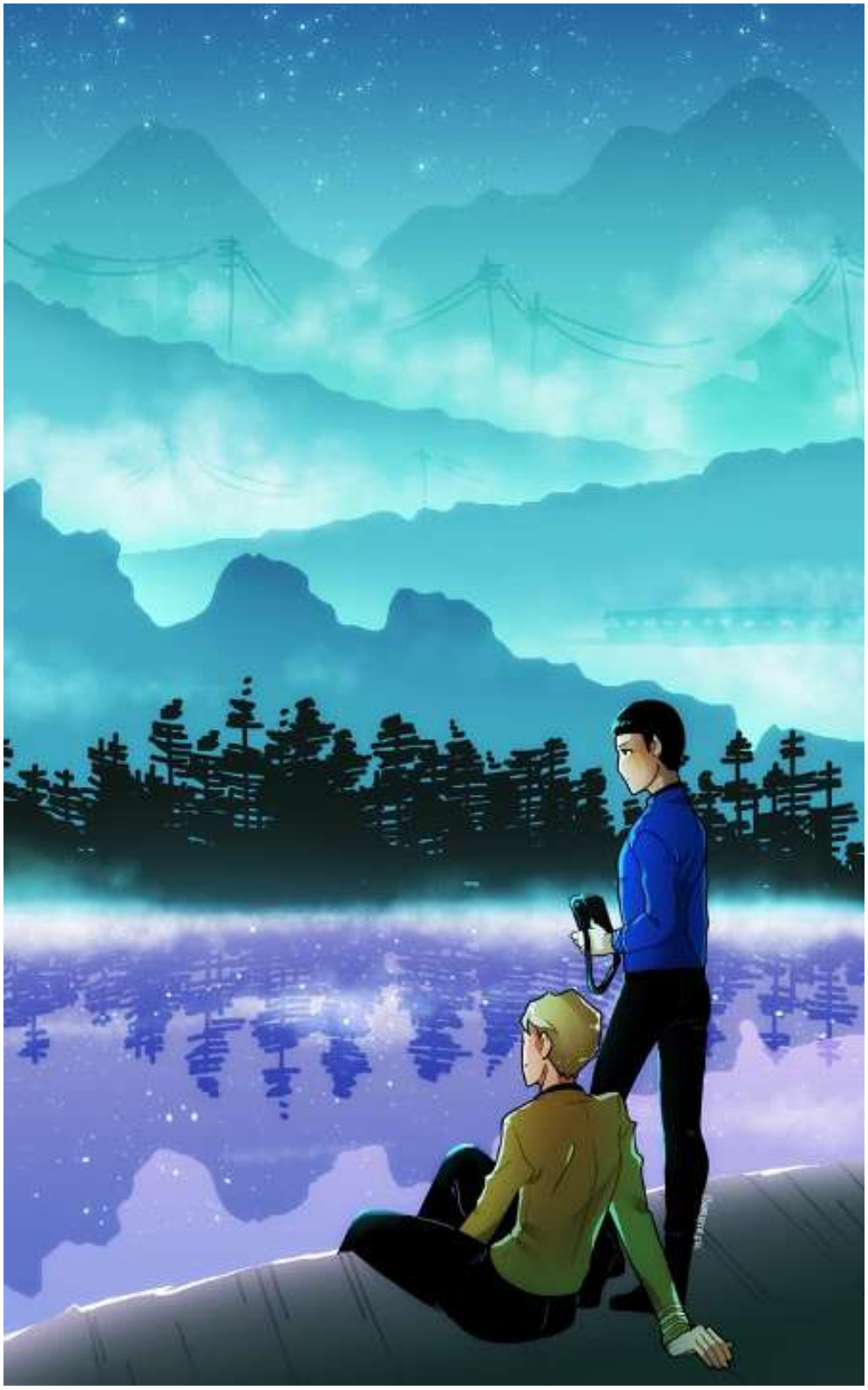
"The civilization is hardly stable, but the disarmament of the doomsday weapon was regarded as a miracle. A reason to pause hostilities and seek reconciliation. There is nothing guaranteed in situations fraught with emotion, Jim. Another lesson for our erstwhile god."

"Well," Jim said, smiling up at the Vulcan. "I can guarantee one thing in this emotional situation. I will love you, always."

"And I am yours, Jim. For as long a time as is given us, and possibly beyond."

The star trails stretched ahead of them, the craft in motion and the universe spinning around them. But here, in this space, together, they enjoyed elusive peace and beloved acceptance. And they eventually made their way to the shower. Eventually.

Away Mission
by Borbtrek



Witchcraft in your Lips
by Isabol

Kirk knelt beside Uhura, suppressing a groan at his protesting muscles. His communications officer was working under her station, with her head inside the access panel. “How are you doing, Nyota?”

“I estimate another two hours before repairs can be completed. Until then, we won’t have long-range communications.” She paused, her voice quivering slightly, “Sir, I regret this disruption in the ship’s functions and my role in causing it.”

Kirk sighed. “It wasn’t your fault, Lieutenant. Is there anything I can help with?”

“No sir.” Hearing how close she was to tears, the captain suppressed another sigh, grabbed a nearby pouch of tissues, and handed her one. He patted her on her shoulder. “You’re doing fine. I know you’ll repair this as soon as possible.”

He pushed to his feet, his hand coming up to massage his aching shoulder. And jerked his hand down upon seeing Spock’s concerned gaze. Corralling his yeoman, Kirk reviewed the growing list of reported malfunctions. As each crewman returned to his station, they were discovering more evidence of the crew’s deliberate sabotage of the ship’s functions before they beamed down to Omicron Ceti III.

Spock joined him as he returned to his seat. “Captain, our sensors have been affected as well. I will be able to restore their function while you see Doctor McCoy.”

“McCoy? Did something happen to sickbay as well?” Kirk couldn’t keep the dismay from his voice.

“No sir, I have informed our CMO that you require his services.”

“I’m fine. Just some bruises.” Kirk snapped, not missing the slight withdrawal in the brown eyes at his curtness.

“Nevertheless, the fact is concerning that you are not placing an officer on report who assaulted you. I will be reassured once he has examined you.”

Kirk grimaced, “You realize his examination will probably hurt worse than our little brawl. And you seem to forget, I attacked you. And sa—” He stopped himself, shaking his head. “I am sorry.”

“Unnecessary, Captain. The results served the purpose.”

“Yes, it is necessary. I don’t approve of the method I used to get those results when it harms someone I respect.”

The brown eyes softened. Kirk thought he detected a slight flush of green before Spock suddenly turned away, returning to his station.

The turbolift arrived, McCoy turning immediately to the captain. “What happened? Spock said I needed to see you.”

The Vulcan sounded harsh as he spoke directly to McCoy. “According to protocol, the captain should be examined post-assault. I have entered in the ship’s log my actions.”

“Assault? Jim, you didn’t tell me—”

Exasperated with the over-protectiveness of his two officers, Kirk moved quickly, stopping McCoy’s tirade to steer him to the lift. “Briefing room,” he ordered. “Bones, it’s nothing serious. We’ve got enough upset crew without me going to sickbay.”

Following Kirk into the briefing room, McCoy nodded, his expression troubled. “Boy, tell me about it. There isn’t much physically wrong with anyone, but my department is bogged down with the psychosomatic complaints.”

“Anything serious?”

The medical scanner was whirring, and McCoy bent over the results. He lifted the device and aimed it at Kirk’s shoulder. “Well, serious remains to be seen. There are two cases of severe depression I have ordered to be monitored. Most of the crew are very dismayed they deserted the ship and you. It seems there’s a disconnect between rational thought and reality. Even for me, I know the spores are to blame, but somehow, I feel—” McCoy stopped to thump his chest. “I feel here that I failed you. And so does a lot of the crew.”

Kirk smiled gently, understanding what McCoy was trying to tell him. He rested a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “It’s okay. You didn’t fail me. And I can’t tell you how glad I am that you’re back.”

The doctor’s face tightened and he looked away briefly. His voice gruff, he said, “Some strain in your shoulder which needs sonic treatment and a stress fracture in your right wrist. Otherwise, nothing but bruises. Come see me later, when it’s quieter.”

“I tried to tell Spock that but I think he’s dealing with a lot of irrational concerns as well.”

“A guilty Vulcan? Imagine that. If I weren’t experiencing such overwhelming feelings myself, I might find this amusing.” McCoy managed an unconvincing smile.

“Do you think he’ll be all right? I said some pretty awful things to him earlier to make him react.” Kirk glanced away, remembering the transporter room.

“Thank goodness, or we might all still be down there.”

Kirk started for the exit but stopped. “Bones, when he said earlier this was the first time he had ever been happy, I couldn’t quite believe he said that. Do you think he’ll talk about it?”

“With us? No.” McCoy shook his head. He closed the cover on his medkit and then looked up to meet Kirk’s eyes. “You? Maybe. Give him some time. And let me get a handle on the biochemical reactions these spores caused. Maybe I can relieve some of the emotional overloads.”

Spock knew the desire to remain within visual contact with the captain was irrational but so far he had been unable to keep from hovering. More disturbing were the flashes of images that kept intruding of Leila and the feelings induced by the spores. His normal ability to suppress these feelings was inhibited by the fact the visions transmuted into not Leila but Jim Kirk, naked and alluring, pressing against him.

His body's response to the planet had been unanticipated. Due to his link with T'Pring, he should not have been able to experience the sexual encounters which had occurred. But now that Spock had regained control of his faculties, it appeared his body had been awakened and now he was experiencing a strong, unexpected, physical attraction to James Kirk.

The Vulcan was also experiencing an emotion he had never understood before. His inappropriate attraction to his commanding officer was difficult enough. However, it was his role in subverting the crew with the spores which inundated his thoughts with shame and he discovered this was nearly impossible to control.

He had ensured that the entire crew mutinied against the captain. Spock clenched his fist, discovering it was shaking.

Yet Kirk acted as if he had done nothing wrong. The captain insisted on apologizing to him despite the fact Spock was responsible for the malfunctions they were currently experiencing. The first officer had instructed the crew to sabotage their stations prior to beaming down to ensure their section would not function.

Constantly reinforcing his barriers, Spock worked side by side with the captain almost continuously as they addressed the multitude of malfunctions.

Now fifty-four hours later, the major systems had been corrected and they were due to leave orbit within the next hour. The captain had not stopped moving during this time, maintaining a calm, gentle manner that helped to soothe the feelings of the hypersensitive crew, barely taking time to rest.

"Sir," Uhura caught Kirk's eye. Once long-range communications had been restored, she had regained some of her normal confidence. "Mister Sandoval is requesting to meet with you and Mister Spock in hydroponics before we leave orbit."

Kirk's eyebrows rose. "Hydroponics? Why? Never mind, tell him we'll be there in ten minutes."

Spock joined him on the turbolift, concentrating on his shields as Jim's musky scent filled his nostrils. Again the vision of him with Leila, rutting inside her like an animal, flooded his vision; the breasts morphing into Jim's well-muscled chest and arms. He heard Jim calling out his name in surrender.

"Spock?" Kirk was reaching to touch him. "Are you all right?"

He was still standing at the entrance, blocking the door to the turbolift. Spock jerked back from his touch, stepping inside but turning away from Kirk to frantically attempt to regain control of his wayward mind and his body's sexual response.

The captain seemed unperturbed by his behavior. He said, “Once we get her back en route, I’m going to take a break.” Spock could feel the heavy gaze on his back. “And so are you, Spock.”

Anxious to have time to meditate, Spock said quietly, “Agreed.”

“Any idea what Sandoval wants? I thought we had provided decent living accommodations for them on the hangar deck. A little odd, but it seemed to have worked out.”

“My previous communications with the colonists indicated they were satisfied.”

Kirk grunted, leading the way into hydroponics. He was surprised to see McCoy seated at a table with Sandoval and another female colonist. The captain smiled at McCoy, inwardly sighing as the doctor glanced away uncomfortably. The entire crew continued to be hypersensitive, especially in response to the captain.

Sandoval stood, shaking hands with Kirk. “Welcome, Captain. This is Branda Colti, she is our healer.” He gestured to a woman smiling beside him. “We have a request before we leave orbit which you may consider controversial. I’ve asked Doctor McCoy to explain why we think it is necessary.”

Kirk shared a glance with Spock before sitting down. “All right. Tell me what you need.”

McCoy spoke up, “First, Jim, you need to understand some observations we’ve made. The changes the spores made in our bodies are permanent in repairing damage; tonsils returned, scar tissue from previous injuries are gone, no evidence of previous fractures. Our own two crewmen who have permanent disabilities have shown unexpected improvement. Jill has regained some of the vision in her eyes and Cagle now has sensation in his right hand.”

Kirk shifted, suddenly uneasy. “Gentlemen, I don’t think I like where this is going.”

Sandoval nodded, “I understand. We just thought we should examine these spores more closely to see if we can benefit from them. Let me reassure you we have no desire to return to the state the spores induced in us. We made absolutely no progress in the past four years with valuable research and opportunities lost to us now.”

“What exactly are you proposing?”

Colti stood, walking over to a large specimen container. “Under very strict quarantine guidelines, we would like to bring a number of the pod plants with us to continue our studies. We could see if the two crewmen continue to progress under the pod’s influence.” She pressed a panel and the windows of the box cleared, allowing them to see five pod plants inside.

“No!” Kirk came to his feet, recoiling from the sight of the plants. “Absolutely not. I want these off the ship now! And under no condition will I use my crew as guinea pigs. We don’t know the long-term effects yet.” He glanced at McCoy, the doctor’s evasive glance revealing how ill at ease he was with this plan. “Doctor, I can’t believe you want me to go along with this. Did you know they had brought these aboard?”

McCoy shook his head. “No. Before you decide, you should talk to Cagle and Jill Bernstein. Their progress in just a few days is remarkable. You will understand better—”

“No, dammit! I won’t understand!” His anger escalating, Kirk glared at the pod plants. “Spock, get these off the ship now. And make sure no one has brought any more of the plants aboard. Sandoval, I will not honor your request and quite frankly I’m appalled that you have suggested it.”

Kirk stalked out of the department and changed direction twice before heading for the observation deck, needing to defuse before returning to the bridge. Due to the increased sensitivity of his crew, he had to be extremely careful not to take his anger out on anyone including Spock.

Pacing in front of the star-filled window, his anger escalated when a feminine voice intruded. He turned sharply, finding Leila Kalomi curled up on a nearby couch.

“I was told people came here to relax, but this doesn’t seem true for you.”

Kirk said harshly, “I didn’t realize anyone was here.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You haven’t, Miss Kalomi.”

Kirk strode to the exit, but her voice stopped him again. “He loves you; you know this, don’t you?”

“What?”

Leila said, “Spock, he loves you.”

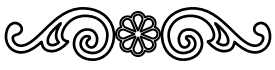
Stunned at her statement, Kirk floundered for a moment. “I don’t think you should be discussing this.”

“I saw you in his mind. At every turn.”

Kirk was stunned at the jealous feeling rising in his chest. He whispered, “He mind-melded with you?”

“Yes.” She stood, her expression sad. “It was everything I imagined and yet now, I am ashamed. He was forced into being with me by the spores. But he chooses to stay with you. Do you understand the gift he gives you?”

Exhaustion was transporting this conversation to the surreal realm. He should not be discussing Spock’s love life with a civilian or anyone for that matter. His confusion surfaced and he turned again for the door. “Forgive me, Miss Kalomi. I’m needed on the bridge.”



A full night of meditation had served the purpose of controlling the emotions which had surfaced so inappropriately the day before. Spock worked on the bridge with the captain throughout the day, maintaining a strictly professional attitude.

Currently, Kirk was in the shuttle bay resolving a dispute between a colonist and a crew member. Completing the necessary diagnostics on the sensor array, Spock went to join him.

Upon arrival, Spock answered a multitude of questions from the colonists. He could hear the sounds of a lively game involving children in the background. There were twelve colonists' children between the ages of six and seventeen. A familiar shout of laughter caught his attention and Spock turned to look, surprised at the flutter in his chest at the sound.

The captain was playing a game of basketball involving both the adult colonists and the children. Kirk caught up with the smallest child who had the basketball and held him high to allow him to toss the ball through the makeshift hoop. Everyone cheered and Spock felt his mouth curve up in a smile.

Then his breath caught as the captain ran briskly back to the other side of the playing area. Dressed only in a white tee shirt and gym pants; sweat stains were visible down the back and on his chest. The sheer masculine presence swept over Spock and he was transfixed by the sight.

In the past, he had noted with disdain crew members who became visibly aroused in the gym. Before Omicron Ceti III, Spock had never experienced any reaction and certainly not the fiery response now flowing from groin to chest and up to heat his cheeks and ears. He could not seem to draw his eyes from his captain, strong arms pumping as he bounced the ball and threw it to another player.

As if sensing his presence, Kirk turned and waved him over, stepping out of the game. Spock straightened, rigidly controlling the betraying reactions of his body.

Watching him, the captain's eyes narrowed slightly, "Are you alright? You seem … flushed."

Irritated with his lack of control, Spock answered coldly, "I am well, Captain. I assume the misunderstanding was clarified?"

"Yes," Kirk grimaced. "It was between crewman Cagle and Miss Colti. I'm afraid Aaron somehow found out about the proposed plan to bring the pod plants aboard and continue using them on him to improve the paralysis on his right side. He was very disturbed, yelling at her. Cagle didn't want to have anything to do with something which made him betray his oath, his ship—" he glanced away for a moment, and then said, "and his captain."

The game wound down, many of the adults pleading exhaustion. Kirk called for the children to join him in some ice cream and sent the kids off to obtain permission from their parents.

"I believe the last of the malfunctions have been repaired. Our estimated arrival time at Starbase 11 is six days."

"Thank you, Mister Spock." Kirk nodded, appearing distracted. He frowned slightly, grabbing his tunic to wipe the sweat from his face.

Spock forced his eyes away from the enticing sight, clamping down on the unwelcome feelings. A touch on his arm forced him to face Jim.

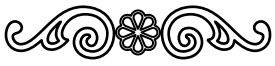
"Spock, are you all—" Kirk stopped, the frown deepening. "Do you think we can find time this evening to talk?"

"Talk, Captain? Is there—"

“Captain?” The youngest child had returned to Kirk’s side, pulling at his shirt sleeve. “My mommy won’t wake up. Can I go anyway?”

Kirk took his hand, sending an apologetic look toward Spock. “Show me where your mother is, Chance.”

Spock followed silently. Kirk disappeared inside a small privacy enclosure. Unexpectedly, the captain called urgently from inside, “Spock, get McCoy down here now.”



Working in his lab, McCoy fought against the feelings of overwhelming guilt and failure. The aftermath of the removal of the spores was an emotional overlay that was wreaking havoc. He now had twenty-two crew members on close watch for depression and had placed them on an elevated dose of antidepressants which was helping. Now, he was wondering if he should dispense the medicine to most of the crew including himself.

McCoy forced down the thought that he had completely failed his captain and friend by not only deserting him on the planet but also helping to subvert much of the crew. The doctor dropped the slide he was holding, his frustration making him clumsy.

“Doctor McCoy, report immediately to the hangar deck.” The disembodied voice was a welcome respite from the continuous cycle of his thoughts. McCoy grabbed his supplies and headed out the door.

The doctor arrived at a run, directed by several colonists to a structure at the edge of the bay. His medical scanner was already running as he knelt beside the colonist, Branda Colti. He glanced up at Kirk hovering over his shoulder. “Near suicide. Looks like a toxic plant. It could have been from our hydroponics lab.” Injecting a hypo, he nodded at the medical team who had arrived with a stretcher.

Minutes later, Kirk stood at McCoy’s side in sickbay, as he ran test after test. He asked quietly, “Bones, is there any chance my crew is at risk? Can the spores be causing this?”

“I have the ones I am concerned about being monitored continuously. The colonists may be at higher risk due to the longer exposure. Chapel is interviewing the other colonists to see if there were any warning signs. Once I have more information, I’ll go over the results with you.”

Colti moaned, her head rolling against the pillow. Kirk moved aside to allow Sandoval to speak with her. “Branda. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Tired.”

“I know. For us to help you, try to answer. What happened? Did you mean to end your life?”

McCoy caught the man’s arm, trying to stop him. Colti moaned again and convulsed slightly. Her eyes opened wide, “No! My son, Chance? Is he—”

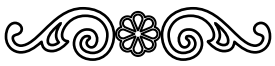
“He’s fine. Leila is taking care of him. Do you remember what happened?”

“Made me … something—” Her breathing deepened, the heavy eyelids sliding closed.

Reviewing the scans, McCoy stated reassuringly, “She’s all right. It will take a while for the drugs to dissipate.”

The colony leader moved away from the bed. “I’m going to talk to my people, see if anyone heard or saw anything. Branda is the least likely person to commit suicide out of us all.”

Kirk nodded and made Sandoval reluctantly agree to allow one of the medical crew to accompany him.



It was late in the evening when Kirk finally ordered his yeoman off duty. Barnes gathered up the completed reports, one slipping free just as the door opened.

Kirk hid a grimace. “Barnes, that’s the third time you’ve dropped something. You’re tired. Leave those here and get some rest. We’ll start fresh in the morning.”

Appearing flustered, the yeoman nodded, saying dispiritedly, “Yes, sir.”

His first officer appeared in the doorway and Kirk waved him in as Yeoman Barnes left. Kirk tried to smile and found his energy waning.

“I’ve smiled so much these last three days, I don’t think I can anymore.” When there was no response, he glanced up at Spock. “Sit down, Mister Spock. I’m glad to see you.”

“Captain, I have the analysis of the interviews with the colonists.”

“Oh, let’s see what you have.” Kirk inserted the disk.

Out of the corner of his eye, the captain noticed Spock draw in a breath and straighten sharply. He had become more aware with each interchange with Spock today of the professional manner he was maintaining.

Kirk shrugged, turning to the computer screen, and scanning the data. “Did you see any common threads? Anything we should be worried about with our crew?”

“Miss Colti’s history indicates she could have harbored feelings of suicide in the past, she lost her husband just after they arrived at the colony. Once free of the spores, she verbalized unresolved grief regarding his death. The other colonists who knew her did not expect her to commit suicide but were concerned at the depth of her grief. Miss Kalomi also verbalized that she was upset by your reaction when she spoke with you about the pod plants.”

Sighing heavily, Kirk nodded. “I’m afraid I was rather harsh.”

Spock held his eyes supportively. “Your reaction was understandable. I believe Doctor McCoy was relieved with your orders to remove all the pod plants.”

“That’s good to hear.” Grimacing, Kirk asked, “Did we find any more colonists who might be experiencing the same kind of feelings as Miss Colti?”

“No. This may be a one-time occurrence.”

“I hope so. I just checked in with McCoy, she’s doing fine. He still maintains he sees no danger to the crew.” Kirk retrieved the disk and handed it to Spock, their fingers touching for a moment.

He watched as Spock pulled away as if burned, standing abruptly. He moved to the door. “Excuse me, Captain. I have—”

“Spock,” Kirk interrupted, following uncertainty. “Are you all right? I’ve never known you to be so … ill at ease with me.”

He could see Spock struggling to answer, searching for words, something he had never seen the Vulcan do. “I am experiencing sensations related to the spores. As a Vulcan, I should not have these feelings.”

“For Leila? I’ve noticed you avoid her.”

Spock turned slightly, not meeting Kirk’s eyes. “I have not had anything significant to discuss with Miss Kalomi. I do not have any feelings for her.”

Kirk took a step then stopped. “You admit to feelings but not for her. Are these feelings for—” He broke off. “Forgive me. I don’t mean to intrude. Is there some way for me to help?”

For just a moment, Spock felt his universe shift and thought he had lost control. Knew he was leaning forward to press his lips against the enticing mouth which was so close. Only a step. He bit back a moan. “No, Jim. I require meditation.”

The hazel eyes darkened slightly before Kirk turned away. “Spock, I must tell you, Miss Kalomi spoke to me about you.”

Suddenly, it felt as if there was no air in the room. Spock stood in frozen silence, certain his world was about to crash down. He willed the door to open, to step forward to safety.

“She said you mind-melded with her.” He looked over at Spock, the corner of his mouth curling up self-deprecatingly. “I gotta tell you, I was damn jealous when she told me, surprised the hell out of me.”

“You were jealous? Are you interested in Miss Kalomi?”

“Hell no. You. Although I didn’t realize I was until she said that.” Kirk returned to his side. He met Spock’s eyes without hesitation, “And she said she saw a precious gift you shared with me.” He placed a hand on Spock’s arm. “She said … she believes you love me. Is this the feeling you are struggling with?”

Spock did not move for what felt impossibly like a lifetime. He stared into the concerned hazel eyes holding him so mesmerizingly and saw no condemnation. Instead, they were bright with hope. Yet this path led to madness. “Captain, I have experienced physical reactions which are not appropriate for a Vulcan. The spores created a false world for me, requiring increased time in meditation to reduce the effect. I regret Miss Kalomi chose to tell you what was in my mind when under the total control of the spores.”

Disappointment crossed Kirk's features briefly before he straightened. "I can see you are disturbed by this. Tell me how I can help."

The impulse to comfort his friend was shockingly hard to control. Spock's hand lifted, nearly touching Kirk's cheek before he drew back. Jim caught his hand, squeezing lightly. It was then Spock knew he had to escape, to leave while he was capable of movement. Pulling his hand free, he turned toward the door. "You cannot help me. I am tied to Vulcan." Spock took a step. "I am Vulcan."

The next morning, Kirk was relieved Spock was already on duty when he arrived for his shift. He had feared his friend would avoid him after his foolhardiness in revealing what Leila had told him. Kirk had spent the night carefully burying the hope which had emerged after her revelation that Spock felt more for him than simple friendship.

Engrossed in the report McCoy had sent, he did not pay attention to the time. He frowned, glancing around for his yeoman who was late.

"Lieutenant Uhura, Yeoman Barnes seems to be missing. I haven't had the joy of signing the morning reports. See if you can locate him."

"Aye, sir."

After the third ship-wide call, Kirk stood, glancing uneasily at Spock. "Something may be wrong."

Uhura asked, "Should I send security to his quarters?"

"No, we'll go. Spock?"

The first officer joined him without hesitation in the turbolift. In the silence, Kirk glanced over at Spock. "I was out of line last night. I did not mean to ascribe Human motivations to you. Please forgive me."

The severe expression softened, "Jim, there were misunderstandings but there is nothing for you to regret."

They approached the crewman's quarters, Kirk using his override when there was no answer.

Spock's wish to protect Kirk was not reasonable. Yet, the first moment he saw the yeoman was dead, his wrists slashed, he blocked the captain's view of the room. Irritated, Kirk pushed his way past Spock. "No, oh no."

Notifying sickbay, the Vulcan suggested they wait outside the young man's quarters.

Kirk snapped, "Why? He's dead. I'm supposed to be protecting my crew!" The captain gestured toward the desk, "Look for something which might give a reason for this!"

A surge of guilt pulsed through Spock, surprising him with the intensity. Nodding, he headed for the desk, analyzing the unexpected feeling as he did so. The Vulcan acknowledged the alien emotion, setting it aside to explore at the appropriate time.

McCoy came through the door, the team behind him. He gave a little cry, kneeling quickly down to the young man's side, his scanner running. He finally shook his head, his eyes bleak. "It's too late."

“McCoy. You told me my crew was safe.” Kirk snapped. “You said they weren’t at risk. Explain! Tell me how to protect my crew!”

The doctor’s color was turning nearly ashen gray. He swallowed hard, a glimmer of tears in his eyes. “I thought they were, Captain. I don’t know why this is happening.”

In his anger, Kirk ignored the signs of distress from McCoy. He turned to Spock, “Implement Code Seven. I want everyone paired with someone else until we get a handle on this. Every crew member needs to be accounted for. No one is to be by themselves at any time.” He turned back to McCoy, “Officer’s briefing in one hour. I want answers. Sandoval will be there as well.”

“Aye, sir,” McCoy answered dully.

Late in the evening, Kirk finally gave in from his constant patrolling of the decks out of consideration for the silent shadow at his side. They headed for his quarters, Kirk commenting, “Well, it’s been a while since I’ve had a sleepover. Do you want the bed or the floor?”

Spock shook his head. “I will not require sleep. I will continue exploring the effects of the spore plant.”

Kirk palmed his door signal. “Come to think of it, I haven’t heard from McCoy since the briefing this morning. I expected to have some more input from him.”

“Yes.” Spock paused, hesitating before he commented, “He appeared more upset than expected in the yeoman’s room.”

“And I was pretty angry with him.” Kirk glanced sideways at Spock and as their eyes met, he felt his internal alarm sounding. Suddenly afraid, he said, “Let’s go check on him. I assumed he had a partner with him, but you know McCoy.”

Sickbay lights were dimmed and the captain felt like he was creeping through the rooms. He headed for McCoy’s office, almost relieved when he saw the lights were off. He was turning away when Spock continued through the door.

The doctor was slumped over his desk, a hypo falling out of his hand. Horror kept Kirk rooted to the floor as Spock shifted the doctor’s limp body back against the chair.

Seeing a slow breath, Kirk came to his side, a hand to his jaw, lifting McCoy’s head. “Bones! Wake up! What did you take? McCoy!”

The whisper came from deep down as if he were slipping away by the second. “Something made … me. Do — head scan now before—” His head fell.

Alerting the staff, Spock carried McCoy to the exam table, alarmed to discover he was no longer breathing.

Chapel appeared, gasping at the monitors. “Cardiac arrest.” She prepared a hypo quickly to inject him.

Spock stopped her action. “No. He wanted us to do a head scan first.”

“We could lose him!”

Kirk stepped in, ordering, “Do the scan now. McCoy wanted it done. You’re losing precious time.”

The next few seconds were a flurry of tense activity with angry glances at both Kirk and Spock. The scan was completed within eighteen seconds and the medical staff turned to revive the doctor. Spock left to review the scan in the medical lab.

When McCoy woke up, groggy and confused, the captain forced his way through the resentful staff to his side. “Bones.”

Ignoring the fact that the room was crowded with staff, Kirk leaned over to hug his friend. “Bones, stay with us. Fight back.”

Amazingly, McCoy asked, “Scan — did you get the scan?”

Kirk nodded. “Yes. I don’t know the results—” He glanced up as Spock entered the room.

Seeing McCoy was awake, Spock gave an approving nod. “An anomaly was revealed which was not on the previous scans. This may be a small resistant area of spores. We are investigating how to eradicate them.”

McCoy lifted a heavy hand and Kirk took it, giving a little squeeze. As the eyes drifted closed, the captain turned to the staff. “Make sure you are all following Code Seven until we figure this out.” His eyes fell on Chapel. “And stay with him at all times.”

She came forward, grasping the hand he released. “Yes, sir. Understood. If this helps us stop this, I am sorry for my behavior. I should have trusted you.”

Kirk started to agree with her but stopped himself. He said quietly, “I was asking you to take a chance on his life. I think your response was appropriate at the time. He is very important to us.”

The grateful smile told Kirk he had been right to withhold his frustration. He turned thoughtfully away, joining Spock as he returned to the lab.

“Captain, the area tapped into by the spores can cause a deep depression. We will work on a way to safely irradiate the spores without damaging the tissue of the brain.”

“Any theories on why the scans were not able to pick this up before? I know McCoy has run several of them on the crew in the past few hours.”

“There have been four hundred twenty-five negative scans of our crew. The computer is running a diagnostic to discover the reason this was missed.” Inside the lab, Spock activated a computer screen. “Here is the affected area. If we had obtained scans before the spores were eradicated, it is possible we would not have missed this.”

Another example of the havoc caused by introducing the crew to the spores. Recognizing the sensation which would result in an unproductive spiraling into guilt, Spock compartmentalized the feeling to examine at a later time.

Kirk frowned, “Spock, I know you feel responsible for the spores, but this was not your fault. It does bring me to a question I’ve been considering. I do not believe it is your normal behavior to have feelings of guilt?”

It should not have surprised Spock that Kirk was following the same path of thought. “You are correct. I have experienced difficulty subduing emotions normally completely suppressed. There have been moments when I considered these emotions are being forced on me.”

“The spores, could they still be acting on you, and the rest of the crew and colonists who were affected by them?”

“Considering recent events, it is possible.”

Kirk turned around, leaning against the counter, glancing at a lab tech across the room. He lowered his voice, “The people who have harmed themselves all had interactions with me. Negative interactions.”

Spock straightened; his eyes watchful. “You are suggesting you could be the catalyst.”

“Well, if one follows the dots, they do seem to lead to me.”

Spock quelled the desire to reach out to Jim, to reassure him. Instead, he said quietly, “A possible theory. However, I believe this is the aftermath of the contamination by the spores and I do not relegate the blame for any of the recent injuries to you. And nor should you.”

The distressed expression eased slightly. Kirk tilted his head, smiling. “Somehow, you seem to read my thoughts before I even know I’m going there. Thank you, my friend.”

Spock nodded, turning back to study the computer screen. He had to force his hand to the keyboard, instead of lifting it to trace Kirk’s jaw, only wanting to ease the tension he could easily see. He only hoped the captain did not see his fingers trembling.

“The spores may not take lightly to your attempts to interfere. I’m assigning security to stay with you.” Kirk paused, and Spock felt the brush of his hand on his arm. “Which reminds me, I think you have taken the brunt of my anger more than anyone in the last couple of days. Are you alright?”

Spock glanced up, allowing a small smile. “Yes, Jim.”

“I’ll miss our chess game tonight as well.”

“Then we shall have a precipitation check?”

Kirk grinned at the subtle teasing. “Yes, if we make it through this stormy course we shall have a rain check.”

Three days later, Spock noted the bridge crew appeared to be well rested, enjoying each other’s byplay. Kirk was making rounds, interacting with each member, a genuine smile lighting his face frequently. The Vulcan repressed his urge to smile as well, pleased to see the happiness Jim was displaying rather than the fake smiles he was forced to display in the past week.

The captain stopped at his side. He lifted a hand but then dropped it. In the last week, Kirk had restrained his interactions with Spock, making sure not to touch him. Appreciating the effort Jim was making, Spock decided it was time to reach out to Kirk. Glancing over, he allowed a smile to show in his eyes, his lips curling slightly.

The delight shining in the captain's eyes gave Spock a jolt of pleasure. He gave a nod. He waited for Kirk to ask about a chess game in their off-duty time and then realized the captain was being careful not to overstep just as he refrained from touching him.

Spock ventured, hesitantly, "Chess, Captain?"

Giving a soft laugh, Kirk nodded. "Rec room, 2000 hours?"

Pleased with the response and the smile in the hazel eyes, Spock nodded in response.

McCoy appeared on the bridge. He headed toward the two men, stopping to talk to crewmen as he passed them. At their side, he gripped Kirk's shoulder. "Just treated the last crewmen. I believe the last effects of those accursed spores have been eradicated. I'm waiting for an answer from Starfleet Medical Headquarters before we cancel Code Seven."

Kirk grinned, "That's great news, Bones. Good job."

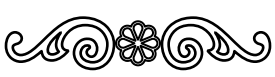
Spock watched their interaction. He clamped down on the swell of negative reaction to the affectionate look between the two men. McCoy's hand remained on Kirk's shoulder. He turned back to his console as they headed down into the well of the bridge. Jim's delighted laughter sounded behind him.

Despite his rigid adherence to his nightly meditations, Spock continued to experience strong responses including now, with the flare of unexpected jealousy of McCoy, with the captain. And earlier today, desire had flamed through his body when Jim had met him in the hallway outside their quarters, hair wet from a shower, his fresh male scent causing the Vulcan's male organs to tighten.

He reached again for the barely existent link between him and T'Pring. There was no awareness in her mind of his needs. Spock quelled the Human frustration; their link was meant to provide support for each other. Yet as the years progressed and time passed, Spock found her presence fading. Attempting to contact her by comlinks only resulted in a limited interaction of short messages. Her cool beauty and manner did not create calmness within him. She did not offer the caring that Jim managed to provide with just his touch.

Kaiidth! He was tempted to cancel the chess date with the captain; however, he did not wish to see disappointment in the hazel eyes.

Barely quelling a sound deep in his throat, Spock shook his head. The truth was he did not want to turn away from time spent with the captain. It was his disappointment he was avoiding. He planned to spend the entire night in meditation to reduce the growing intensity of his feelings for the captain. After their chess game.



Two months after the mission to Omicron Ceti III, Kirk was deep in the mining caves of Janus VI. He was worried about Spock who was still in contact with the Horta. Carrying the pump, he

hurried back to both his first officer and CMO, concerned about leaving them in a potentially fatal situation.

The captain bypassed McCoy who was still working on the Horta's wound. He approached Spock carefully, reluctant to interrupt his communication with the Horta. He knelt beside him, "Spock."

When there was no response, he placed his hand on Spock's arm, squeezing slightly. Even this did not get a response. Kirk slid his fingers down to touch Spock's bare wrist.

This caused a quick intake of breath. Waiting, Kirk was surprised when an influx of feelings and emotions flooded him. He nearly lifted his hand but realizing this was coming from the Horta, his curiosity kept him motionless. An incredible world of sensations, completely alien but overall, he sensed great sorrow and protectiveness.

Spock drew another breath, pulling his hands free. He gave Jim an unrestrained smile before closing his eyes and placing a finger against his temple. Kirk sat quietly at his side, waiting until Spock opened his eyes.

Kirk reached up, brushing a tear from Spock's cheek. "For her?" Spock nodded and explained the creature's actions and losses.

McCoy glanced over at his two friends, unable to keep a smile from emerging as he watched Jim touching Spock's face. He had seen their respect deepening into love between them.

His smile faltered, aware the differences created by their physiologies would undoubtedly make a relationship a difficult road to travel. But seeing the smile Spock shared freely with Kirk caused a well of joy inside him. The future might be challenging for them. McCoy vowed to try to provide any support possible.

Later in the evening, the three men were in the captain's quarters. Kirk handed a cup of tea to Spock.

Holding his drink, McCoy sat across from them, still shaking his head. "They are never going to believe this in the medical world. Treating a wound with cement!"

"Your expertise and the unique solution were appreciated by the Horta, Doctor."

The doctor chuckled. Spock continued, "Captain, your ability to listen and create unique solutions continues to astound me."

Kirk blinked in surprise. "It was you who were able to talk to the Horta. If not for you, we might have destroyed an incredible life form. You tried to tell me earlier in the tunnels."

"And yet when you encountered the Horta, you did not destroy it as you had ordered me to do. I am curious why not."

"I don't know. I was plenty afraid at first. But then—" He stopped, frowning. "Guess you're rubbing off on me, Spock."

McCoy laughed. "By the gods, I hope not, Jim. One of him is all I can take." He leaned forward, frowning. "I've been intending to discuss this with both of you regarding this mind-meld

technique. Spock, I've seen you perform two of them in critical situations and the aftermath. It drains you mentally and physically, doesn't it?"

Frowning, Kirk studied his friend. "What do you mean?"

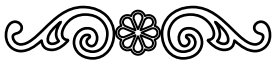
"Our good doctor is being dramatic and perhaps overprotective. I do require meditation and rest after a deep meld. Van Gelder and the Horta are extreme examples. Normally a shallow meld does not cause too much exertion."

Kirk studied the Vulcan, "I know McCoy had you in sickbay this afternoon but I thought it was precautionary."

"It was, Captain."

McCoy opened his mouth but then closed it quickly when Spock shifted to look at him.

Kirk realized he was missing a significant portion of an earlier conversation. He decided to let it drop until he could pin McCoy down. Spock was unlikely to admit to something he perceived as weakness in himself.



It was only two weeks later that the captain and first officer found themselves prisoners of Kor, on Organia in a cold and drafty jail cell. Kirk decided now would be a good time to discuss some of his concerns about Spock's mind meld ability.

Observing the Vulcan tuck his wrap carefully around him. Kirk knew he was feeling the effects of the decreasing temperature. He stood, moving over to kneel beside Spock. "It's getting kind of cold down here."

Spock nodded, "Two degrees Celsius. Not dangerous, however—"

Kirk finished, "But it's nippy." He settled beside Spock, hoping his body heat would provide some warmth.

Spock straightened but after a few seconds relaxed, almost leaning into Kirk's warmth.

Kirk rubbed his hands together, trying to increase his circulation. "You have to know, I tried to get Bones to rat you out about his meld concern but he was pretty quiet on the subject."

"Rat me out?"

Laughing quietly, he said, "So since he wouldn't talk, how about you coming clean and telling me how it affects you?"

"Clean? And rats? I'm not certain you are speaking Standard, Captain."

Shoving his shoulder against Spock's, Kirk tried again. "If I understood correctly, melding with another being, especially a non-Vulcan, can be a very disturbing event mentally and reduces your physical reserves."

Spock drew a breath. "I will admit to fatigue—"

“Per McCoy, when I dragged it out of him — extreme fatigue.”

He felt Spock release a long breath. In a tone of aggrieved patience, he continued. “The fatigue can be mild or severe depending on the situation. Usually, meditation addresses any mental aberrations resulting from the meld and assists with reducing the fatigue.”

Kirk gave a chagrined smile. “You’re trying to tell me not to worry in the future if you must meld with raving lunatics or rock creatures.” At Spock’s nod, Kirk settled back against the wall behind him. “I must admit to an abnormal amount of curiosity. Can you describe how it feels to meld with another mind?”

Spock glanced at him, an amused glint in his eye. “You seem most persistent concerning this ability.”

Kirk grunted. “I’m getting downright cold.” He shifted, his legs brushing against Spock’s.

The Vulcan continued, answering Kirk’s question. “On Vulcan, mind melds were limited and very structured both by my father and instructors. I have participated in very few beyond the bounds of Vulcan. The Horta was my third experience on the *Enterprise*.”

“Wait. Are you saying you never did this before under Pike’s command?”

“I did approach Captain Pike about utilizing this skill but he was not comfortable with requesting this of me. He was concerned about my safety.”

“Well, now I feel like a heel. I need to understand this better to ensure we don’t endanger your life … or your mind.”

Spock could not resist placing a reassuring hand on Kirk’s arm. “I will endeavor to inform you if I am at risk.”

“Will you though? I’m afraid you sometimes leap without considering your safety.”

Spock turned his head to keep his sudden smile hidden. “I believe you may be confused and are ascribing behaviors more suited to you than me.”

Kirk laughed lightly and the sound lifted something inside Spock’s chest. This closeness allowed him to share an uncommon feeling with the Human. He found himself enjoying the deepening rapport between them.

“In answer to your earlier question, the meld with Van Gelder was extremely disturbing. Doctor McCoy observed my difficulty in recovering from this experience. It was not an experience I wish to repeat.”

“Why did you do it, Spock?”

Spock hesitated. “I believed your life was in danger, Jim.”

Kirk’s arm moved under his hand, tension rippling through his frame. “Spock, I can take care of myself. I need you to promise me to not endanger your sanity for me.”

Drawing a breath, Spock decided not to answer. If he were presented with the same dilemma in the future, he knew his choice would be to meld with a ‘madman’ if needed to save Jim Kirk’s life.

At the continuing silence, the captain asked, “So tell me what it was like melding with Leila unless it is too personal?”

“An interesting experience. Different from previous melds with Van Gelder or the Horta. And my training melds on Vulcan. I believe the spores may have contaminated the meld. Sharing thoughts was slightly murky. The closest comparison is being underwater. Opaque, subdued, all sensations appeared muted.” He drew a breath, “It is possible my limited relationship with Miss Kalomi prevented me from a meld of significance.”

“So not all Humans are easy to meld with?”

“I do not know. She is only the second Human I have melded with. The Horta was the most recent meld I have performed.”

Kirk gave a small huff of concern. “I think I’m lucky you came out of it fairly unscathed.”

Spock turned to look at Kirk and shook his head. He continued, “I found the Horta to be extraordinarily intelligent and gentle. Her mind was very compartmentalized requiring a staggering amount of storage for the vast knowledge required to maintain her world. Despite all her responsibilities, she was very caring. She even verbalized concern for you, Captain.”

“She did?” Kirk laughed. He continued quietly, “I must admit a certain curiosity to how a meld would feel.” He briefly placed his hand over Spock’s fingers on his arm. “However, I don’t think I would be comfortable melding with someone unless it was with you.”

Knowing their captivity could result in their death, the temptation to reach out and allow their thoughts to touch was almost overwhelming. Spock struggled to subdue the impulse. He feared their building rapport could result in complications from a meld between them.

Thankfully, Kirk with his ever-curious mind changed the focus of their conversation. “I’m curious, would you tell me about Vulcan, Spock?”

“Specifically, what interests you?”

You mentioned you had ties to Vulcan. Family? Friends? Significant other?” He kept his tone light, adding, “You’re free to tell me to go jump in a creek.”

He was pleased when the brown eyes twinkled briefly in his smile. “Creek? Vulcan does not have creeks.” He leaned his head back against the rough wall, their shoulders touching lightly. “My parents’ home is on Vulcan. They travel frequently off-world due to my father’s duties. I have not been home for four point three years.” He hesitated. “I suppose it would be appropriate to state I have a significant other but at this time I am not certain. We have not spoken in a long time.”

“And this is why you cannot form other relationships?” At Spock’s nod, Kirk rested a hand briefly on Spock’s arm before abruptly pulling it back. “I have the feeling relationships as a Vulcan are more complicated than simply having a girlfriend.”

Spock gave a huff of air. “You would be correct. Our society does not function the same as Humans. It is more ordered.”

“More logical?” Kirk threw in with a laugh. “I suppose our methods of social interactions and finding a girlfriend or significant other is a little confusing.”

Spock felt himself relaxing with the conversation. Since the disastrous events with Leila, he was slowly allowing his relationship with the captain to return to the previous understanding. He never ceased to appreciate interacting with the captain. And earlier during their efforts to impede the Klingons, the gentle teasing between the two of them frequently resulted in a bubble of joy in the center of his chest.

Allowing his amusement in his tone, he asked, “I have discovered an endless fascination with observing Human behavior and mating rituals. There does seem to be constant chaos and miscommunication between Humans regarding the ‘dating’ occurrences.” He turned his eyes on Kirk, lingering on the mischievous grin curving Jim’s lips.

“I heard you speaking with Doctor McCoy regarding previous relationships. I am interested to know if you have someone waiting for you at home?”

“Me?” The captain laughed lightly. Then Jim stilled, the hazel eyes suddenly serious.

“There were a couple of times on Earth, I thought I had found the ‘one’. Her name was Ruth. But we were young. Then in the Academy, I was serious with—” He broke off, laughing self-deprecatingly. “I just realized; she was a scientist like you. I always go for the brainy—” He stopped suddenly. “But to answer your question, no. No one is waiting for me. I just don’t see myself settling down somewhere and doubt it’s possible to expect someone to have a relationship where I’d see them every six or twelve months.”

A gust of cold air blew through their jail. Kirk shivered again. Wrapping his arms around his chest, he leaned into Spock’s warmth. Then he pulled back. “Spock, I think I sometimes unintentionally breach your personal barriers.” He paused, his voice deepening with emotion.

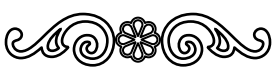
“I don’t mean to but it just seems natural to touch you. I want to ask you to tell me right away if I am creating difficulty for you.”

His face in the shadows, Spock hesitated before stating, “I will honor your request. Currently, I do not experience negative feelings from your touch, Jim. Quite the contrary, I value our relationship on a professional level and as your friend.”

Kirk was surprised when Spock shifted, pulling his cloak around to drape over his shoulders. With their shoulders touching, he unexpectedly felt a thread of affection through the contact.

Leaning his head against the rock wall behind him, Kirk nodded. He wanted to verbalize his feelings as well but was afraid the intensity of his emotions at this moment might be too much for Spock.

Kirk satisfied himself with simply resting quietly, soaking in the comforting presence of the Vulcan beside him.



Their trip through the Guardian to find McCoy had forced Kirk and Spock to remain in the past far longer than either of them had hoped. As Kirk lifted another crate, he was beginning to despair that they would be able to locate the doctor.

Kirk staggered before getting his balance. He had felt vaguely unwell this morning but knew they needed the money to help with the supplies Spock required to complete his work. Throughout the long hours at the warehouse, he shivered off and on and realized he must have a fever. He pulled his jacket off in the subzero temperature, beads of sweat soaking his shirt. Coughing, he grimaced at the congestion rumbling deep in his chest. He wiped his face, turning back to the next carton. He just needed to complete the shift to get paid.

It seemed like hours later when the bell rang. Kirk stood in line for his wages, his vision wavering. Swept along with the crowd of exhausted workers, he made his way through the gate.

Kirk was shivering again but when he looked for his coat, he realized it was back at the warehouse. Frowning he looked over his shoulder, not seeing the building he had left, Kirk decided to continue his way home.

The crowd of men he was following disappeared and he looked around in confusion, not certain of his destination.

“Gotta get back to Spock,” Kirk said, trying to refocus. His cough painfully racked his chest. His eyes kept watering and suddenly black dots appeared in his vision. As if in slow motion, he sank to his knees, shaking with the cold.

Snowflakes were falling, covering the bleak world with a white blanket.

Spock straightened, glancing around the tiny room he had spent almost the entire last three weeks in working on his tricorder. He was determined to find away back home for both. To find a way back to the *Enterprise* for all of them. For Jim.

But something had alerted him, touching his mind. Lifting a hand to his head, Spock stilled his thoughts, listening intensely.

He experienced vague feelings of unease. And cold. Spock shivered in the cool air but this was a deeper feeling.

“Jim?” And with the question, he knew this resonance was coming from his captain.

Jim had been restless the night before, an insidious cough interrupting any sleep he managed to get. He was up a couple of times during the night to retreat to the bathroom at the end of the hall. Observing the paleness of his face, Spock had tried to encourage Jim to stay home this morning, but the captain had brushed him off with a wan smile. “I’m all right, Spock. Should be home by seven. I’ll bring some food.”

It was seven twenty now. Many times, Jim did not arrive back from his various jobs until well after eight. Yet the Vulcan’s sense of unease deepened.

Spock retrieved his coat and set out to search for his captain. Nearly an hour later, he anxiously continued to look, stopping to warm his hands on a vagrant's street fire. He had asked every person he passed if they had seen Jim, describing him in detail.

He reached out again attempting to open the limited resonance they shared. If it wasn't for his link with T'Pring, the resonance could more accurately be called a link between them. Frowning, Spock buried the thought, returning to his efforts to find Jim.

It was midnight when he found him, crumpled under a dim streetlamp. Covered in snow, his color was gray, and his lips almost blue. Somewhere, he had lost his coat. Fearing he had been attacked, Spock was relieved there were no injuries.

"Jim?" Kneeling in the fresh snow, he pulled Kirk into his arms. Touching the side of his face, he tried again. "Captain?"

There was a deep breath and the eyelids fluttered. The hazel eyes opened, cloudy and not focusing. Still, Kirk smiled, "Spock? I wanted you to see the snow and you came."

Confused, Spock shook his head. "Yes. We need to get you home, out of the snow." The eyelids slid closed. Kirk snuggled into his arms. "Yes. Home, Spock. With you."

Once in their room, Spock used their precious resources to increase the heat in the room. He managed to undress and change Jim into dry clothes, his concern growing when Kirk did not awaken. The captain's skin felt cool to the touch, despite the four somewhat meager blankets he had applied over Kirk.

Warming up some tea, he attempted to get the semi-conscious man to drink but only managed to cause him to choke, a cough rumbling deep in his chest.

Standing beside the bed, fear clenched his heart. He understood the emotion but was shocked at the depth of this feeling. They were alone in the past with limited medical abilities. The one person who could help was not here. Spock closed his eyes briefly, illogically desiring to hear the acerbic tones of Doctor McCoy.

He jumped as cold fingers touched his. He looked down to find Jim reaching out to him. And the rapport between them opened, some of his fear receding.

"Tired."

"Yes, Jim. You need to rest."

Kirk frowned, tugging on his hand. "No, you're tired. Rest."

Spock knelt beside him, enclosing the fingers within his other hand. As usual, Jim was attempting to reassure him. The eyes closed for a moment and then opened almost in alarm.

"Spock?"

"I am here, Jim."

Kirk coughed, grimacing. And still, he focused on Spock. "Mm, all right. You can work." A shaking chill coursed through him. "So cold. Can't get warm."

Something steadied inside of Spock and without hesitation he slid into the bed beside Kirk, pulling the covers snugly over them both. He drew Kirk into his embrace, trying to wrap his warmth around the shivering Human.

Slowly the tremors subsided, until Kirk rested his head on Spock's shoulder. "Better."

Once his breathing deepened into sleep, Spock slipped out of the bed. When Kirk moved restlessly, coughing, the Vulcan came back and rested his hand on the broad forehead, relieved to feel his temperature had returned to within Human norms. He could almost feel the thoughts of the Human beside him. Their rapport was deepening and he was certain he had glimpsed something within his mind which could be a second link beyond the one with T'Pring.

And for this moment, in his despair at their current situation, Spock allowed the golden thread between them to open, sharing his concern with his friend. He resisted slipping into Jim's mind. It would be inappropriate since he did not have Kirk's permission. And there was the potential for the connection between them to develop into a link.

Yet he could not resist sharing briefly with Jim. He smiled as he remembered Jim's words from long ago, 'It gives me emotional security.' Now he understood better than he had those many missions ago.

The possibility of them and McCoy returning to the *Enterprise* was growing so increasingly slim he had refused to quote the odds when the captain had asked two days ago.

Once Kirk was quiet, the Vulcan withdrew and returned to his task.

Spock straightened, moving to Jim's side as he moved restlessly. Words tumbled out broken by his frequent coughing. A hand flew up to press against his eyes, the Human shaking his head.

"Love him. Don't know how I can let him go."

Spock bent over the bed, grasping his hand. "Jim. I am here."

The glazed eyes tried to focus on him. He coughed again, and Spock helped Jim to sit up to assist with his cough. Once the bout subsided, he encouraged Jim to drink some of the tea. It was cool but might still soothe the irritated throat.

"Spock, I—" He broke off, his eyes sliding shut, his head drooping tiredly on Spock's arm. The Vulcan slipped his arm around Kirk's shoulders, allowing him to shift so he was holding most of the Human's weight. The dark blond head lulled weakly against his chest.

The captain drifted, his breathing remaining shallow and fast. "Can't let Spock know. I—"

Concerned Kirk was not aware Spock was there, he said quietly, "Jim, I am here. Is there something you wish to tell me?"

Muttering, his words were unintelligible. Then Spock heard, "I love you, Spock. Think I'm dreaming so I'm going to tell you."

"Jim?" Spock brushed the hair back from Jim's face. "Can you hear me?"

Kirk shifted, lifting his head to look up at Spock. His eyes were still glassy but there was a sad smile on his face. "I understand you cannot share this love with me. I am trying to look

elsewhere." His long eyelashes closed. And there was moisture on his face. "Edith is special. But you, Spock—" He lifted a hand to caress Spock's face. "You're different — we could be forever. Must protect you." The hand fell to his lap. "Can't lose you."

Spock stared at Kirk's now sweating face in consternation. Listening to his unfiltered words felt as wrong as mind-melding without his consent. "Jim?"

The Vulcan considered Jim's words. He knew Jim's relationship with Edith was deep and had been concerned about the Human's ability to cope with her loss if this was the outcome needed for them to return to the *Enterprise*.

Although Jim's words had been caused by his fever, Spock now understood, Kirk was trying to protect him. He quelled the flare of hope and buried desire at the words. If not for T'Pring, he would also reach out to Jim and allow their rapport to flame into a union between them. But this could never be.

He rested his hand on Jim's forehead. The captain's temperature was rising, becoming feverish. He removed the blankets. And shifted to allow Kirk to lay back on the bed away from his own higher body heat.

Kirk cried out, "No, don't leave."

The captain curled into the Vulcan's side, pulling Spock's hand tight against his chest. His eyes were squeezed shut and Spock saw the glimmer of unshed tears.

"Jim. I am here. How can I help?"

Instead of quieting, the respirations increased, Kirk moaning with each cough. To ease his breathing, Spock pulled him almost upright, holding him tight to his chest.

For the next twenty minutes, Spock fought to keep Kirk in bed and reassure him. The captain was alternately moaning, and speaking almost nonsensically. And all the activity only increased his rasping cough. His attempts to reassure the captain were ineffective. Spock explained repeatedly he was here and he was not leaving him.

Then he began to cry. The devastating sobs tore through his shields. Spock drew the man close in his arms, trying to provide whatever support he could.

Finally, he opened the rapport between them and the burst of golden light in his mind overwhelmed him. He could not hear Jim's thoughts but he felt his entire being within, sharing. There was an open conduit between them.

He had never experienced a connection with another being that felt as incredible as this. Spock could feel the complete acceptance and joy that flowed between them. And he could feel his mind reaching to be within Jim's mind. To bind himself to Kirk. Spock drew back. There was a risk here which would compromise both Jim and himself. He was perilously close to a spontaneous bonding.

He continued to allow Kirk to feel his presence but withdrew enough to ensure they would not increase their link. But as he withdrew, Spock paused to allow the golden sun between them to shine brilliantly before closing it away.

Spock allowed their deep relationship to support and comfort both of them. He drew in a deep breath, permitting himself to press a kiss to Jim's forehead. Relaxing, he slept, holding his precious burden close to him.

Kirk blinked, the contours of their room coming into focus. He almost groaned, the hope this was some surrealistic dream shattered. For a moment he had thought they were on the *Enterprise*. He ran a hand over his face, sitting up slowly.

Spock was sitting just as he had been when Kirk had left for work, bent over the components. He wondered if Vulcans experienced back strain when forced to work in poor ergonomic environments.

"Spock?" He croaked which set off a coughing spell. By the time he finished, Spock was beside him, supporting him in an upright position. His voice was gruff. "Well, hell. Think I may be sick."

"Indeed."

"The last thing I remember is leaving work. Don't remember walking here." He glanced up in alarm. "I was paid, did I make it home with the money?"

There was amusement in the gentle tones. "You did not make it home but you did still have the money."

Slumping back against the bedrest, Kirk nodded. "What happened?"

Spock explained as he retrieved a mug of coffee. Taking the steaming liquid gratefully, he sipped it slowly.

"I plan to visit Miss Keeler to obtain treatment for your ailment."

Kirk nodded. "Don't let her come in here. She'll see too much." Coughing again, he held his ribs when it continued for several seconds. Spock did not hesitate to support his shoulders. Producing a small towel, he wiped the beads of sweat from Kirk's face and neck.

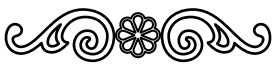
The captain felt an embarrassed flush. "Spock, please don't do tasks that may reduce your controls." He reached out to take the cloth, rubbing his face roughly. "I don't want to cause harm to you by breaching your barriers."

Spock frowned, taking the cloth back. His fingers brushed Kirk's. "The benefit outweighs any danger to my shields. You require assistance, I am grateful to be of service."

Managing to hold the gentle dark eyes, Kirk gave a smile which deepened when he saw the answering smile in the crinkling corners of Spock's eyes. He felt his eyes grow heavy, his eyelids sliding shut briefly before he managed to open them.

"Jim, sleep. I will obtain food for us and, if possible, medicine for you."

He felt Spock propping him up on two pillows and he curled on his side. There was a touch on his forehead and he found it impossible to open his heavy eyes. Kirk felt more than heard Spock say, "Rest, *ashayam*."



It was late before Kirk made it to his quarters. He had visited Peter, checked in with McCoy, and now planned to follow up with Spock as soon as he reviewed any priority messages. Not quite twenty-four hours after Spock had lost his sight, the captain was suddenly aware of just how many duties his first officer assumed for him.

Stretching, he ordered his computer to review the messages. He was surprised to discover many of the routine requests had already been approved. He knew on the bridge two hours ago there had been at least twenty-three waiting for his eyes. Frowning, Kirk researched the missing messages finding they had been approved by Spock earlier this evening. Damn the man, he shouldn't be working, especially now.

Kirk paused, wondering what he expected Spock to do. He couldn't see his efficient first officer, despite his life-altering injury, sitting quietly in the dark, doing nothing.

There were five messages still waiting for him. He reviewed the first three quickly, two from Starfleet, and one from McCoy. The last two from Spock, one he skimmed, a detailed account of the recent mission and ensuring he claimed full responsibility for his injury. Kirk allowed a grim smile, sitting down slowly, his chest tightening at the memory of Spock walking clumsily into the desk after leaving the chamber in sickbay.

The second message was from Spock as well. He reviewed it, exploding, "What the hell?"

Kirk charged into Spock's quarters, alarmed when he discovered Spock wasn't there. Activating the computer, he requested the location of his first officer.

Spock knelt on the floor beside the large observation window. It did not affect him that the view was hidden from him. His eidetic memory showed him what was there.

Yet, it was not the same.

Spock considered in the future there would be a multitude of baffling experiences that he would not see and would have difficulty visualizing the images in his mind. This alone would force him to seek a different type of life to function in society. It certainly would not include him performing on the *Enterprise* or in Starfleet.

He almost smiled. He knew Jim well and the arguments he was going to propose. There were many individuals within Starfleet with disabilities including profound sightlessness. One thousand, four hundred forty-two to be exact. He had researched this to be ready for the challenging conversation he knew Kirk would bring to him.

Resignation. From a life which had been his for twelve years, five months — Spock stopped, he had no desire to calculate the days. Truly he had been part of Starfleet since he attended the academy.

His world had been one of the scientific discoveries, experiments, and wonders of new worlds and alien species. Over the years, his world had grown to incorporate relationships. Many continued to correspond with him from the academy and during Captain Pike's command. And here, there were many of the crew who were more than acquaintances. McCoy despite their confrontational interactions was a respected colleague.

The captain was on his way. The slanted brows drew down, wondering again how he knew this. Spock's thoughts turned inward, viewing the growing thread between them with consternation. His only link at this time should be with T'Pring. This thread between Jim and himself was expanding. As he studied it, he could feel the approach of Jim Kirk, the thread began to vibrate in a golden light. Almost in excitement.

Spock had thought he was prepared for this conversation. Viewing the link, and examining the vibrancy which continued to grow between them told him the complete failure on his part. He knew it was during their mission in Earth's past when the unexpected resonance they shared had exploded into a full-scale link between the captain and him. Spock realized his efforts to subdue it after their time through the Guardian were failing.

He did not know if he could part with Jim. Did not want to return to Vulcan and leave his 'joy' behind. His *t'hy'la*, as his recent research had revealed. Allowing himself to truly feel the thread between them, Spock acknowledged the happiness he felt between them.

Yet he was tied to Vulcan. To return to T'Pring where their link would become a bond forever. It was the most logical outcome of his recent loss of sight. His breathing grew harsh at the thought.

The captain strode in, his footsteps clicking quickly; irritated strides. Stopping directly behind him, Kirk drew a breath. Finally, the broad hands came down to rest on his shoulders. The voice was quiet but the thread of anger underlined his words.

"I'm not signing off on your resignation. I won't."

Feeling the tension in the fingers on his shoulders, Spock had to force himself to say, "I do not require your signature. I will forward the request to Command in the morning."

"No, Spock. You don't have to do this."

The fingers squeezed his shoulders almost painfully before Kirk withdrew his hands. Spock fought down the feeling of loss of his touch. He listened to the pacing feet, relieved when Kirk came to sit on the floor beside him, close enough for the Vulcan to breathe in his scent.

"You don't have to leave the *Enterprise* and certainly not Starfleet. Many blind service members serve in the Fleet. You can—"

Spock turned, facing where he could feel Jim's warmth. "Captain, you must be aware the personnel serving aboard Starships have been sightless since birth. They have had time to learn to function adequately. I have not."

"You can learn. You can serve here. Bones can—"

Gently, Spock stopped him. "I would be very limited in providing service aboard here. And if you had time to adjust to this outcome, you would agree."

"No! I won't. I can't. Spock, I can't lose you." There was a tiny catch in Kirk's voice.

He tried to reach out and touch Kirk's arm, but his groping fingers only found empty air. Then, a warm hand grasped his, their fingers entwining. Certain he should be withdrawing from Jim's touch, Spock discovered he did not have the will to do so.

“Captain.” He stopped. “Jim, I cannot stay. You know this in your mind. It’s your heart which does not accept.”

The fingers squeezed him tightly and suddenly the conduit between them opened. He felt Kirk’s distress. For a few seconds, he was unable to stop his shields lowering and he shared freely his grief at not just the loss of the life he currently was serving but the future loss of his friendship with Jim.

And he needed more. Feeling the emotions, he wanted to see them as well. Spock raised his hand, searching for Jim’s face. Not to meld, simply to ‘see’ the expressions on the mobile features. “May I?”

The captain understood, guiding his searching hand to his face. His fingers glided over his cheek. Smoothed the wrinkled brow. Touched the tears Jim was silently shedding. His thumb drifted down to press against the pliant lips, curved in a sad smile.

Kirk pressed a kiss into Spock’s fingers, causing a wave of tingling to spread from Spock’s lips throughout his body. The suppressed sexual response flared to life again. He drew back, dropping his hand.

“Oh, my friend. I—” Kirk broke off. After a few moments, the Human voice was full of not quite buried emotion. “Forgive me.”

Spock forced his hand to remain at his side, his whole being wanting to reach again and share this Human’s vibrant spirit.

“What would you do? Return to Vulcan?” Kirk asked, his voice quiet. Subdued.

“It is possible. I have discovered a training academy for the newly blind on Andoria which seems most promising.”

“Isn’t there one on Earth? I have leave time available, I could go with you.” Spock could not stop a smile from appearing.

He was startled when Jim’s warm fingers traced his lips.

The touch drifted down over his chin before withdrawing. It took all of Spock’s will to keep from grasping Jim’s hand and pulling it towards his face. He kept his own tightly clasped in his lap. The temptation to touch Kirk’s temple, to feel his golden thoughts, to share their growing regard for — *Kaiidth!* He must stop.

“Oh, Spock, I don’t think you understand how much you mean to me. I feel so guilty because all I can think about is how am I supposed to go on without you. I can’t imagine how difficult this is for you.”

Facts. Data. To help both to adjust, he had to provide information. Spock drew on his years of training. “We accept what is. Not what could be. Opportunities to continue to grow and learn will present new vistas. I see it as a challenge I am willing to begin. No purpose is served in grieving my former life.”

His pedantic tone seemed to steady Kirk. His respirations were slowing and the agitation he had sensed was easing. The aura was changing and he knew if he could see, the mantle of command was slipping over Kirk's shoulders.

The captain said heavily, "It's late. You should be resting. It's been a long day." He heard the rustle of movement as Kirk stood. "How did you find your way here alone anyway? I nearly had a heart attack by the time I found you."

Spock rose to his feet. "I have been aboard the *Enterprise* for twelve years, five months, and three days. I did not have trouble locating this room."

Kirk laughed quietly, rising to stand next to him. "Well, in that case, I'm tired. Will you guide me back to our quarters?"

Spock nodded. But instead of grasping Kirk's arm, he turned and drew the Human into his arms. After today, he would not have this opportunity. Without hesitation, the captain brought his arms around his back, one hand gently massaging the tense muscles in his neck. Spock breathed in the clean male scent, marveling at the easy way they fit into each other's arms.

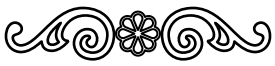
He said quietly, "Jim. I will miss you. I, too, do not wish to leave you."

Neither man spoke, remaining silent for long minutes. When he released the Human, Kirk drew back slowly. He could sense the incredible discipline Jim utilized to keep his needs under control. Spock found he did not have the will to withdraw. He allowed his heart to tuck his hand around Kirk's offered arm.

As they headed for the exit, Kirk said stubbornly, "I'm still not accepting your resignation."

"Illogical."

Kirk's snort of laughter followed them down the hallway.



In the weeks following his aborted *pon farr* and the murder of his captain and friend, Spock marveled at the resilience of James T. Kirk. Since that fateful day, Jim had shown him not only friendship but kindness, patience, and compassion.

But the most incredible one of all, the captain shared his total acceptance and trust.

The Vulcan had slowly emerged from his cocoon of guilt and pain after the events on Vulcan. The disastrous, appalling incidents leading up to their trip to Vulcan and then facing *plak tow* were more terrifying than he had ever imagined, confirming why Vulcans did not discuss *pon farr*. And to emerge from the confusing flames and discover his beloved's white face on the sand beneath him. His horror was beyond anything he had experienced in his lifetime.

Spock fully expected the captain to withdraw his easy friendship or exhibit some anxiety when near his potentially violent first officer. He did not. Instead, he extended gentle invitations to meals or to play chess. And never exhibited annoyance when Spock repeatedly turned down

the offers. For the first few weeks, the Vulcan could not bear to be in his presence for long before guilt and shame pulled him back under a maelstrom of confusing feelings.

He spent long hours in the labs. Even longer hours in meditation. It took time to recover simply from the residual hormones. And because of his overwhelming dread of hurting Jim again in the future, Spock buried his pride and reached out to a Vulcan healer he trusted. There were many sessions, seven in fact, before he acknowledged his fear was inaccurate and the events were unfortunate but were not caused by him.

Still, he had killed his captain. He could not stop the tremble in his hands as he remembered.

On the bridge, Spock turned at the sound of Kirk's laughter behind him. The captain caught his eyes and smiled widely before turning back to his conversation with McCoy and Scott.

Then he heard Kirk say quietly to the two men, "Quitting time. I gotta go. I have a date!"

Spock glanced at him curiously, before turning back to the program he was running. He felt a sinking sensation within, quelling the urge to sigh. He had thought they were eating together in Jim's quarters tonight. Apparently not.

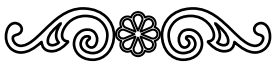
Kirk approached him quietly, patiently waiting until Spock turned to look at him. "Ready, Mister Spock?"

Puzzled, he asked, "Do you not have plans?"

The hazel eyes widened and then suddenly danced. "Yes. With you!"

And the suppressed feelings of both relief and joy threatened to emerge despite the presence of the bridge crew.

Giving a small smile, he managed, "Indeed."



It was a few weeks later when Kirk followed Spock down a corridor.

"Where exactly are we going, my friend?"

"Patience is a virtue, Captain."

Kirk barked with laughter. "Not mine!

Spock led the way into the turbolift. "Yes, and the most recent example is your response to Apollo's statement when he stated he took the wind from your sails. Your answer sounded annoyed, 'Give it back, then we'll talk.' If the situation had not been fraught with danger, I believe I might have felt amusement." He glanced sideways at the captain, taking a moment to appreciate the beauty of the compact form beside him.

In turn, Kirk mock hit his arm with his fist. The Vulcan reveled in the touch, it had only been recently since Jim had started touching him, easing some unnamed emotion in his chest.

Spock stepped off the turbolift. Kirk frowned, "Deck Eighteen? Shuttle Bay?"

Spock shifted his eyes to give him a sharp look. Kirk subsided with a smirk. “As a kid, the normal question for a road trip was—”

“—Are we there yet?” Spock supplied smoothly.

Kirk could not resist shoving his arm with his shoulder. But he pulled away quickly as a crewman approached. He said, “Don’t tell me you asked that of your parents as a child?”

“I did not.”

Sending him a fond glance, Kirk entered through a doorway to the side of the hydroponics. They walked down a path, the captain pausing to inhale the scents of flowers. “It’s been a while since I was here.”

Continuing, Spock led the way into a small galley that was provided for the crew. He stopped to remove a warm dish from the unit.

Kirk’s eyes widened, “What is it? Smells good.”

“Kleetanta. I think you will enjoy it.” Spock headed for a door at the end of the galley. Kirk frowned. “You’re taking me to a storage unit?”

Catching the amused expression on Spock’s face, he subsided and waited while the Vulcan juggled the dish in one hand, accessing the room by placing his palm on the entry panel. Kirk was surprised, he didn’t remember this room requiring security.

As they entered, the small room lit up with muted lighting. He glanced around curiously. Instead of crates and shelves he vaguely remembered being here, there was a table with chairs by the door. A couch was in the center of the room.

Obviously prepared before their entrance, the table was set with *Enterprise* dishes and a wine bottle. Spock placed the Kleetanta beside a plate of saffir. Kirk grinned; he knew the bread was considered a dessert course by some but he enjoyed eating the bread-like food by itself.

Kirk stopped, allowing himself to enjoy the view as Spock gracefully poured them each a glass from the bottle. The Vulcan’s slender beauty was becoming all too impossible to suppress the effect on his own body’s response.

It seemed more difficult tonight with Spock dressed in a black tunic with an elegant script running down the right side of his chest. He drew a deep breath, inhaling both the scents of the food and the spicy scent of Spock before forcing his unsuitable thoughts back into a dark corner of his mind.

It had taken Spock long weeks to emerge from the event of the *pon farr*. Kirk knew his friend had been entirely shaken and intuitively understood the Vulcan required time to recover. He was relieved to see more of Spock’s personality emerge in the last few days. Tonight was a good example.

Kirk smiled as Spock turned to face him. “Well, this was a road trip well worth making. Are we celebrating?”

Spock graced him with a tiny smile. He moved to a panel by the door and spoke a quiet command.

The room rumbled. Startled, Kirk straightened his senses on alert. “What is happening?”

Light poured from above and he realized the walls, no, the outer plates of the ship were disappearing. He was suddenly able to view the saucer section of the bridge through the unexpected skylight. His eyes wide, Kirk demanded, “I repeat, what is happening, Science Officer?”

Spock moved behind him, placing both hands on his shoulders. Startled again, he wasn’t sure if it was from the Vulcan’s sudden nearness or the sight of space in an area where this wasn’t possible.

Spock guided him to turn, and behind them he could see the nacelles of the *Enterprise*, and the stars. He had to blink to keep back the sudden swell of tears.

The smooth baritone rumbled, jolting Kirk back to the extraordinary feeling of Spock’s presence so close. “Commander Scott and I have been working on the modification to this room. I discovered it was a perfect location to provide a view of the *Enterprise* I believed you might appreciate. The outer layer of the ship has retracted to allow for us to see your ship.”

“This is—” Kirk stopped, overwhelmed. He brushed a hand over his eyes. “Spock…”

Spock pressed his fingers into his shoulders. “Is it acceptable? I am aware I did not obtain your permission to create this.”

He could only nod, his eyes drawn back to his ship, knowing anything he said would allow his overwhelming feelings in his voice.

“At this time, only you or I are allowed access to this room. We cannot exit without closing the viewport, to ensure the ship is protected at all times. Also, it will automatically close with a yellow or red alert.”

Humbled, Kirk turned, daring to wrap his arms around Spock, briefly hugging him. “I am speechless.”

When he moved to pull back, Spock did not immediately release him. Kirk lifted his head to find shining brown eyes studying him. A flicker of indecision crossed the stoic features. Then beneath the astounding view of his ship and the stars, Spock dipped his head and Kirk’s heart stopped as the incredibly warm lips pressed against his.

Tendrils of electricity slammed through his senses and Kirk gasped. His body felt suddenly alive with desire and he was instantly hard.

Spock pulled back; the uncertainty reflected in the dark eyes. “Forgive me, Jim, I am being precipitous.”

Hands in the silky hair, Kirk pulled his head back down to take the warm lips against his, his tongue darting, trying to find entry into the tightly closed mouth.

“Please, let me—”

Kirk was dismayed when Spock pushed him back firmly, holding both shoulders to keep him captive. The brown eyes searched for him, for a moment devouring his features. He could see

the desire leaping within their depths. Forcing himself to be patient, Jim nodded. He couldn't keep from smiling at the beguiling and yet confused expression on the normally stern features.

Grasping his hand, Spock guided him to sit on the couch. "I had intended to ask your permission after we had eaten. But I find it impossible to resist you."

Wanting to speed things up, Kirk looked down to hide the naked longing on his face. "You have my permission."

Spock rested his first two fingers on top of Kirk's. Jim could swear something glorious was rushing through him from the contact, almost a continuation of the kiss.

The voice was earnest but rumbled across Kirk's skin. "The last few months, my regard for you increased. Before Omicron Ceti III, I admired your intelligence and sharp-witted thinking. I believe some of the situations we had encountered would have resulted in the *Enterprise's* destruction with any other commander, including Captain Pike which you are aware I hold in the highest regard."

Flashing a mischievous grin, Kirk glanced at him, "Yeah, you stole my ship for him." Spock could not stop the smile that crossed his face.

"However, it was not only your mind which drew me to you, it was your willingness to treat me as an equal. And as a friend."

Kirk's smile widened and he leaned forward. Spock held up a hand to delay his response.

"But since Omicron, I became vividly aware of not only the attributes of your mind but of your body as well. I began to desire to be closer to you. Yet I could not because of my link with T'Pring."

Kirk frowned but he simply traced his first two fingers over the Vulcan's, feeling a muted sensation from earlier.

The Vulcan tilted his head, glancing down. Moving his arm, he turned it over to grasp Kirk's hand. With his barriers down, he felt Jim's love shining through. He closed his eyes, drawing in a quick breath. And Jim, trying to protect him, attempted to withdraw his touch.

"Jim." He placed his other fingers over their joined hands. "Your constant presence in the last few weeks, your kindness and compassion are beyond my understanding. I cannot comprehend the trust you have shown me, after I—"

When he faltered, Kirk lifted a hand to touch his face. And seeming to intuit Spock's intentions, he leaned forward slightly and pressed his lips against Spock's.

A hand crept around the Vulcan's neck, and Spock leaned into the kiss, incapable of suppressing a sound from deep within himself. And he could not stop as the kiss went on, Jim managing to share through this simple action his love.

Through their embracing hands, Spock ran his first two fingers across Jim's digits again. And the Human felt the rush of sensation pouring a new flood of warm emotion through them. And desire.

Kirk pulled back, drawing Spock into his arms, and in-between gentle kisses on his lips and cheeks, he asked, “You said you needed my permission?”

Shakily, Spock withdrew from his embrace. Again placing his two fingers on Kirk’s, he drew a breath. “I wish to make a formal declaration to begin *koon-ut so’lik*. To begin courting you with an intent to become your mate. I desire to be your shield mate.”

In the muted lighting, hazel eyes turned dark green as he smiled at Spock. A glimmer appeared within them. “*K’diwa, du k’hat’n’dlawa.*” *Beloved. You are half my heart and soul.*

Unable to keep the surprise from his face, Spock lifted his two fingers in the air and was gratified to find Kirk immediately matching the gesture. The captain said quietly, “I have been studying in the hope I would be able to say it to you one day. Did I get it right?”

Spock opened himself, allowing the Human to share in his feelings. The rush of sensation caused him to sway. Jim rested his forehead against Spock’s. He murmured, “I take it that was a yes.”

“I believe there is already a link between us and it is stronger than the one I shared with T’Pring.”

Kirk was kissing his eyebrows, working his way down to his mouth. He murmured, “Yes. We are connected. I can feel it on a deep level. And I don’t want to ever lose it. Are you asking to bond with me? Because the answer is a profound yes!”

Spock shook his head in mock dismay. “I asked to begin the process of courting you. Bonding is in the future.”

Kirk clarified, “And what does courting me entail?”

“In Human terms, dating. Taking time to learn about each other and discover if we are compatible. For Vulcans, we would then seek to discover if our minds are compatible.”

Kirk pulled back from the Vulcan, unable to quell his laughter. “But, Spock, we are compatible. In essence, we have been courting each other for the last year. I am asking you to bond with me, *t’hy’la*.”

The dark eyes widened in shock. “*T’hy’la*? How do you know this?”

Kirk tilted his head, a smile crossing his face. “I have been studying Vulcan culture with the help of Nyota. However, this term wasn’t mentioned in any of the texts I reviewed. When you were blind, I sensed it in your mind when we spoke on the observation deck. I did not say anything at the time, you were so vulnerable and I was certain you did not intend for me to know this. But I could see the word and feel everything it meant. And I share this incredible connection between us.”

Spock appeared speechless. Kirk could not help it, he leaned forward, pulling the Vulcan back into his arms. “I love you, *k’diwa*. I am ready for the next step in our lives, to bond with you forever.”

The kiss between them deepened, Kirk feeling the electric tingles shooting throughout and he moaned. They kissed open-mouthed for long minutes before Spock slipped his tongue between Kirk's teeth and numbing pleasure shot through the Human at the contact.

Spock moaned, then stopped suddenly. He drew back, his brows drawing down. "Your sense of humor can be most disconcerting." Puzzled, Kirk gave a short laugh, "What?"

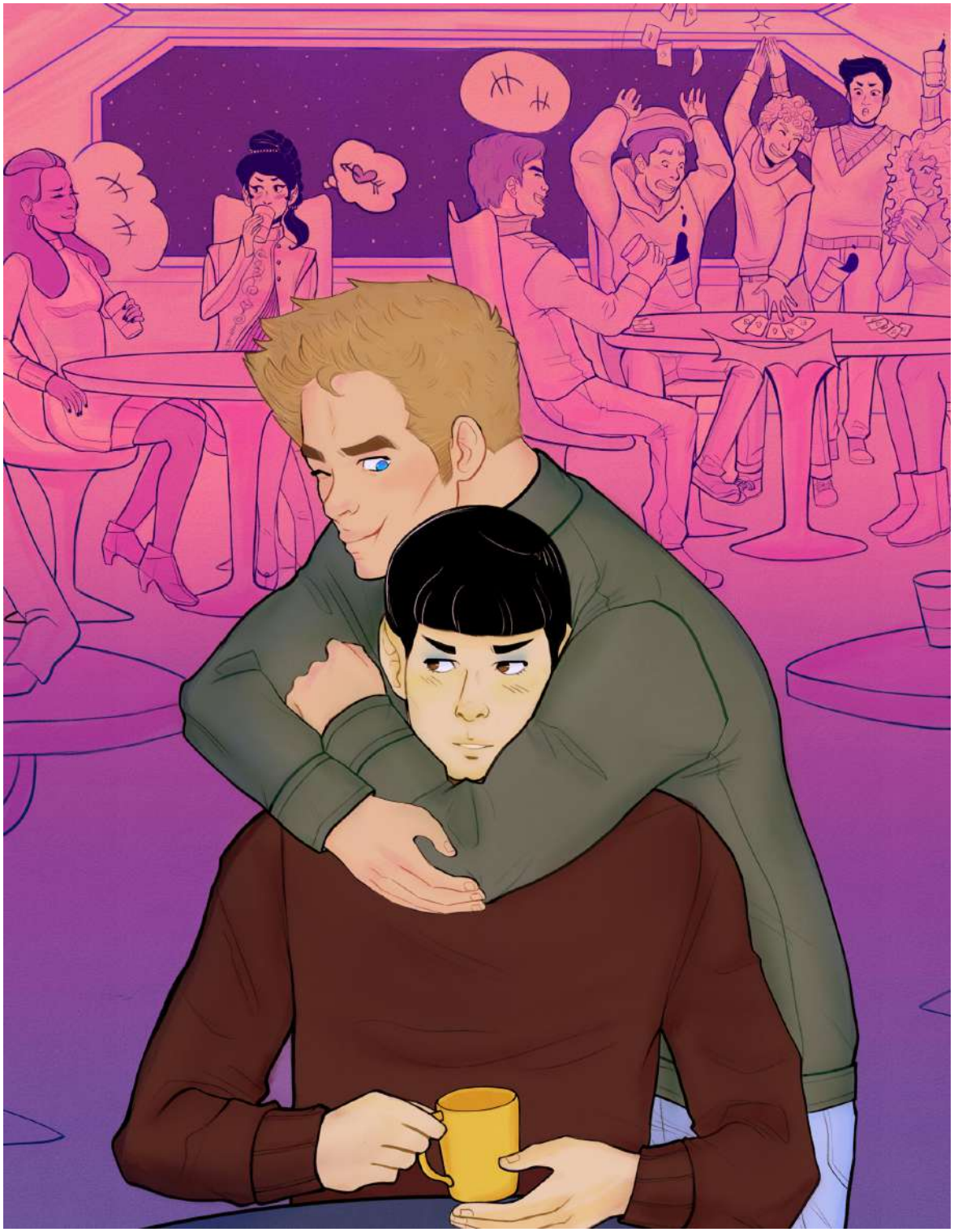
"You were thinking of the line from the play *Henry V* by Shakespeare."

Understanding dawned, Kirk grinned before reaching for nuzzling Spock's mouth with his again. He whispered with laughter in his heart and mind, "But you do have witchcraft in your lips."

Note:

"You have witchcraft in your lips, there is more eloquence in a sugar touch of them than in the tongues of the French council, and they should sooner persuade Harry of England than a general petition of monarchs." — William Shakespeare, Henry V

Jim and Spock
by Speff



The Forest for the Trees
by LSpingles

"*Though lovers be lost, love shall not…*"

(Dylan Thomas, Death Has No Dominion)

Soon, ashayam. Spock reached out along the link that remained alive, but stubbornly inactive, as he sat in the command chair. They would arrive at Amerind in seven minutes. Time was limited.

He had met with the landing party earlier in the day. Lieutenant Sulu was going to lead a team to scout the village, scanning the tents to determine if any individual matching the height and bone structure of Kirk was present. Spock had hypothesized that Kirk may have sustained a brain injury. The VSA had confirmed that his experience, the presence of an active link without the ability to achieve contact with his mate, was consistent with situations where one bondmate had sustained serious brain trauma. Spock assumed the villagers must have found Kirk and provided food and shelter; otherwise, he could not have survived with such an injury. Doctor McCoy would accompany them to ascertain his medical status. If Sulu identified a candidate that was not visible as he was inside a tent, Spock would be contacted. Spock was certain he would be able to use his link to confirm the person was his bondmate once in closer proximity.

Spock planned to beam directly to the site of the obelisk. His primary task was to activate the asteroid deflector. In addition to saving the planet, it would allow further time to search for Kirk if Sulu's scouting mission was not immediately productive. He knew certain tonal qualities were the key to access to the obelisk, but how to achieve that remained a mystery. However, other means of access could exist. Direct beaming was not a possibility given the properties of the facility which rendered scanning impossible. His success with his assigned task would determine his next course of action. If the deflector beam was activated, he would have time to rescue the captain under the cover of darkness and not risk contaminating the culture. If he was unable to activate the beam, Spock was prepared to launch an immediate rescue, reasoning that cultural contamination of a race that would imminently be destroyed was not a concern. He avoided considering any alternative where his bondmate was not returned to him.

Spock rose from his chair. "Lieutenant Uhura, please notify Doctor McCoy and Lieutenant Sulu to meet me in the transporter room."

"Mister Scott, you are in command," Spock said as he approached the engineer's station on route to the turbolift.

"Aye, Mister Spock." Scott stepped down and seated himself in the center chair.

When Spock arrived at the transporter room, Sulu's team, clothed in appropriate local attire were arranging themselves on the transporter pad. Spock raised an eyebrow at McCoy's standard uniform.

"I've decided to join you outside the village. Sulu's going to feed any data to my tricorder. Figure we won't see anyone that far out of the village so there's no need to go in costume."

"It is not the plan I laid out in the morning briefing."

McCoy activated his Feinberger and waved it over Spock. "I'm concerned about you. Spock, you're close to collapse." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I've decided to monitor a senior officer I believe to be under physical and mental stress."

Spock frowned, considering the merits of debating the matter. A call from the bridge indicating they had achieved orbit decided the matter. He had no time to waste.

Spock turned to Sulu. "Doctor McCoy will accompany me. However, if Doctor McCoy is needed at the village for any reason, contact the ship and arrange for him to be transported to your coordinates."

"Mister Fischer, transport Lieutenant Sulu's team to the first set of coordinates I provided."

"Doctor." Spock nodded at McCoy and they proceeded to the pad after the others departed.

"Energize."

Spock felt a surge of joy and fear after materialization. Kirk, who appeared physically healthy, was visible on the raised platform of the obelisk but under attack. For unknown reasons, he and an Amerind woman were being stoned. Unfortunately, he had not anticipated villagers in the vicinity of the beam-down site as it had been unoccupied when he had scanned the site from the bridge thirty-seven minutes earlier. *Perhaps McCoy was correct and I do require monitoring,* he thought, acknowledging that his lack of foresight had allowed their arrival to be seen in violation of the Prime Directive.

He should have anticipated the villagers might come to the obelisk and taken precautions: logically, it may have operated in the past to destroy asteroids and the villagers may have worshipped it. There was no way to undo the damage so he motioned the doctor to approach the site. At least their unexpected arrival had dispersed the crowd in fear. As Doctor McCoy performed an external physical evaluation Spock looked inwards: his link remained in the strange catatonic state it had been in since they had departed this planet. Proximity to Kirk had not altered the situation.

"I need Nurse Chapel," McCoy advised.

Spock flipped his communicator open and spoke to Scott. "We've located the captain. Beam down Nurse Chapel with an emergency surgical kit. Also, contact Lieutenant Sulu and have his party return to the ship immediately." He was satisfied that his voice did not betray the surge of panic that McCoy's words had elicited.

As his heart hammered in his side Spock waited for McCoy to complete his diagnosis. Aware that he was giving away his impatience, but unable to wait any longer, he prompted, “Will you need to operate?”

As McCoy shook his head in response to Spock, Kirk looked about frantically. “My wife. Is she all right?”

McCoy parroted, “Wife?”

“Hallucinations?” Spock asked. His calm voice masking the inner turmoil Kirk’s words stirred as his eyes were drawn to the woman at his feet. Spock knelt beside her, gently raising her head onto his lap. As he did so, he picked up her mental response to Kirk’s cry of the name “Miramanee.” *No.* Instinctively his hands let go of the back of her neck, avoiding any further skin to skin contact. Exhaustion had weakened his mental shields.

As Nurse Chapel materialized, Spock looked from Miramanee to Kirk and back again. *How did I not sense your involvement with this woman?*

It doesn’t matter. I must focus on the mission. The commanded words were only partially effective. The question refused to be pushed aside completely. Spock expelled a slow breath and closed his eyes to concentrate on regaining his control. *Focus or this planet will die.* Slowly he pushed the matter of Kirk’s relationship to the woman into the background. Control regained he asked the woman, “Why were you being stoned?”

He could feel her labored breathing. He silently thanked Chapel when she crouched beside him and he heard the hiss of a hypo. “The nurse has given you something to ease the pain.”

“Kirok could not get back into the temple.”

He raised an eyebrow at the curious statement. “Naturally, since he did not come from there.” As he spoke, he wondered, *why did Kirk create an alias name?*

“I saw him come … come.”

Before he could protest again, he realized the woman’s statement to be true. It was the only logical explanation. *Kirk must have been inside the obelisk when I scanned for him when he was initially lost. The alloy is impenetrable.* Spock carefully repositioned Miramanee and joined the others by the captain.

“Does he recognize us?” Chapel asked.

“His brain is unimpaired. Everything is functioning normally except his memory.”

Spock felt as though he might sway off his feet as he heard the diagnosis. Relief flooded through him. Kirk’s brain was not irreparably damaged. And the diagnosis explained much. Loss of memory would have allowed Kirk to enter an arrangement without violating their bond. The link was silent and inactive because Kirk’s mind did not know it was there.

“Can you help him?” Spock asked.

“It’ll take time.”

“Time, Doctor McCoy, is the one thing we do not have in abundance.” Spock had not touched the mind of his bondmate for sixty point three days. He had left Amerind uncertain if he would

ever touch his beloved's mind again. And if they were going to save these people, Kirk would be the best person to assist them, as he had been inside the obelisk. He needed to bring back his captain for the people of Amerind and for himself.

"Is the captain strong enough for a meld?"

"Yes, but are you strong enough to perform it? I know it can be quite draining." McCoy ran his tricorder over him. "You're already near the point of collapse."

"I have no choice if this planet is to survive." Spock took a moment to settle himself, to prepare himself for images he anticipated would be present involving his bondmate and Miramanee in the meld. He tenderly brushed the side of Kirk's face before placing his fingers, adjusting the positioning slightly until connection with the psi points was fully achieved. He entered slowly, unsure how Kirk would react. Where typically a landscape of vibrant color existed, it was cast in shadow. Only a tiny corner of his mind was illuminated. The recent past, Spock presumed. He veered in that direction, but once there hesitated.

It was his right as a bondmate to view all of Kirk's memories. Yet, he had never ventured to a place in Kirk's mind without being first invited. They had each agreed to respect personal boundaries although to date none had been invoked by either of them. He had hoped his simple presence would have been enough to draw Kirk out but it had not. He could not ask permission. He hovered on the edge of the light. Wondered what price would be paid for an uninvited intrusion. After promising himself to narrow his focus as much as possible he pushed through the barrier.

Spock moves at blinding speed trying to get to the beginning of Kirk's memories in this zone. Flashes of trees, horses, fishing, laughter, and passion flickered past until he found himself in a sterile room of computer banks. Recognizing the script, Spock knows he is in the interior of the obelisk. Sensing Kirk's disorientation, Spock approaches his image. "I am Spock. You are James Kirk."

He tries to touch the image, but Kirk backs away.

"Our minds are moving closer, closer, closer, James Kirk. Closer."

Kirk turns and Miramanee appears on a hillside, beckoning him forth. Kirk begins to run towards her image waving in the distance, yelling as though he knows Spock is here to destroy Kirok.

"No!"

Spock chases after him, leaps and tackles him, flipping him onto his back, using the weight of his body to hold him down.

The intensity of the meld increases. Spock tightens his grip on Kirk's face ensuring it will not be broken. "James Kirk," he insists.

Kirk tries to shake his head. An image of Miramanee's naked body exiting the lake appears.

"Miramanee!" Kirk calls her. She attempts to come closer, but Spock builds a barricade. And Kirk howls. "No!" Her image starts to coalesce again. Kirk frantically calls to her, "Miramanee!"

Spock does not allow her presence. He forces a memory of his own, his joy at discovering Kirk alive after returning from Vulcan. “Our minds are one,” he says.

After you come back to me, you can have her too, Spock promises.

Kirk’s mind calls forth another image, rejecting Spock’s offer. Miramanee beside him as they take their marriage vows before the tribal chief. “I am Kirok. I am Kirok.”

No. You are Kirk. Spock battles. Replaces the image with that of the bridge of the *Enterprise*.

“I am Kir—” Spock tries and fails to get Kirk to accept his name. The tent returns. “I am Kirok!” Kirk shouts triumphantly.

Spock refocuses his mind, drawing another image. Their shared quarters on the *Enterprise*. Kirk tries to push it aside, starting to yell “I am—” but Spock refuses to let the image of their quarters be dispelled and this time his bondmate’s mind accepts the memory Spock has drawn. *Kirk,* he shouts in the meld.

Spock smiles inwardly in victory as he falls out of the meld. “Spock!” he shouts asserting his own identity again.

“What is it?” McCoy asked with concern, glancing back and forth between the two men.

The meld had been more taxing than anticipated. “His mind…” Spock stopped himself. The war he had waged to bring back Kirk was a private matter. “He is an extremely dynamic individual,” he replied blandly.

“It worked,” Kirk said, turning away from Spock and going to Miramanee.

Spock pushed aside the hurt Kirk’s cold tone and actions had engendered. Later, he would have the time to explain his actions in the meld. For now, he knew he needed to focus them both on the immediate task: saving Miramanee and the rest of the Amerind people. To succeed, he needed his captain back and addressed him as such. “Captain, were you inside this structure?”

“Yes. What’s inside is loaded with scientific equipment.” Spock noted Kirk responded without looking at him. He continued to be focused on Miramanee, stroking her hair.

“I believe this obelisk is one huge deflector mechanism. It is imperative that we get inside immediately.” Spock pressed his lips together in frustration as Kirk continued to focus on his wife. “Captain,” Spock emphasized his title, calling on Kirk’s inherent sense of duty, “we do *not* have much time.”

The strategy worked. Kirk shook himself. He turned away from Miramanee and commented, “I don’t know how to get inside.”

“If we are not able to gain entry and activate the deflector mechanism within the next fifty minutes, this entire planet will be destroyed.”

Kirk ran his hands over the raised markings on the obelisk. “The key must be in these symbols. We’ve got to decipher them.”

Spock inwardly smiled. It was evident there was no permanent damage to Kirk’s brain. “I already have to some extent, Captain. They are musical notes.”

“Do you mean entry can be gained by playing certain notes on a musical instrument?”

“That would be one method. Another would be a series of tonal qualities spoken in their proper sequence.” Spock replied as a gust of wind blew debris across the podium.

“Give me your communicator. I must have hit it accidentally when I contacted the ship.”

Kirk’s thought was exactly what Spock had surmised. “If you could remember your exact words, Captain.”

Kirk flipped open his communicator, “Kirk to *Enterprise*.”

“Aye, Captain,” Scott immediately replied and the hatch to the obelisk slid open, with Miramanee still lying on top of it. Given the hatch did not move until after Scott replied, Spock realized he had also been part of the puzzle. The phrasing had required eight notes. It was fortuitous that he had left Scott in command. Spock ceased his musing when it registered that Kirk had snapped shut his communicator.

Kirk stepped into the obelisk, pausing before descending into it to look at McCoy and Chapel who were tending to Miramanee. “Bones, stay with her. Do what you can.”

Spock followed Kirk down the stairs and surveyed the inner chamber of the obelisk. Readings indicated the computer banks were monitoring the atmosphere for asteroids and had detected one. All that would be required was activation. It was similar to other deflector panels Spock had seen, but its monitoring system appeared more complicated. Spock reached out to touch the panels, but Kirk jumped in.

“Careful, I must have hit something accidentally. A beam caught me and that’s when I stopped remembering.”

“Probably a memory beam.” *Likely used to instruct the locals in how to activate the unit*, Spock thought. “You must have activated it out of sequence.”

“More symbols,” Kirk sighed in frustration. “Can you read them?”

Spock had already focused his mind on the task. Deciphering the Preserver language had been his sole focus recently and that, combined with his general knowledge of the design of such deflector panels, allowed him to select with eighty-seven percent accuracy. Despite that, a small tremor shook his hand as he made his decision. One which would save this world and change his life forever.

On contact, other section panels activated and two point one seconds later a powerful deflector beam from the top of the obelisk activated, the strength of the blast shaking the structure below. It lasted for twelve point seven seconds.

When it ceased, Kirk contacted the ship.

“Scott here, Captain.”

“Status.”

“Mister Chekov’s on the scanners now. Give us a moment. He reports the asteroid deflector has done its job. It’s nae longer on a collision course with Amerind.”

“Great news. Kirk out.” He flipped the communicator shut.

Spock looked at Kirk. Before he had a chance to speak, Kirk was hurrying up the stairs, his back to him. “I have to see Miramanee.” Spock had taken a step, but then Kirk turned at the top, “alone,” he added quietly, and departed without looking back.

Spock swallowed back his offer to accompany him.

Now that the crisis was past, Spock allowed himself the luxury of rest. He was exhausted, mentally and physically. He sat on the bottom step leading to the surface trying to curb intrusive thoughts about Kirk’s reason for requesting privacy. He was moderately successful in convincing himself that it was simply that Kirk thought it best that he tell Miramanee about his existence before he was introduced.

Spock steepled his fingers as he reached across the bond which was disturbingly shuttered to him. He wondered how long he would be forced to wait to meet Miramanee. He was aware she had been in a weakened condition when they left, possibly due to blood loss from internal injuries sustained from the stoning, but he was certain McCoy and Chapel, with the benefit of the emergency surgical kit, could address her injuries.

No doubt, explaining my existence will be a shock. An emotional shock at this time may not be advised by the doctor. *I may have to wait to be introduced,* he reminded himself. But he knew he did not want to wait. He wanted to meet Kirk’s wife and assure her she was welcome.

He exhaled a breath, trying to collect himself. He tried to focus on the way forward. He leaned back against the wall. His mind was in disarray considering various options to a critical question: *How will we integrate Miramanee into our life without violating the Prime Directive?*

Spock stiffened as a hand squeezed his shoulder. McCoy’s blue eyes studied him intently as he kneeled beside him on the steps. “It’s not like you to fail to hear my approach.”

“My mind was occupied. How is Miramanee?”

“Not well. She miscarried.”

Miscarried? She carried our child. Spock inhaled sharply as the fingers he previously had steepled collapsed into a tight grip. *No*. Again he sought the mind of his mate, but he was denied access.

“Why are you not with her now if she requires medical aid?”

“There isn’t anything to be done. There was heavy bleeding. That combined with her other internal injuries…” The doctor’s voice trailed off. “I left her in the tent with Jim. He wanted some privacy.”

Nothing to be done? Impossible. “Beam her aboard. You can perform a blood transfusion on the *Enterprise*.”

McCoy’s jaw dropped before he quickly recovered, shouting. “She can’t just vanish from her tent!”

Spock bit his lower lip, torn by his conflicting duties. “You said Jim was with her in private. The blood transfusion could be performed in the tent.” Spock pulled his communicator out. “I will arrange to have a supply of synthetic blood beamed—”

“What’s gotten into you, Spock? I expected it from Jim, but not you. I can’t just violate the Prime Directive and use modern medicine to save her as much as I want to. Her people understand the gravity of the situation.”

Spock turned away from the doctor’s scrutiny. There had to be a solution. He had a duty to Miramanee. He stood abruptly. “If I perform a mind meld, I could help direct her mind to—”

McCoy blocked his attempt to exit on the stairs. “You’re exhausted and not thinking straight. As of this moment, you’re relieved of duty, Spock. Beam back to the *Enterprise*. Now!”

Spock gripped McCoy’s arm to push him out of the way. “Doctor, I—” *What? Have a personal duty?* His mouth snapped shut. *What could be done that would not violate his Starfleet oath?* He saw the grimace of pain on McCoy’s still face and released his hold.

McCoy flipped open his communicator keeping his eyes on Spock the whole time. “Uhura, give me Scotty.”

“Doctor?”

“Our science officer has worked himself to exhaustion saving this planet. As of this minute, he’s relieved of duty. He’ll be beaming up and going to his quarters and is not to be disturbed. Until further notice, you’re in command. I’ll do a complete physical of the captain once we’ve beamed aboard.” His voice dropped lower. “And Scotty, that might not be for a while yet. Jim needs to stay on the surface for an indefinite period. I suspect, no more than twelve hours.”

Spock took the moments while McCoy spoke to regain his composure. *If Jim can accept Miramanee’s loss of life, then I must.* He reached out along the bond to offer what comfort he could to his bondmate and again met a wall of resistance. The denial was a torment after all the days apart.

“You’ve done enough, Spock. I need you to return to the *Enterprise* and get some rest.” McCoy glanced over his shoulder to the stairs which led to the surface.

“I should be giving comfort to Jim.” Spock swallowed, unable to keep private his torment. “I cannot reach him. He has blocked me from his mind.” He looked at McCoy, searching the doctor’s eyes for answers as to why he was being shut out, knowing his pain was visible, but exhaustion stripped him of the controls necessary to keep his anguish hidden.

McCoy looked at him with compassion. “Don’t read too much into that, Spock. Right now, he needs some time alone with Miramanee. Later, he’ll need your support. I need *you* to get back to the ship and rest.”

Spock nodded, wearily. “Doctor, if I may make a request?” At McCoy’s nod, Spock continued. “Please remain on Amerind to provide Jim whatever support he needs as he seems unwilling to accept mine at present.”

“Of course, Spock.” McCoy smiled grimly.

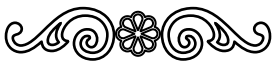
“And…” Spock shifted on his seat, as he considered how to frame his request.

“Yes,” McCoy prompted gently.

“And if you are unobserved, I would request that you do what you can to ease any discomfort for Miramanee.”

McCoy nodded. “I’ll do what I can.”

With that assurance, Spock flipped open his communicator and requested beam up.



Spock sat in his meditation robe, hands clasped tightly, on the edge of the bed in their shared quarters. He had returned from the surface six point eight hours ago but his attempts at meditation and rest had been futile. His mind and body remained in a state of agitation: a consequence of the forced meld on the planet and subsequent actions by his mate. There had been brief periods in the past when Kirk shielded his mind, typically after a difference of opinion or death of a member of the crew, but in those circumstances, it was a brief denial followed by a muting of their connection. This was different. Although he knew Kirk had experienced joy at the rediscovery of him in the meld on Amerind, that spark of joy had vanished immediately, and before Spock could assimilate the other emotions of his mate he had been pushed from his mind.

For the moment, Spock’s inner eye focused on the light which was Kirk’s presence throbbing brightly again in his mind after the endless days when it had been dimmed, but the presence remained illuminated behind a transparent wall allowing no sense of his emotional state. He knew his bondmate must be grieving and yet Kirk was denying him the ability to offer comfort. All Spock knew was that he would know no peace until he was truly one again with his mate.

He had moved from his meditation mat to the edge of the bed eighty-seven minutes ago when the alert he had set to monitor transporter activity chimed. A quick call to the bridge confirmed that the entire landing party had returned from the planet. It had taken considerable willpower to not go directly to sickbay. His only solace was the knowledge that McCoy was with Kirk and would do what he could to comfort him. Another part resented that his mate had not insisted on coming to him immediately after transport. There was no emergency requiring him to be immediately medically cleared for duty. The checkup required for medical clearance could have waited.

At that thought, another more worrisome thought intruded. Kirk was deliberately delaying returning to their quarters. His bondmate was rejecting him. *What else can explain his willful shuttering of our link?* He shuddered, gripping his hands tightly once again, to control the rampaging unproductive emotions. *Calm. He will come. He will explain.* He reached out. It was his thirty-seventh attempt to reach the mind of his bondmate since returning to the *Enterprise*. Nothing.

He stood and began pacing their quarters, unable to sit any longer, heart pounding in anticipation of the conversation that must occur. It was on his fifteenth turn that the doors opened. Spock spun around, deliberately releasing the hands he had gripped behind his back so that his arms first fell to his sides and then he deliberately opened them in welcome.

Kirk, still dressed in hide skins, stepped far enough into the room that the doors closed behind him and stopped. As Spock filled his lungs with the scent of his mate, he noted the scents from Amerind mixed with a slight trace of alcohol. Spock quickly squashed the irritation that rose at the thought of Kirk relaxing with McCoy with a drink while he anxiously waited. *He is here and suffering*. Red rimmed eyes glanced at him. As Kirk had not moved, Spock started forward.

When Kirk raised his hand in the stop motion, Spock ignored it, pulling his mate into the embrace he had longed to give since his departure from the planet.

“Don’t. I don’t deserve this,” Kirk choked out. His efforts at separation were no match for a determined Vulcan.

Spock rated them feeble at best, whispering into Kirk’s ear, “You do,” and pulled him tighter. Kirk trembled briefly, then stiffened in his arms. After five point two minutes, Spock stepped back worried by the tension that radiated off Kirk. When he looked away, Spock reached out and gently but firmly turned Kirk’s face towards him. “I grieve with you.”

“Stop.”

“Let me share your pain. Let us be one again.” Spock raised his hand, fingers spread. Kirk winced and turned abruptly.

“How can I ask you to share this? All you’ll experience is evidence of my betrayal.”

Spock wrapped his arms around his mate, pressing his chest against tight shoulders. He leaned his head on his shoulder. “Shutting me out is a betrayal. Amnesia is not.”

Kirk shook his head. “Bones told me how you worked yourself to exhaustion. On the planet, you were so tired, you weren’t even thinking straight. He had to relieve you.”

Spock sighed. Yet even now, he did not regret that he tried to save Miramanee. He only regretted his failure. “I could not do otherwise.”

Kirk swallowed hard. “And while you were driving yourself into the ground, I fell in love with Miramanee and now ache from her loss. You can’t see that and forgive and forget.”

Releasing Kirk, Spock moved from behind to stand directly in front of his mate capturing and holding his eyes. “Jim, meld with me and you will know the truth.”

Tortured eyes flashed at him in disbelief. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I accept your love of Miramanee.”

Kirk threw his hands up in frustration. “At least acknowledge what you’re feeling. God damn it, Spock, you couldn’t even bear to see us together. You tried to rip her from my mind in the meld,” he accused.

Spock reached for Kirk’s shoulders and held him steady as he stared intently into angry hazel eyes. “I regret the actions necessary in the meld. I had to push those memories away so you

would acknowledge me. They were not destroyed. You must believe me. I simply knew no other way to bring you back. Forgive me."

Kirk's eyes widened, then slowly the tension in his body eased as Spock's words sank in. "You weren't trying to remove her from my mind," Kirk acknowledged slowly.

Spock eased his hands away from Kirk's shoulders and held out a hand. Kirk took it and they walked into their bedroom. They sat on the edge of their bed together.

Spock gently touched the side of Kirk's face. "Jim, now that you are whole in your mind, I do not want you to hide your memories of Miramanee from me."

After swallowing, Kirk whispered. "In her final words, Miramanee was speaking of the long and happy life we would live together and the many strong sons she would bear me." Kirk's eyes glistened with tears. "We kissed a final time. I told her that I would always love her."

Spock nodded.

"Understand, it wasn't a lie."

"I would expect no less. And you mourn her death and the death of your child. I would not want it otherwise." Spock captured a hand in his, squeezing gently. "But you must understand this: they were part of *our* family unit. I regret that I failed in my duty to protect them."

A grim smile touched his partner's face. "Our hands were tied."

Spock released Kirk's hand to brush his fingers past the psi contact points on his face. "Jim, it has been too long since I have known the touch of your mind. I need to be one with you. Do not keep this wall between us. Let me share your love, happiness, pain … all."

After a brief hesitation, Kirk nodded and Spock allowed himself to breathe again. His fingers settled into place. It was comforting to see the landscape of images he was accustomed to no longer in shadow upon entry. Spock followed Kirk as he went to the new area, the one he had plunged past. A kaleidoscope of ephemeral images assaulted his senses. Miramanee cleaning fish, planting, laughing, running through the forest, picking berries, gasping in ecstasy, showing off a baby cradle, tending a fire, brushing her hair, then rubbing it with orange blossoms, smiling in Kirk's arms, dying in Kirk's arms.

It was too much and not enough. The emotional resonance of Kirk's happiness, joy, love, pain permeated Spock. It was difficult for Spock to absorb it all and then he realized Kirk's avatar had left his side.

Spock assumed Kirk had retreated to his usual quiet place and sought him out. He knew it well. The loft of his barn in Iowa. As always, it was a winter's day. It was Kirk's sanctuary. He made his way through the falling snow and climbed the ladder. His mind conjured a blanket and he sat beside Kirk to wrap him in it. His arm around his back. Offering comfort. Sharing warmth.

They sat silently for an undefined time in the mindscape.

Eventually, Spock loosened his grip and took Kirk's hand in his. He broke the silence. "We must return to those memories. You need to go slower. I want to know Miramanee. To love her as you do."

"I don't think I can. It's too hard."

"Take me back. I will be with you. It is my right. I wish to see a tender, loving moment."

"I can't do that to you."

"Trust me. Secrets cannot remain between us. Please share one loving moment. Another day, we can explore other memories."

Kirk took his hand and they descended from the loft. One moment they were walking in the snow hand in hand in the Iowa sunshine, the next they were running through the forest, sunshine filtering through the leaves of maple trees. Hearts pounding. Laughter rippled through the air.

"Here. Let's stop here." Miramanee lay down in the shade of a willow tree.

Spock inhaled the scent of the grass, pollen from the wildflowers by the lake's edge as he joined her. He leaned on one elbow and looked into chocolate orbs that worshipped his countenance. The sounds of birds and background insects filled him with peace. Her hand gently trailed up his arm.

"What shall we do today?" she asked, eyes dancing, beckoning him forth.

He leaned forward and tasted Miramanee's sweetness. Her raven black hair smelled of honey suckle on this day. As their kiss deepened her arms tightened around him and he rolled onto his back, bringing Miramanee with him, her breasts tight against his chest. Their kiss was broken only briefly by her laughter before they sealed together again as their hunger for each other escalated.

Spock groaned as he immersed himself in Kirk's memory. Kirk's arousal for his wife spread throughout his being. He shrugged his shoulders out of his Vulcan robe, switching hands to never lose contact with Kirk's psi points, reclining beside Kirk on their bed.

Miramanee and Kirk struggled to untie and push down his buckskin pants. Spock mirrored Miramanee's actions in their own bed. His hand brushing past Kirk's fast hardening member. As Miramanee's hand wrapped around Kirk's sex, Spock did the same. He had longed for his bondmate.

Spock surrendered to Kirk's memory. It was becoming difficult to keep himself apart. "My wife. So beautiful," he murmured between heated kisses. He rolled her so that he was on top, looking down on his wife. His hand caressed the body hidden under the deerskin. Breasts. Hardened nipples. Flat belly. He pushed aside the skirt. His fingers explored. Reveling in the dampness. Her desire for him was evident. He found the nub. Massaged. Taking joy as her body responded to him. *Come for me, Miramanee.*

Miramanee had stopped kissing. Her warm breath huffed against his neck. He knew she was close. Finally, she shuddered, wrapped in his embrace. She smiled at him with love, “my chief,” she whispered.

“I will love you always,” whispered back as their lips met in a slow, deliberate sensuous kiss. Spock kissed his bondmate, who instinctively responded. As Miramanee and Kirk’s desire began to escalate again, so did Spock’s in turn. His sex was throbbing as he ground it into Kirk’s thigh seeking more friction.

“Want you,” Miramanee gasped. And the words seemed to be meant for both of them. As Miramanee directed Kirk to her entrance, Spock rolled Kirk onto his stomach, positioning himself behind. He switched hands again to maintain the meld as he quickly spread lubrication from his leaking glans over his cock. He was achingly hard.

As Kirk pressed forth, Spock pushed forth as well, only he met resistance. *No.* “Love you,” Miramanee and Kirk said in unison as Kirk began to move.

No. Do not leave me behind. Spock searched quickly in Kirk’s mind, taking command of his body, loosening the rectal walls. On autopilot, his fingers took lubrication oozing from the flared head of his penis and coated the way. He had just lined himself up, the head of his penis starting to inch forward when Kirk moved beneath him, making love to his wife, in sync with the memory. The movement caused Spock to lose contact.

No, not without me. Spock used the weight of his body to pin Kirk in place. His cock wedged in the crack between Kirk’s ass cheeks. He pulled back, positioning himself again, then froze in realization just as the head of his penis started forward.

Jim! Jim! Spock cried out frantically for recognition. His mate was oblivious to his needs, lost in his memory.

Kirk gasped below him. A blaze of anger pierced Spock. *How dare you!* The shout reverberated in his mind. Kirk yanked his head free of Spock’s fingertips, breaking the meld. His head twisted back as he shouted. “Get off me! Out of me!”

Spock winced. He knew he should comply. He had not wanted to cause more pain. He had planned to simply observe.

“I didn’t agree to this.”

“Please, Jim. I thought I could stand apart, but I can’t.” Spock wished he had better control. If he wasn’t so exhausted. His body began to tremble. “I want—” his voice broke. Spock swallowed. “I need to be with you both,” he finished.

“Why?”

Kirk was calmer now staring at him intently. Through their body contact, he could sense Kirk’s emotions. His anger had dissipated slightly, replaced by confusion. Underneath that Spock could sense Kirk’s concern and love directed at him, despite his actions. “Miramanee is not only *your* wife. She is *our* wife. Let me make love to her with you. It is too difficult to be apart. If she had lived, I may have participated in this manner.”

“All right.” Kirk sighed. “I’ll try. Although I’m not sure I can get back in the mood.”

“If you still trust me, I can help.”

Kirk nodded and Spock melded with him again, winding back the memory to an appropriate period and then letting it start forward again. This time when Kirk slid into Miramanee he was fully aware of Spock joining with him as well. Kirk didn’t try to quell the love he felt for Miramanee, he let his heart swell with it. As Kirk moved, Spock moved. In unison, they made love to her and each other. Together, Miramanee’s, Kirk’s and Spock’s passion soared until they had all climaxed. And it was right.

Spock collapsed on Kirk. They both took a moment to catch their breath. After two point one minutes, in which Kirk said nothing, Spock whispered, “Thank you.” He disentangled himself and went to the washroom to retrieve a towel. He hesitated momentarily, wary of the conversation to come, wondering what Kirk was thinking. He had lost contact with Kirk’s psi points just prior to climax, so Kirk’s thoughts were again a mystery. The link was muted, but not blocked. Spock had sensed the typical euphoria post orgasm and now a sense of anxiousness before he left the bed; however, he was uncertain if it was his own anxiety he was reading.

Spock noted on his return that Kirk had taken the opportunity to remove all his clothes which were on a heap on the floor. He was seated on the edge of the bed. Spock approached holding out a towel. Kirk stood, wiped the last residue of semen off his person, then opened the covers to their bed. He climbed in, patting the spot beside him. “Join me.”

Spock was pleased. Kirk’s short silence had unnerved him. He was normally the first to speak post coitus.

Clearing his throat, Kirk began to speak. “I’m sorry I was so angry earlier. All that rage, it wasn’t only directed at you. I’m mad at the people who did this to her, at myself for failing to protect her. If I had only been able to get into the obelisk thirty minutes earlier, Miramanee wouldn’t have died.”

Spock refrained from telling Kirk not to blame himself. Logically, he knew Kirk understood he was not to blame for the violent actions of others. The same could not be said for himself. He should have anticipated what could have happened given his tenuous control. He forced himself to look directly at his mate. “My actions were inappropriate. I asked for your trust, then violated it. I—” A finger over his lips silenced him.

“No more. I forgive you. Don’t forget, although I had pulled away from the meld, our bodies were still joined. I could sense how desperate you were.”

Spock looked away, unable to hold eye contact any longer. It was distressing to realize how out of control he had been in that moment. If Kirk had not acquiesced, would he have been able to withdraw? “I should have known not to ask for the meld when I was so exhausted. I lost control.”

Kirk took Spock’s hand in his. “I want to explain something. I didn’t want to show you my love for Miramanee, not because I was ashamed of it, but because I didn’t want it to hurt you.”

“Your shielding is what hurt me. I need you, Jim. *All* of you. Now, she is part of us.”

“I didn’t understand how beautiful it could be to share my love for her with you.”

“When we bonded, I did explain it is a common Vulcan family structure to have either three or four individuals in a family unit.”

“Yes. I remember now that a significant number—”

“Thirty-eight point seven percent of family units,” Spock supplied.

Kirk nodded, not skipping a beat. “Honestly, I think I may have tuned out half of what you were saying at the time. I couldn’t imagine sharing. Why did you say it was so common?”

Spock raised an eyebrow. He had explained in detail. “Sexual attraction by gender is not a factor on Vulcan. All Vulcans are inherently bisexual. It is a compatible mind that matters. However, a compatible mind happens with equal frequency for the same sex. *Pon farr* typically requires a male/female pairing, its sole purpose being procreation. So, ninety-nine point seven percent of family units—”

Kirk jumped in. “I remember now. That’s why clans continue the practice of arranging marriages male/female and additions to the family units can be made based on other factors.” A grin spread across Kirk’s face. “And the only exception to this requirement for a male/female pairing is the rare *t’hy’la* bond where the male will accept a mate of the same sex and not view him as a rival.”

The corners of Spock’s mouth raised. “Affirmative, my *t’hy’la*.”

“I guess, despite all my travels, I’m still a product of my Terran upbringing. I could never imagine sharing my heart with more than one person. Sex with more than one, sure, but love didn’t seem possible. I couldn’t picture myself in a family unit with more than one partner.”

“For myself, prior to meeting you, I always believed I would end up in a family structure of three or four.”

“Why?”

“Family is important on Vulcan. Currently, I am the last of my line. Since I am sterile, the obvious way for me to participate in parenthood would be in such a manner.”

Kirk glanced sharply in his direction. “What is it?”

Spock realized the brief surge of uncontrolled anger he felt towards T’Pring must have bled through together with his own shame. His continued lack of control was embarrassing.

“Hey, look at me.” Kirk gripped his hand tighter. Swallowing his pride, Spock turned back.

“I know your controls aren’t the best at this moment, but perhaps whatever caused that anger is best expressed. Not buried.”

Spock let out a small huff of air. Kirk gave him an encouraging nod and he began. “I was aware of T’Pring’s attachment to Stonn. I thought it a good thing that she had found someone that she had mental affinity with. I was prepared to welcome Stonn into our family unit once we were bonded. My wife would have had a companion that she desired. I would have continued to serve in Starfleet for a time and then participated in the child’s upbringing. There would be an heir. My parents would be pleased and perhaps the distance between—”

“Oh Spock,” Kirk’s voice was full of sympathy.

“I was a naïve fool. And it almost cost your life.” A shudder rippled down his spine.

“T’Pring’s actions aren’t your fault.” Kirk leaned over Spock and kissed him gently on the lips. “And I, for one, am glad how it all turned out. But what you said reminds me of something you mentioned the first time we discussed this. You said you were *prepared* to welcome Stonn. I recall you saying any addition to a family unit was a *joint* decision. I took away your right when I married Miramanee.”

“It was not deliberate on your part.”

“No, it was not.”

The conversation appeared to have come to a natural end, but there was something in Kirk’s manner that made Spock pause. He studied Kirk who was now nestling against his arm. He seemed hesitant. “What are you thinking?”

“I was wondering what your reaction was when you found out about Miramanee and her pregnancy?”

Shock, Spock thought. It was his immediate reaction; however, it lasted only a moment. He knew Kirk wanted more from him. “I worried about how we would maintain a relationship with Miramanee and fulfill our parental obligations to our child and not break the Prime Directive.”

“Their deaths are a blessing in disguise, I guess,” Kirk’s voice cracked.

Spock reached for Kirk’s face, turning him quickly, so they were face to face. “No. I mourn her death and the death of our unborn child. Miramanee would have been a joyous addition to our family unit and her child a precious gift to us.”

Kirk licked his lips. “I never thought there would be more than us two in our family, but now…” Kirk trailed off.

Spock looked at Kirk trying to determine what he meant by the statement, “Are you saying you would like to pursue this avenue to start a family.”

“Let’s say, I’m more open to the idea. Although at present, our lifestyle is not conducive to parenthood.”

“You may not always be a starship captain.” The words felt sacrilegious. Spock was buoyed by the fact that for the first time mentioning a life after the *Enterprise* was met with calm acceptance. Normally, Kirk exuded a feeling of dread.

“I might enjoy the challenges of establishing a new colony somewhere. I’m sure a new colony could use your scientific know-how. We would be sure to pick a colony that aligns with our ideals. It would have to be supportive of inter-species relationships.”

As long as I am by your side, I will be content, Spock thought. He cleared his throat. “You understand, sexual positioning may not always be as today. I do not anticipate a need to engage in coitus with the female partner we select. Even during *pon farr* I expect I will be drawn to you, but if a female is present—”

Kirk completed Spock’s thought. “Your biology will seek to procreate.”

“Possibly. If the female is Vulcan the biological need may prevail. *T’hy’la* bonds are rare and almost exclusively couples. I doubt authoritative studies exist as to which drive would prevail.”

Kirk frowned. “I want to be clear. If we decide to have another partner, we both need to be mentally and physically attracted to her. I know you would have accepted Miramanee because of the way it happened, but you’re not to put my desires ahead of your own. Agreed?”

Spock tipped his head in agreement and Kirk kissed him quickly before resting his head on Spock’s shoulder. He let out a small sigh, “Anyway, we don’t need to decide any of this now.” Spock sensed a brief surge of sadness across their link and circled his arm around Kirk’s back. He waited as Kirk took a few deep breaths. “We may decide not to add another partner in our family unit. If we don’t meet a person we both feel drawn to, but still decide we want a child, we could hire a surrogate. Is that done on Vulcan?”

“No.” Kirk lifted his head, eyes widened in surprise. Before he could comment, Spock continued speaking to set his partner’s mind at ease, “But as I am not on Vulcan, I would be agreeable to exploring that avenue to becoming a parent along with other options such as adoption. I do have a desire to be a parent or at least to mentor the younger generation, if parenthood is not what you wish.”

A fleeting smile crossed Kirk’s face as he collapsed back onto the pillow beside Spock. “I’ve never allowed myself to think about parenthood before. This job has taken precedence. It’s why I agreed to Carol’s terms about David. I didn’t think I could do both. But once Miramanee told me about our child, I couldn’t help but be excited. At the time, I didn’t know about this.” Kirk’s gesture took in the entire room while his eyes held Spock’s eyes. “In any case, I know the idea excites me. However, I won’t be ready until my day in the captain’s chair is done and I’m not sure when that will be.”

Spock sought out Kirk’s hand under the covers, interlacing their fingers. He did not wish to dampen the positive mood discussions of their future had elicited, but he could not risk leaving Amerind without performing certain rites for his wife and child.

“Jim, there is a Vulcan ceremony for those whose *katra* has passed into the universe and has not been saved to be brought to the Hall of Thought. I would like us to go to the surface of Amerind tomorrow so I can perform this ceremony for our wife and child before we depart.”

Kirk squeezed Spock’s hand tightly.

“I’d like that very much. She would be honored. Now, I think you need to sleep.”

Spock sighed, releasing the last vestiges of tension from his body. Kirk as well seemed more at peace. They repositioned themselves on their bed. With his bondmate secure in his arms for the first time in two months, Spock allowed himself to rest.

And death shall have no dominion

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.
And death shall have no dominion.
Under the windings of the sea
They lying long shall not die windily;
Twisting on racks when sinews give way,
Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;
Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
And the unicorn evils run them through;
Split all ends up they shan't crack;
And death shall have no dominion.
And death shall have no dominion.
No more may gulls cry at their ears
Or waves break loud on the seashores;
Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
Though they be mad and dead as nails,
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion.

Tiberius does Dallas
by Soral

Summary: Definitely a crack fic, but not so bad as the episode itself. I give you the missing scene that would have made sense of “Spock’s Brain.”

“It really has to rate as the most bizarre mission nightmare to date, Bones.”

McCoy sat back to savor his Saurian; Jim’s tales were best accompanied by the mellow mindset that a couple of glasses of the good stuff would provide.

“*Sigma Draconis*, I mean, where did I dredge that name from?”

“Some childhood story about wizards and witches, perhaps?”

“I mean, incapacitating the entire crew, Spock’s body turned into a brainless robot controlled by you, McCoy, of all people.”

“Doesn’t sound like a nightmare to me.”

“Then we follow an ion trail. I mean, Bones, a civilization as advanced as one that could breach our security and take a crew member leaves an ion trail. It defies logic.”

“What about the women? Let me guess — buxom…”

“What makes you think there were women?”

“There always are.”

“The guys lived on the surface…”

“And the bimbos lived in caves…”

“How did you know?”

“There is always a cave.”

”We didn’t get far, but at least we established Spock was still alive. Then the women knocked us out, and when we woke up, we had these belts on that gave us shocks if we disobeyed the women.”

“Sounds like some kind of kink electro-play scenario.”

“It went from bad to worse. I should have realized it was a dream when we found Spock’s brain inside a structure resembling a *KerPlunk* game. Spock had lost his marbles.”

“So how did we rescue Spock?”

“You put a strange device on that looked more like a prop from the hair salon in *Legally Blonde*.”

McCoy parked that one to tease Jim about later and nodded sagely, taking an extra sip of brandy to hide his smirk.

“Carry on.”

“You won’t like it, halfway through reattaching his brain you begin to forget what the teaching device shoved into *your* brain, and Spock has to tell you how to operate.”

“Now that *is* a nightmare.”

“Then I hear a noise from the bathroom. I mean, Spock never uses the water option.”

“Sounds like a soap opera to me.”

“You are not taking this seriously.”

McCoy certainly wasn’t, and Jim was being far too earnest. So Bones pushed a glass towards his friend and decided to take over the story. “Then you wake up, Spock comes out of the bathroom clad only in a skimpy towel, and you realize it’s only a dream.”

“That bit wasn’t part of the dream.”

Outcomes-Based Initiative by Amedia

KIRK: There are times, Mister Spock, when I think I should have been a librarian.

SPOCK: The job of librarian would be no less challenging, Captain, but it would undoubtedly be a lot less dangerous.

(Star Trek: The Animated Series, "Bem")

Captain James T. Kirk looked up from studying navigational updates to look at the spaceport outside the ship. Through the big picture windows in his office, he watched a starship shooting out from the nearby spaceport and flaring brilliantly into warp speed. He wondered, not for the first time, whether being the captain of a Starfleet vessel would have been a more suitable job for him than the one he had now.

Certainly, commanding an exploratory Starfleet vessel would be more exciting than piloting a galactic bookmobile. Yet such reflections inevitably brought him to the same thought: if he'd chosen a different path through life, he would not have met his beloved husband, Mister Spock. As always, thinking about the head librarian brought a smile.

Today Kirk's smile was especially broad. Since Spock was the highest-ranking member of the Federation Library Service aboard, the task of his formal assessment fell to Kirk, who was outside that hierarchy, rather than to one of the lower-ranking members of the library staff. Many people found assessment to be a bureaucratic nightmare. Kirk found it a never-ending source of bedroom inspiration.

The computer chimed a soft silver sound to signal the end of shift, and Kirk leapt eagerly to his feet. He made his way from the navigation area of the ship into the library proper, and put his head into the head librarian's office. "Good evening, Mister Spock," he said, his dancing hazel eyes belying his apparent calm.

Spock looked up from tidying his desk. A trace of a smile warmed his features as he saw Kirk in the doorway. "More assessment work tonight, Captain?" he asked in a voice that was dry with a tinge of amused hope.

By contrast, Kirk grinned broadly. "Ohhh, yes," he replied.

Over dinner in the cafeteria, they chatted quietly about the day. The Klingons had appealed to Spock to settle a disagreement as to which recording of *Aktuh and Maylota* they should ask the library to obtain, and in an effort to avoid bloodshed amongst the quarreling parties, Spock had suggested that they simply ask the library to stock both versions. He further offered to host a Klingon Opera Appreciation Night the next time the Starbook was in neutral space.

“An excellent strategy, Mister Spock,” said Kirk. “If you were in charge of peace talks, we might even be friends with the Romulans by now!”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “I take it this is one of your Human jokes based on exaggeration?”

“If it were a joke, that would be the correct category,” said Kirk, always pleased to see Spock making advances in understanding humor. “But in this case, I was not exaggerating, nor was I joking. You have a knack for finding solutions without ruffling feathers. Don’t forget the Orion Pirates and their distaste for certain forms of erotica.”

“Your admiration in this case is misplaced,” said Spock. “I merely showed them how to use the tagging system so that potentially offensive materials were hidden from their view.”

“And the Ferengi? They were highly suspicious of an institution that managed its resources in a moneyless system, and were unwilling to engage in any use of the library because they could not satisfy themselves that it was solvent.”

Spock looked down and the corners of his mouth lifted slightly. “I was pleased that challenging them to restructure their theoretical framework so that they could profit from understanding alternative economic systems was effective. However—” and he gestured toward Kirk with his glass, “did you have to suggest to them that they could adapt our business model to creating Space ‘Boozemobiles’?”

Kirk was unapologetic. “It certainly boosted their enthusiasm,” he said. He leaned toward Spock and touched their foreheads together. “Are you finished with dinner?”

Spock nodded. “I surmise that neither of us is particularly hungry tonight, Captain, which is logical. Certain assessment activities result in unsatisfactory outcomes when attempted on a full stomach.”

They reached their quarters and Kirk activated the door. “Do you remember the assessment area for tonight, Spock?” he asked.

Spock nodded. “It may be my favorite topic so far, Jim. Although I derived great enjoyment from last month’s seminar on collegiality and collaboration with the welcome participation of our visitor Doctor McCoy, I am eager to embark on this month’s session.”

He pushed open the door to the bedroom and began undressing rather more swiftly than usual. Kirk followed suit. “So, creativity and innovation have sparked your interest?” Kirk asked, shucking the last of his clothes and climbing onto the bed.

“Indeed, Jim,” said Spock. “I have been contemplating a number of ideas,” said Spock, joining him there. Reaching into the nightstand on his side of the bed, he pulled out a notebook and opened it to a page covered densely in his precise handwriting. “And I believe they will result in some momentous outcomes.”

The Bondmate Tetrameter
by T'Lara

Never forgotten words which withstand
Error and failure even beneath
Veils of opaque haze cast by dark time.
Embers still smoulder under the coal
Resting in fire ancient and pure.

And
Never
Dying

Always reminding souls with the sounds
Lips once had uttered sealing the bond,
Weaving a thread that Fates could not cut:
Answering questions fortune would pose,
Youthful equation for growing old,
Senses not tiring under a yoke.

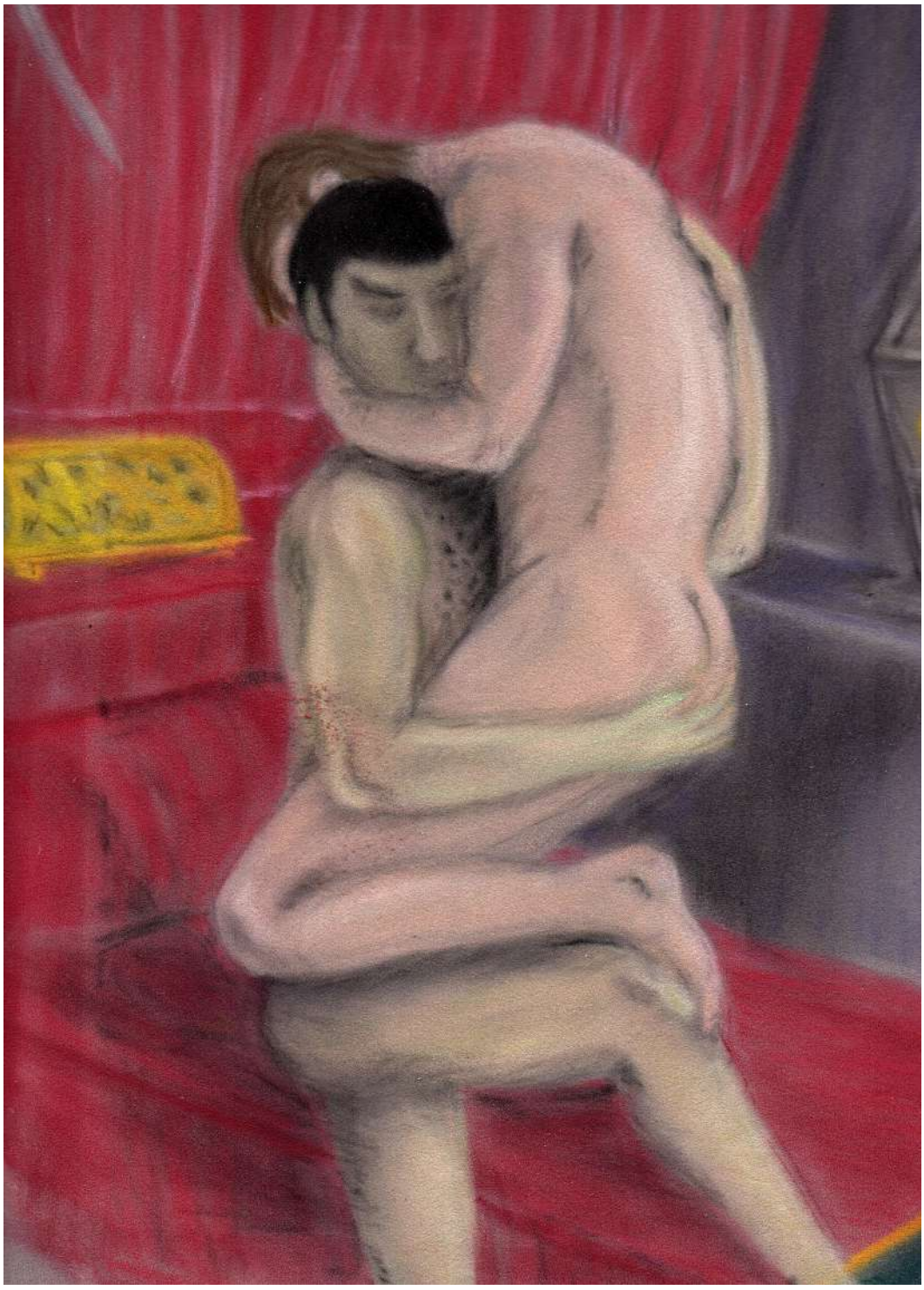
Touching a sheer sky inside two ships:
Only the second sails through deep space.
Unmatched the first one made out of love,
Crossing a distance never too soon.
Hope ever bringing farewells unmade
Into a shared life fighting the odds,
Novas and madmen, gods or mere death.
Going still boldly where no one dares.

And
Never
Dying

Touched and enchanted by mind's caress,
Opening pathways into both's thoughts.
Universe tending this bond divine.
Calls his *t'hy'la* to the set place.
Holy in legends, life force for mates,
Entering *katras* like needed breath.
Drawn to each other: One entity.

Author's Note: The meter for this poem was derived from the *Amok Time* phrase "never and always, touching and touched" : trochee / amphibrach // trochee / iamb.

The Joining
by Lynn Hartshorn



A Calculated Risk
by Carleen

It is a scientific fact that Humans possess a fraction of the strength and stamina of Vulcans. Indeed, Vulcans also possess a higher degree of mental and intellectual proficiency. Yet Humans persist in their stubborn, often baselessly arrogant methods to overpower anything in their path.

The captain of the starship *Enterprise* stands in front of me, body square and fists clenched. His breathing rate increased twenty percent since he confronted me as I stepped off the transporter pad. His body language also informs me he intends to evaluate the theory of unmovable objects versus unstoppable forces. Indeed, he already has by striking me and insulting my family. Childish, don't you think? I'm sure my mother would agree.

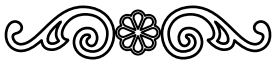
If it weren't for the spores… The spores. If it weren't for the spores … I wouldn't have lost control. I wouldn't have pursued the baseless connection with a woman half my age, with happily-ever-after building like storm clouds in her luminous eyes. If it hadn't been for the spores, I wouldn't have endangered my crew and my captain's lives.

James T. Kirk, my captain and companion, is an unstoppable force of intellect and raw masculinity. And those two factors turn my head from Vulcan pragmatism, ground me in the sea of Humanity, and invoke imaginary scenarios that can never be. I am aware that I am the unmovable object to his unstoppable force. It is a law of physics, and yet, I'm often pulled toward it, helpless in the face of his magnetism.

The need for something beyond my reach floods my bloodstream. It must be the spores reinfecting me. It surged with each act of violence from the captain — my heart races, keeping pace with the rage simmering just below the surface of my flesh. Desire tempts me into exploring actions with which I have no experience or rights. It is not for the girl my body yearns. No, not her. I tremble with desire for the golden man who dares to provoke my rage.

I will stop him now before he insults my family again. When a small table makes it into my hands, the spores plead with me to protect them. I raise the table above my head.

I will not kill the captain. *No, not today,* the spores sing to me. *Don't kill him. Simply stop his mouth from uttering such vile insults. We will protect you. We will make you happy. She is still here. She wants you. Why do you linger with this one?*



I'm swaying on my feet and my chest aches from exertion, but I can't back down. Not yet. Not while the spores still hold Spock in their grip.

I took a chance by wiping the sweat from my eyes and catching my breath. I've insulted him about everything I can think of. Maybe it's working. I must believe it's working because I don't know what else to do. He's angry with me, angry enough to retaliate. But that's my goal, isn't it? I remind myself that this raging bull in front of me is my first officer. In his heart, he's a pacifist. But when provoked, he could pack a punch.

He's still glaring at me. So, it's not over yet. There's too much at stake, so I must hold my ground.

He's also the closest thing I have to a friend. There's Bones, of course. Our friendship is based on his ability to mother-hen me into taking better care of myself and he approves of my ability to match him whiskey for whiskey. It's challenging to remember all that while my jaw throbbed to the beat of my pounding heart and my hands ached to the tune of broken bones.

Bones will have a fit about my hand. But I had to do something, try anything to get Spock's attention. He may never forgive me for what I've done, and I'll have to live with that. How, I don't know. That friendship I mentioned will end today. But if I don't get to him soon, we'll run out of time.

I hate that I must hurt him, but I have no other choice.

Any worries I had about hurting him flew out the airlock when Spock grabbed a table with every intention of embedding it in my body. It's raised above his head. I brace myself, but in the same instant, I watch the fight go out of him like a deeply held breath. I saw it happen when he stopped short of hitting me and the spores dissolved in the hot blood of an angry Vulcan.

I'm sorry.

Watching the fight go out of him honestly startled me. What now? At least I can breathe again, and with luck, I can count on my first officer to return to duty. I need him, he knows I need him, and as I said, we are running out of time. I'll have to accept the guilt that accompanies my actions, but my plan did work. After everything that had happened today, watching the pain of disappointment on Spock's face hurt most because I was the cause.

"Captain, you did that to me deliberately," he said, placing the table carefully on the floor as if it were something fragile.

The grief in my friend's voice overrode my pleas for forgiveness. We don't have time for that. I need him now, so I make a joke to defer the apologies and my growing guilt, "Believe me, Mister Spock. It was painful in many ways," I replied, rubbing my chin.

No one would call me a publicly affectionate type of man, and I don't, as a rule, hug people. No one expects a starship captain to be a hugger, but damn it, I wanted to touch him. I reached for him, palm up, and he flinched when my fingertips touched his sleeve.

Okay, so that's how he wants to play it. "We have work to do, Mister Spock. To get the crew back, I need your help."

Spock nodded but stopped in the hatchway, "Captain, striking a fellow officer is a court martial offense?"

“Well, if we’re both in the brig…?”

Spock touched my lips with his fingertips. “Don’t.”

I should have taken that as a warning, but I couldn’t stop. “I’m sorry I had to do it … take you away from her.”

His face closed while his eyes hardened. A wisp of panic forced my hand to clench his bicep. I managed to stop him before he could turn away. *Look at me, damn you. Look me in the eye. Please*.

Spock moved his arm out of my desperate grasp. “Captain, I am myself again and prepared for duty. Let us stay focused on the task at hand.”

“Spock, I can’t manage this without you.”

“I am aware of that, sir. Shall we?”

On the bridge, we worked silently while setting a trap for the crew. Spock seemed unwilling to talk, so I waved him off when the transporter room announced the arrival of the colonists. I can’t imagine what Spock might have left to say to Leila, but it’s his business.

Once the crew started beaming up, I headed to my quarters. Later, after a four-hour nap and a hot shower, I returned to the bridge with my heart still heavy. When the elevator doors opened, I had my captain’s face back on and joined Spock and Doctor McCoy next to my command chair.

I listened to Bones’ chatter while visually inspecting the bridge stations. My crew is safe, and the ship is flight-ready. About to defend Spock from Bones’ teasing, Sulu and Chekov glanced at me to let me know we could leave on my command.

*Thank God, I am ready for things to return to normal. “*At your discretion, Mister Sulu.”

I sank into my chair, leaving the ship in Sulu’s capable hands. Using my chair, as they often did, as a barrier, Bones and Spock continued bickering over my head. I tried to ignore it by sending Rand a mental directive to bring me coffee. When no coffee appeared, I don’t understand why not, since I fully intended to promote her to lieutenant for her heroic actions. Finally, I decided I’d had enough.

“We haven’t heard much from you since Omicron Ceti III, Mister Spock.” Silence answered my question. Then Spock stepped forward, putting some distance between Bones and me.

“I have little to say about it, Captain. Except for the first time in my life, I was happy.”

Startled, I glanced up at McCoy, who raised an eyebrow before quietly exiting the bridge. Spock’s words inexplicably angered me. As the anger faded, I realized I also felt betrayed.

“Mister Sulu, continue the present course. Please inform me when we reach Star Base 12. Otherwise, I’ll be in my quarters.” I left the bridge without acknowledging my first officer and fled to my quarters.

My first victim was the ridiculous sculpture by my bunk. It impacted the wall leaving a satisfying dent in the bulkhead before crumbling into pieces of red something or other and scattering across the deck.

The door to my quarters opened right on cue. Because, of course, someone decided I needed interrupting. It's all true what they say that command *is* a lonely job, yet you're never alone.

It wasn't Rand or Bones or one of Scotty's techs. My first officer stood in the doorway, witnessing my childish behavior.

"Arrogant of me to assume you were happy here," I snapped. Better to get this over with. To maintain our working relationship, we needed to discover our new normal.

I value your friendship and our partnership, Mister Spock. I think I'm in love with you, seemed premature, so I stopped talking. Spock's life, his decision — he might ask for a transfer. I could only accept the outcome and learn to live without him in my life.

"Captain, if I may?"

In no mood for another impenetrably logical excuse, I turned on him.

"Before you leave, perhaps you might take a few minutes to help me understand how your words surprised me. Like one of your right hooks, it hits hard. I felt, dammit, I felt betrayed."

"Allow me to explain. I found her…" Spock secured his hands behind his back. "Jim, she's not the woman I knew six years ago. It shames me to say this, but the spores forced those feelings of love from me. I said things I didn't feel and … that I didn't understand."

"Spock…?"

"Allow me to finish, sir. You want to know what happened on the planet? Of course, you do. Humans possess such an appetite for prurient gossip. I kissed her twice. And you assume I initiated sex with her because I'd changed clothes. You proceed from a false assumption, *Captain*. I was standing so close to the plant that the oil and spores drenched my uniform. I was filthy with it when I asked for a change of clothes."

Why was he reassuring me? Was he reassuring me? "Spock, what you did or did not share with her is your business."

"Then I do not understand your anger."

I started pacing because now I'm lost. He's my friend, and suddenly I don't know how to have a simple conversation with the man with whom I spent my free time playing chess, working out, discussing books, politics, and philosophy.

I said the first words that entered my head. "And I don't understand your anger, Spock. She was beautiful, with all that gorgeous golden hair and brown eyes," I exclaimed like a jealous fool.

"Hazel."

"What?"

"Hazel."

"Oh."

Spock sighed so deeply I heard it across the room. "Golden hair, changeable hazel eyes. A smile that lights up a room."

That was from Spock. What the hell…? We stared at each other. We were waiting for something. For the other shoe to drop, I guess. Spock, always good at silences, won the battle when I finally spoke.

“Spock? I need help.” Him and his goddamn silences. “If you enjoyed her charms … sorry, company.”

“We did not have sexual intercourse, Captain.”

Oh, well. That settles everything. What am I supposed to do with that information?

*“*That’s none of my business, but why not?” I responded, shoulders shrugging, the way one man might speak to another about a woman. “She was gorgeous.”

Spock turned his back on me, triggering my anger back to the surface.

“I don’t care what you did or did not do with her, Spock. What I want to know is, if by your admission the feelings felt false to you, why did you say it was the only time you were happy?”

“When we met on Earth, she made her attraction obvious, including expressing affection in public. At first, I found her attention flattering.”

Spock turned his face toward me as if allowing me to witness the emotions etching his face or begging me to understand. “The spores forced unwelcome emotions into my life.”

More silence.

“Goddamnit, Spock. Is it insane of me to assume you were happy with me as my first officer? You owe me an explanation.” I laughed. “Why aren’t you with her instead of here? I won’t talk you out of leaving if you want a transfer. Now, go if you must. Spend time with her.”

“Captain, I stated my case, by indicating that I have no interest in her charms. However, since you seem so concerned, why don’t *you* visit her? She’s located in the visiting officer’s quarters.”

Emotion churned to life in my chest and swept away the anger. I hadn’t felt such grief since my brother died. And now, Spock would leave too. How could I hold onto my command if Spock were to leave me? I didn’t know, and it scared me. Wait. What did he just say?

“What?”

“I said, if you are so concerned with her state of mind, perhaps you should visit her. Your prowess is well known, throughout the galaxy.”

“Watch your words, *Mister.*” I felt the need to put distance between us. But I was in no shape for the crew to see me in this state. Busy trying to hide inappropriate emotions, I failed to notice Spock walk up behind me. The unexpected weight of his hands resting on my shoulders sent a shiver down my spine.

“Jim.”

The sound of Spock murmuring my name sent tears to my eyes. I couldn’t allow our friendship to end this way. I turned slowly into his arms, and when he didn’t move away, I moved closer. If I had to let him go, I resolved to suck it up and wave goodbye.

“Spock? I won’t stop you from leaving. Any captain would be honored to have you as their exec, and it’s important to me that you find that happiness.” How wrong, how naive I was to think our friendship could sustain him. I wanted … I needed him to find happiness. That whole mess with T’Pring took him weeks to process.

When his gentle fingers wiped a few errant tears from my cheek, I leaned into the touch needing him, craving his touch and affirmation.

“I’ll write you the best review any first officer ever received. I don’t know how I’ll be once you’re gone, but I want you to be happy wherever that search takes you.”

“Are you sending me away, Captain?”

“What? No, of course not.” My answer caused me to step back so quickly that I backed into my desk. *I need a drink.* Instead of reaching for the brandy, I forced myself to stop and think. Was I sending him away? Why would I do that? Because he means that much to me.

“I’m not sending you away. How could I? After today’s events, I won’t stop you if you want a transfer. But right now, I’ll say good night. It’s been a long damn day, and I need to sleep.”

“As you wish, Captain. Goodnight.”

Then he was gone, and I’m standing in my empty quarters with a gut full of emotions I don’t know how to manage. I need to sleep — the best thing for me. No brandy. Sleep.

I stripped and dove into bed. When it finally came, sleep was a confusing parade of half-formed dreams about my ship, crew, and first officer. It wasn’t until the alarm went off that I realized my anger came from my imagined inability to make Spock happy. Now what?

Time to face the day. A few minutes later, I walked out of my bathroom, in search of a clean uniform, clean, exhausted, naked, and aroused. And continuing the theme of how a good captain is never alone, my first officer stood just inside the door.

Perfect.

*“*What do you want of me, Captain Kirk?”

If you’re going to put it like that, how about a blowjob? How long has it been? Stop thinking about it, you idiot. What I need is coffee.

My dick thought it was a promising idea though because you know how it goes. My robe was in the bathroom, so my choice now was to retreat. Fuck that. Captain James T. Kirk never retreats.

“Spock, if this is a senior leader briefing, then a uniform is in order.”

“That will not be necessary, Captain. You only must answer my question.”

At this point, the only question I can think of is how long it would take you to drop to your knees, stick your fingers up my ass, and suck the dark matter out of me.

If that is what you wish, Captain. However, I must warn you that my experience with such things is minimal. Perhaps non-existent.

This morning is getting better since Spock is now reading my mind. Maybe he can since I'm sure my dick is hard enough to send mental signals.

*"*I am not reading your mind, Jim. And a Human penis, as I'm sure you're aware, even one as aroused as yours, is incapable of sending mental signals. The biological signs are, however, quite clear. And in all honesty—"

Yeah, because we need honesty right now. Before, I fainted due to the lack of blood to my brain.

"—I have pondered the taste of certain pertinent male bodily fluids."

Really? Well, if we're going down that road, why not female bodily fluids, specifically Leila's bodily fluids?

*"*Jim, we have been over this, but I will ask you again. What do you want of me?"

"I want you to be happy here with me. I thought we were friends, and a friend would have told me if they were dissatisfied. Your career is more important than my fragile Human heart."

Those penetrating eyes of his narrowed threateningly. "Have I ever given you any suspicion that I was dissatisfied with our relationship or my position on the *Enterprise*?"

He didn't wait for me to respond. Without warning, my first officer walked around behind me into the bathroom. I couldn't move, so I stood there like a teenager, light-headed, and impatient.

My robe landed on my shoulders with Spock's hands, smoothing the thick fabric over my shoulders.

Spock.

Yes, Jim?

I want you to find happiness … the pressure of his forehead on my shoulder snatched my ability to focus on words.

Jim, I didn't desire her. She was warm and lovely — Jim, the spores put those thoughts and needs into my blood. I didn't want her soft curves or the breasts she casually displayed, or her eyes. I didn't want her shy, hesitant touch. I didn't want her.

Spock slid his hand inside the robe. *I would gladly go down on my knees. Look into your hazel eyes and assess the weight of you on my tongue, give you pleasure and taste your passion.*

His arms circled my body, and he buried his face in my neck. The strength of his embrace encouraged me to fall back against his chest. I needed more. *Goddamn, I needed more.*

Before he could stop me, I turned, opening my robe to embrace both of us.

Me, James T. Kirk, typically in control of all situations, including sexual, found myself out of control, panting like a racehorse and aroused. The scratch of the uniform pants, the soft velour against my chest. Before I started rutting against my first officer I reached for words, any words.

“You’re something else, you know it?” I gasped trying to find some medium between calm Vulcan and aroused Human.

Spock went completely still for one long terrifying moment.

“As a Vulcan existing in a largely Human world, I am indeed something else. Although I have studied Earth customs, I must admit ignorance of more specific customs. If, as I theorize, our arousal is due to proximity of male erogenous zones amplified by your state of undress… If I extrapolate the pertinent data from our recent experiences, I theorize … is this an expected outcome, Jim? The desired outcome, or as Humans often say, a want or need?” *I love it when you babble, my friend.*

I am not babbling… “Jim? Are you in need of medical attention?” He asked spreading his fingers over the Human heart. “Your heart rate exceeds the rate considered medically safe for Humans.”

“Is this what Vulcans call seduction, Spock?”

“I do not believe so … however, is it working?”

“I’m going to back you against that wall…” I carded my fingers through his hair while my other hand ground our hips together.

“Do not Humans press their lips together as a preamble?”

“Is that what you want? I could just go straight to my knees.”

“I find myself unable to follow your thought process. Perhaps a demonstration?”

“Spock, what if I’m allergic to Vulcan secretions?”

“Anaphylactic shock would prove the opposite of seduction. And an emergency call to Doctor McCoy is inadvisable… However, since my mother is Human, we are safe.”

“Wait, something you said before. Do Vulcans *have* erogenous zones?”

Do you require a demonstration or perhaps a map?

You’re still mad at me. Spock, look. Don’t tease over something I can’t have. It’s not fair. His arms slid around my waist, crushing my erection between us.

Speaking of erogenous zones, if you continue moving, I’m going to come all over that pretty blue shirt of yours. Just stand still and let me experience this moment of you in my arms.

As you wish. Jim … as you are aware there is no word for happiness in my native language. I know the satisfaction of meaningful research, the steady hum of the ship’s functions and my good fortune at drawing a smile from the beautiful Human I admit to taking pride in calling him my friend.

*“*Open your eyes.”

My eyes fell open when I felt Spock’s hands cupping my jaw. *“Spock.”*

Spock watched the Human’s smile return and knew his bluff was called. “What do you want of me, Captain?” Spock asked just before he pushed me away.

He pushed me hard enough that I almost fell on my ass. My robe, to no one's surprise, flew open.

"What do I want?" I laughed, trying in vain to make a graceful recovery. I suppose I had it coming. I cinched my robe closed and wrapped my arms around myself. "A million things I can't have. What do I have? My ship, my Vulcan first officer and the satisfaction that out here, we're getting this right."

I took a breath trying to ease my trembling. "I know it's not exactly the Vulcan way — *but I don't know how to express what you mean to me."* Spock's humor rippled across the steady hum of our mental connection. He might call it a bond. I only know that in that moment, on the sands of Vulcan, when he thought he killed me, then in sickbay when he saw that I had lived something between us fluttered to life.

Foolish Human.

I don't know how to explain that every mental thought coursed through me like a fresh surge of adrenalin; intoxicating and a little frightening. "Are there other ways this lucky Human could satisfy the Vulcan of their acquaintance?"

I didn't wait for an answer. As quickly as possible I opened the Vulcan's clothes, gently pulling Spock's erect penis into my hand. To my delighted surprise, Spock gasped at the sensation.

"Such intimacy is not…"

"Shhh, just for a moment, be with me." Ignoring his warning I pressed our straining flesh together. "I need you."

Thoughts of *I love you* and *I'm sorry* flooded my heart as I allowed my fingers to explore the smooth flesh and ridges of his cock.

I'm panting, but he remains stoic, his jaw clenched and his hands carving fingerprints into my hip bones. I'm putting everything I had into this experience, but he isn't responding. A full minute goes by. Both of us are leaking enough to coat my hand for lubrication… I could come right now … just a little harder … right there.

"*Jim."*

"Goddamn it, Spock." I gasped and experienced three things at the same time. He'll ask for a transfer *and* file a sexual abuse complaint; I'm behaving like a Human being rutting against his body in an act of the kind of abandonment he will not condone. Yet he trusts me enough to experience this with me.

I trust you, Jim. I always have. You know this.

In that case… With the next stroke of my hand, I imagined entering Spock's mind, shoving, stroking, pushing.

When Spock's knees buckled, I followed him to the deck. *Help me get this shirt off you.*

With efficient movements Spock followed orders.

Dropping my head, I raked my nose through the tightly curled hair on his chest… Found his pectoral muscle with my mouth and at the next stroke of my hand, bit down hard.

Spock ejaculated with an un-Vulcan shout, and cum hot enough to burn my skin poured over my hand. All I had to do was touch myself before I exploded. *Fucking perfect. Spock … Spock.*

We stayed like that, a sticky mess, breathing each other in while our thoughts settled into enough order to allow my first officer to speak.

“Fools rush in where angels fear to tread…”

“They do indeed, my beautiful Vulcan.”

Jim, I warn you that if you try that again, I will throw you down on my bed, and penetrate your shapely gluteus until I achieve satisfaction… I suggest you clear your schedule.

Gladly, happily, gratefully…

“Cease. Your thoughts are flush with the Human concept of love. Neither one of us has experienced such a state.”

But together, we…?

“Yes, together. Always.”

Love
by Jericho Jess

The Internal Rambling of a Micro-Environment
by Dovya Blacque

We are small.
Each of us a contained micro-environment
with its own rules, its own dreams,
its own language.

If we're lucky
we might find like micro-environments
that mesh with our own, possibly overlap at
small turns and twists.

But … like any system,
the unexpected can occur in such a way that the
beauty of it is nearly
deathly to behold.

You are that beauty to me,
we mesh so exactly that, every time I see you,
I am stunned and it takes a moment to
catch my breath.

So, whatever byways or skyways you travel,
I will be your constant
and devoted shadow…
who simply has no
existence without you.

The Choice — Part 1
by Kandy Fong

First Officer Spock of the starship *Enterprise* raised his right hand in the Vulcan salute. “Live long and prosper, Father,” he said to the image on the computer screen in his personal quarters.

The elder Vulcan looked worn and tired. “I regret that I was not able to sway the High Council. You do not have long to act. Live long and prosper, Spock. End transmission.”

Spock stared as the image faded away. Spock had been warned that this call might come, even as his ambassador father worked to resolve the situation on New Vulcan. Spock decided to spend as much time in meditation as he could.

The message tone sounded on his computer. “Spock here,” he responded.

His ex-girlfriend Uhura appeared on the screen. “Spock, Captain Kirk has called a senior officers’ staff meeting for 1100 hours.”

“Understood, Spock out.” He stood quickly; he had just enough time to get to the meeting.

Captain James T. Kirk strode to the head of the table. He sat between Spock and Doctor Leonard McCoy, then surveyed his ship’s department heads. “Gentlemen and ladies, I have received orders from Starfleet. They are asking us to investigate a situation.”

Spock started. Did Starfleet already know what was happening on New Vulcan?

Kirk caught his first officer’s subtle reaction out of the corner of his eye, but kept his attention on the group. “We are being sent to the planet Chululy, a class M planet, which is between the Neutral Zone and Starbase 11. It was discovered just last year. A Starfleet first contact team, led by Aldo Ricker, landed there nineteen days ago. Ricker has asked for the nearest starship to assist with a situation there. We will be apprised of the details upon arrival. *Enterprise* should arrive in thirty-three hours at warp factor five. That should give you enough time to read the first contact team’s preliminary report. I want all departments to be ready when we arrive. Exo-anthropology, please advise if we will have any special cultural concerns when we meet with their government.”

Doctor McCoy joked, “Yes, I’ll need time to practice my secret hand signals if they’re like Vulcans.” He turned to Spock as the group smiled or chuckled lightly. McCoy’s smile faded when he noticed Spock still staring at the table as if he hadn’t heard what the doctor said.

Kirk noticed. “Any questions? No? Then dismissed.”

As the officers started to rise, Kirk called to his friend. “Spock. Stay a minute, won’t you?” Spock sat back down and returned to staring at the table.

As the other officers filed out, Doctor McCoy paused to look back at his friends, Kirk and Spock, before he left the room.

Kirk waited until the door closed before he turned to Spock. “I understand that you received a subspace message from Ambassador Sarek. How is he doing? I guess he’s been busy helping form the provisional government of New Vulcan?”

Spock swallowed, “Yes,” still staring at the table top.

Kirk frowned. “You know you can talk to me if you have any … concerns. Hell, I’ve bent your ear enough whenever I had a problem.” Kirk grinned, expecting Spock to respond to the ear comment.

But Spock just nodded. “Thank you, Captain. I find that I will need to postpone our chess game this evening. Also, I will not be able to join you and Doctor McCoy for dinner.”

“Okay.” Kirk tapped a finger against his lips. “Spock, if you want to talk you know where I’ll be. Okay? Dismissed.”

He watched the Vulcan leave. Kirk sighed then turned to the computer and pulled up the preliminary first contact report. There were a lot more reports and paperwork than he’d ever expected that a captain would have to deal with.

That evening, Leonard McCoy waited in the mess hall for his friends to arrive before getting his own dinner. He greeted Kirk with a cheery, “Where’s your Vulcan shadow?” as McCoy stepped over to the replicator, put in his selection chip and took out his chicken dinner.

Kirk crossed his arms, “He’s not coming. He’s busy this evening.”

“Really? Doing what? You usually spend most of your down time with him.”

Kirk put the disk with his dinner choice into the replicator’s slot. “Not tonight.” McCoy studied him as they ate silently.

When Spock reached his cabin, he decided that food was not needed at this time. All day his mind had been preoccupied with his father’s information and his request for Spock’s decision. Spock knelt in the proper pose and tried to clear his mind. But thoughts of the chess game that he canceled with Jim Kirk kept intruding. Spock focused on the small ancient Vulcan statue his mother had given him just before he left for Starfleet academy. His lips twitched as he remembered the story Jim had created about it. That long ago evening, Spock had explained the significance of the statue to a curious Kirk after a chess game. Jim responded with an imaginative and humorous story about its ‘real’ meaning. That was the start of their habit of sitting and talking about Vulcan and Earth after a chess game or two. Jim found Spock’s Vulcan stories interesting. In return, Jim enjoyed telling what he called ‘tall tales’ about Earth. Part of Jim’s fun was Spock deciding which stories were true, or partly true, or false. Jim claimed this helped Spock with his bluffing detection. His last story about a giant, blue ox…

Spock pulled his attention back to the reason for his evening meditation. He needed to decide logically and deliberately like the historical Earth sage Confucius Jim had told him about. After that night, Spock had searched *Enterprise’s* data bank and found several small books of his

writings. The lines about the mind and action were particularly… Spock shook his head and tried again.

The next morning, Spock was already standing at the science station when Kirk exited the bridge elevator. Kirk strode over to him.

“Any suggestions come to your mind after you read the report, Spock?”

“Report, Captain?”

“The preliminary report from the first contact team. I talked about it in yesterday’s meeting.”

“I am sorry, Captain. I have not yet read it. I will read it right now.”

“Really? Good thing you’re a speed reader. It’s only three hours until the lunchtime concert. I know you’re looking forward to it. I remember you telling me that several musicians are from the science department.”

“Ah yes. The concert. No, Captain. I have a pressing matter that I must attend to instead. Since you are here, may I be excused for three hours? I will read the report, then return in time to relieve you so you may attend the concert if you wish.”

Kirk nodded, then watched Spock leave the bridge.

On the way to his cabin, Spock resolved that this time when he meditated, he would do a better job of focusing his attention and not be distracted like last night. He would quickly read the Chululy first contact report, then spend the rest of the three hours considering Sarek’s last communication.

The preliminary report was clearly written, Spock decided. Ambassador Ricker’s description of the Chululyans’ character and civilization painted a picture of a timid and unadventurous population almost overwhelmed by meeting aliens from outer space. They had just started exploring their own solar system. Because Chululy was a hot, desert planet, they found the cooler, fourth planet which had not only the crystals but lots of water unnerving. It would be interesting to find out why Ambassador Ricker asked for help. Telling himself that he needed to understand more about Ricker, Spock looked up the last first contact he had led. A very satisfactory job and the planet had joined the Federation of Planets quickly.

Spock knelt in his meditation pose. The Federation of Planets truly was beneficial. Their exploration and military force, Starfleet, composed of peoples from many worlds, all worked together for mutual protection and advancement. Spock remembered some of the interesting, even fascinating things he personally encountered while serving. Suddenly, he realized his three hours had expired, and he needed to return to the bridge. Again, his attempt to meditate had failed. He regretted telling the captain that he didn’t want to attend the lunchtime concert, but Spock knew he had to do a better job of avoiding distractions to successfully meditate.

The next afternoon, Kirk was in his command chair and Spock at his station on the bridge when the starship came out of warp outside the Chululy system.

“Captain,” Spock called. “There is a twenty kilometer wide ring of meteors composed of ice and stone around the inner four planets.”

“Helm,” Kirk commanded, “activate shields. Lay in a sublight course to the third planet. Mister Sulu, look for the Federation ship.”

Sulu announced, “The survey ship *Gallant* is in a geosynchronous planetary orbit above the capital city on the equator, Captain.”

“Good, match them. Mister Spock, do you see anything unusual about the Starfleet ship?”

Spock checked the visor at his science station and the computer readings. “The ship appears to be normal, Captain.”

Uhura announced, “We are being hailed from the planet, Captain. It’s Aldo Ricker, the head of the first contact team.”

“Open a channel, Uhura.” The image of a short, gray-haired, Human man in a Starfleet command uniform appeared on the main bridge view screen.

Kirk greeted him, “Ambassador Ricker, I’m James T. Kirk of the starship *Enterprise*.”

“Welcome, Captain Kirk. Thank you for coming.” The man placed his right forefinger on his cheek then quickly slid it towards his ear, before making a fist and dropping his hand. Kirk looked at Uhura to see if she caught the signal to encrypt the communication.

She nodded.

Kirk turned back to the view screen. “Our communication is now private. How can we help you?”

“Chululy is considering joining the Federation of Planets, considering joining. We have been explaining all the benefits of membership, including protection, advanced technology, and trade. The Chululyans were able to discover warp drive because their sun’s fourth planet has dilithium crystals, so were able. Needless to say, we are eager to trade, since a new source of crystals would be of great trade benefit to the Federation.”

“The Chululyans started mining for more dilithium after they discovered how to use the first crystals mined to power their spaceships, then mined for more. But they stopped mining when they had a series of mysterious events happen in and around the mine, so they stopped. For example, they would return to the mine to find small rockfalls in the main cave, then the mine kept flooding but only in the nighttime, flooding only when no one was there. For centuries the Chululyans believed that when they die, their spirit goes to the wandering star in the sky, which is the third planet, believed. That is why they hadn’t explored it until now. When unusual things happened, it caused unrest and fear that they were disturbing these spirits, so they left. They suspect that the arrival of the Federation might be upsetting these spirits since this happened right before we arrived, suspect. My ship doesn’t have the firepower to deal with whoever or whatever is the cause, or the sensor strength to find any strangers mining deep in the planet. That’s why I called for a starship.”

Kirk replied, “I understand. Please send us any survey material or information about the situation that the Chululyans have given you.”

“They don’t know much about what’s happening, don’t know. I’ve spent days trying to convince them that the Federation are not the ones causing trouble, not the ones. I think some ship must have discovered their warp signature and came looking for crystals. I need you to find them and deal with them, find them. I’m sending the information the Chululyans have gathered, and the mine’s location, sending info.”

Kirk looked over at Uhura. “Received, Captain,” she nodded.

“We’ll proceed to that planet. And keep you advised. Kirk out.”

“Mister Sulu, plot a sublight course to the fourth planet. Mister Spock, I want a complete scan of that planet. Just because the Chululyans only found one site for the crystals doesn’t mean there aren’t more. I don’t want any surprises.”

Kirk reviewed the skimpy information supplied by the Chululyans. There wasn’t much to go on. Maybe he could spin a ghost story for Spock the next time they planned a chess evening. Kirk reminded himself to wait for more information.

Spock sat down at his science station and swiveled around to face Kirk. “Captain, I have finished evaluating our long-range scans.”

Kirk rose from his command chair and stepped to the railing by the science station. “Great, Spock. What have you discovered?”

“There are no traces of ships orbiting the fourth planet. Just beyond it is a meteor belt mostly composed of ice and stone that encircles the four inner planets. It would be quite dangerous to fly through because although most are too small to be seen individually, collectively they are dense enough to damage ships without a strong shield. The *Enterprise’s* shields were strong enough to be extremely effective.”

“Ambassador Ricker’s report stated the Chululyans reported there was no intelligent life on the planet, just primitive animals, and substantial, deciduous flora. I see nothing to contraindicate that. No evidence of industrialization or of any type of civilization.”

Kirk interrupted, “Any ghosts?” He gave his friend an innocent smile.

Spock raised an eyebrow and gave Kirk his best deadpan stare. “Captain, I do not believe our sensors are calibrated to detect ghosts.”

Spock continued, “The planet has one extensive area of two hundred square miles with an unusually high concentration, I estimate six point seven eight percent, of dilithium crystals. The crystals are interfering with my scans. They would interfere with beaming down also. The Chululyans informed us that a canyon with a stream at the bottom starts near the mine entrance.”

“Spock, are you saying we need to take down a shuttlecraft and investigate on foot?”

“I believe that would be the logical way to investigate.”

“Spock, I want you to take a science team with a security squad and check it out.”

The *Galileo* shuttlecraft, Spock at the helm, orbited the intensely green planet once before it dropped down into the atmosphere. Next to him sat Lieutenant Teltech, the older Andorian

engineer using the shuttle's scanners to locate the canyon and mine. Ensign Basca, the young, Human, dark haired geologist who was an expert in dilithium crystals sat behind Spock and nervously tugged down his red uniform shirt. The four red-shirted security men alertly watched the glimpses of the planet and its abundant plant life through the windshield.

"Huh," the tallest security officer Tinker said to the squad commander Ryan, next to him. "It reminds me of northern California."

Teltech announced, "Mister Spock, I have located the canyon and mine."

"Excellent, Lieutenant."

Spock followed the indicated direction until the canyon came into view. He circled lower, looking for a clear spot to land. A flash of light directed his attention to the bottom of the canyon. He circled back but was unable to locate what caused the flare.

Ensign Basca pointed. "Look, the left side has a break in the trees. Our scanners say the ground is rock and sand under the grass and should support our craft. It's just over two miles to the mine. We could hike along the canyon's stream to it."

Spock set the shuttlecraft down gently. He swiveled his chair to face the rest of the landing party. "So far our information about this planet has proven correct. But as I stated in our pre-mission briefing, we will be searching for the cause of small rockfalls and other events, possibly caused by aliens. Be alert." The group gathered their equipment. The three science officers had tricorders and various scanners in addition to the phaser pistols on their hips. In addition, Basca wore a miner's tool belt. The engineer carried an array of his tools in his vest. Spock also slung the strap for the universal translator over his head and across his chest. The security men carried phaser rifles with flashlights attached.

Spock opened the shuttle hatch and the short step extended automatically. A warm, moist breeze rushed in bringing a strong smell of greenery. The security team exited, taking several steps while fanning out and looking in all directions.

Ensign Basca stood in the doorway and pointed. "The mine is that way, about two miles. You can just see the mountain and natural cave entrance to the Chululyans' mine."

Spock replied, "The canyon is only fifteen feet deep here, I suggest we climb down and walk inside the canyon. It would be easier since there seems to be only grasses and small bushes, with no trees along the small stream. I saw a flash of light when we flew over: everyone, look for anything that could cause that flash."

Two of the security team climbed down the gentle slope while the other two kept watch on the rim. Then, the engineers went down. Finally, the last two security men descended. The leader of the security squad Ryan, along with his senior officer Tinker took the lead, closely followed by Spock who kept scanning the area ahead. Ensign Basca and Teltech were next with the remaining security men watching their six. The loose gravel and tall grass made walking tiring. The only sound was the crunch of their footsteps in the sand. The humidity and higher temperature made everyone but Spock sweat. Privately, he was enjoying the warmth.

Five minutes later, they discovered the cause of the flash. A small, nondescript scout ship with a crumpled bow and a huge, gaping hole on the starboard side lay partially buried near the water bank, almost covered by broken tree limbs and rocks from the canyon wall. The group paused while Spock scanned it.

“There are no life signs. Proceed.”

Ryan and Tinker led the way to the craft followed by Spock and Teltech, while the other two security men, Deerhunter and Kyro, stayed outside and watched for danger.

Engineer Teltech pointed up at the canyon’s wall, “Looks like they tried to land there on the edge of the canyon, but it collapsed, sending them tumbling down to the river. In fact…” He stepped closer to the ship. “It looks like it may have taken some damage even before it landed.” Teltech pointed to the bow and the many small dents inside and around the large, crumpled area of the outer hull.

“Thank you.” said Spock. “I want you and Mister Ryan to accompany me into the craft. We may be able to access the ship’s log or there might be other clues as to its origin.

Entrance was easy through the gaping hole in the side. Ryan used the light on his phaser rifle in the darker corners. But the ship had been carefully stripped down to the bulkheads. The interior was gone. Not even a seat remained.

When the three went back outside, security man Deerhunter called them over. “I noticed something over there, going towards the mine.” He led the group to a stone outcropping. “There wouldn’t be any permanent tracks left in the sand. But I noticed this on this rocky shelf.” He pointed to faint lines scraped into the rock.

“That looks like markings from a pole travois,” Deerhunter explained. “My ancestors used them to carry heavy items. You find two strong tree branches about seven or eight feet long and strip off any smaller branches and lash the branches together at one end. A third branch is tied across both branches near the bottom creating a triangle. Lastly, attach a hammock to hold your payload. Then you pick it up at the tied end, and drag it.”

“Much more energy efficient than carrying heavy items.” Teltech commented.

Spock looked thoughtful. “We still have a mystery. We don’t know who flew this ship or who stripped it. We know a few things; we didn’t find any bodies and there is no blood in the ship. Logically that means the crew might still be nearby, or we might find evidence that a second ship landed, and took the crew and the salvage.” Spock decided. “We will follow the travois marks and see where they lead us. They are going towards that mountain which holds the mine. But keep alert.”

Aboard *Enterprise* Captain Kirk felt bored just sitting in his command chair on the bridge. But pacing around the bridge wasn’t any better. Kirk waved off his yeoman trying to hand him another damn report to read.

Kirk turned to Doctor McCoy hanging out on the bridge. “I’ve decided. In the future, I will ignore Starfleet’s directive on landing parties and instead will go on them all. After all, I like to see what’s going on, not be a man who sits and reads reports. Spock will back me up.”

“You mean read most of your reports for you.” McCoy retorted.

Kirk grinned. “He is the perfect first officer and my friend. It’s just — with this communication interference from the crystals, I have no idea what they are finding down there.”

Kirk ignored McCoy’s muttered comment. “And if Spock’s okay.”

The landing party continued to follow the intermittent travois marks along the brook running from the mine.

Ensign Basca said nervously, “Looks like there is one heck of a flood from time to time to carve out this big of a flood plain.”

“Yes,” said Spock drily.

“I mean we should watch out for sudden storms.” The ensign tugged down his shirt.

“Yes.”

“We wouldn’t want to get stuck in a flood.”

Spock stopped and looked at the ensign. “Your concern is duly noted.” The ensign’s face colored. The group continued down the canyon.

After another few minutes of walking, a twenty foot tall and wide, natural cave entrance could be seen clearly at the base of the mountain near the end of the canyon. Water trickled out of the cave mouth. The landing party walked until they reached the huge entrance. The markings they were following continued into the darkness within.

Security officer Deerhunter spoke up. “Many people passed this way, the original trail we were following is almost worn away. But, if you look closely, some of the markings that are left are much fainter than others. It looks like the travois carried a heavy payload going into the cave but was empty on the way out. That suggests that they dropped off the salvage inside the cave before the Chululyans started seriously mining for dilithium crystals and walked on the tracks.”

Spock said, “Logical, Mister Deerhunter. Ambassador Ricker’s report said he was told that the mine branches off from the main cave after a walk of about two minutes from the cave entrance. Mister Ryan, pick one of your squads to guard the cave entrance while the rest of us follow the trail.”

Ryan pointed at Tinker, “Take your post next to those dense bushes on the side of the entrance so you can have cover if you need it.”

Deerhunter led the way into the cave, using his rifle’s light to follow the tracks. Spock followed closely behind him with his flashlight and used his tricorder to scan the walls and ceiling. The rest followed with Ryan at their back, watching behind the group. The complete darkness of the cool and damp cave felt heavy, like a pile of wet, wool blankets pressing down on the men. The floor of the cave gently sloped upwards, making the cave shorter as the walls closed in. The floor became steeper as they continued inside. Shortly, the group reached the area where the mine branched off from the cave.

Ensign Basca shone his light into the tunnel. “Looks like they were using basic hand tools and manual labor to dig this mine. Look, you can see marks from a pickaxe on the rough ceiling.”

Spock asked, “Do you see any reason for the mine to have rockfalls?”

“Not in the mine itself. The cave narrows considerably as it continues past it. Mister Deerhunter, what do you think about this mark here?” The security man walked back to the entrance of the mine to join the ensign. Basca continued, “Mister Spock, did you scan anything unusual about the cave walls outside the mine?”

Spock scanned. “About thirty feet further into the cave, the left wall seems to have a void behind it. The crystals in the mine are affecting my tricorder so I cannot gather more data. I’ll try scanning farther away from the crystals.” Spock took a dozen more steps away.

“Let me see.” The ensign hiked over to the indicated wall outside the mine and peered closely at it. “That’s odd. It looks almost like … maybe if I took a sample…” He pulled a geologist’s hammer from his tool belt and swung the pick end at the wall.

CRACK!!! A spiderweb of cracks and fissures raced away from the blow. The wall disintegrated as a Niagara of water exploded into the cave. The force of the water swept the ensign and the others away, back down the slope towards the entrance.

Gone.

Spock on the other side of the torrent, was picked up and whirled deeper into the cave. The irresistible currents ripped the flashlight and tricorder from his grasp. Spock tumbled and spun in liquid blackness as he bounced off the ceiling or maybe a wall. He clawed at the water desperately. *Air, I need air.*

Weightless … falling … Niagara Falls … barrel … *JIM!* … Spock tried to tuck himself into a ball as he slammed down into the foaming water. The awkward fall drove the last dregs of breath from his lungs. Spock slowly drifted downwards towards the invisible bottom of the pool, unconscious…

The remaining members of the landing party staggered out the mouth of the cave. Coughing and very bruised, they waded through knee-deep water to collapse on the shore of the suddenly larger river.

Ryan called, “Who has injuries? Does anyone have their flashlight or tricorder?” Teltech gestured at his head and the wound on his forehead. “I am dizzy.”

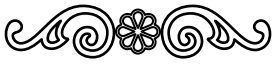
“I think my wrist might be broken.” Ensign Basca called.

The rest reported only bruises and scrapes, but all had lost their equipment. Tinker ran towards them.

“What happened? Where is Mister Spock?”

Ryan stood up and looked around. “Did anyone see what happened to him?” No one saw.

“Tinker, run as quickly as you can back to the shuttlecraft. We need lights and tricorders to go back and look for him. And bring some rope so we can tie ourselves together. And phasers. I’m not losing anybody else.”



Cold. So cold. Spock shivered. He was lying on hard rock, not in the water. He took an experimental breath — *air!* The back of his throat burned, as Spock started coughing up water. He felt a hand slide around his back and helped him sit up.

“Take it easy.” A male voice said in Standard English. “I got you out of the water.”

That wasn’t a member of his landing party talking. Spock mentally prepared for action, then opened his eyes. A young Human male with long, black hair and Asian features smiled at him as he removed his arm from around Spock.

Spock looked around to assess the situation. They were in a dimly lit, small, rocky alcove just a little higher than the pool. The ceiling had gaps over the pool which allowed a little sunlight to find its way into the cave. Someone who looked like a Romulan or a Vulcan sat in the shadows by the far wall.

Spock looked from one to the other. “I am at a loss to understand how I got here. Where is the rest of my group? Who are you?”

The man closest to Spock spoke first. “You triggered my booby trap. The flood should have swept you out of the cave like the others. I hope you weren’t hurt. Were you standing apart from them? I am Yuri Adachi from Earth. Who are you?”

The tall man in the shadows spoke. “Yuri, that is First Officer Spock from the starship *Enterprise*.”

“Oh, no!” Yuri scrambled away from Spock heading towards the third man.

“Yes, I am Spock. Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Yuri stopped in front of the taller man, partially blocking Spock’s view. The man reached out and placed a gentle hand on Yuri’s shoulder.

He spoke, “I am Stun, a former cultural attaché from the planet New Vulcan. I have worked with Ambassador Sarek and had some knowledge of his son in Starfleet. Did he send you to find us?”

“He did not. Why do you think he would?”

“Spock, are you aware of what is happening on New Vulcan right now?” At Spock’s small head tilt, Stun continued. “When the remaining Vulcan population moved to their new planet, they discovered most of it a unique living experience. Vulcans have lived in desert conditions for generations. But seventy percent of the new planet has flowing water on the surface in the form of lakes and rivers. Yuri Adachi is a brilliant hydrology engineer from Earth. He was hired

to teach our engineers his sophisticated methods of using that flowing water to make electricity, and how to quickly construct dams to control flooding. I was the liaison between his team and the Vulcan engineers because I have studied Earth and the Federation, and speak Standard English. What started as an assignment became more. We spent as much of our time together as we could the last three years. We became … friends." Stun paused to look at the young Asian in front of him.

Yuri smiled back at him. "Special friends." He placed his palm on Stun's knee.

Stun looked closely at Spock to see if he disapproved of Yuri's action. When Stun saw Spock's calm acceptance, he felt encouraged to continue with the truth. "When Yuri asked the Vulcan High Council for permission to live on New Vulcan permanently, he was told of a new law that will be passed that restricts the planet population to Vulcans only. Once the law passes, all non-Vulcans would be allowed up to six months to finish any on-going projects, then would be required to leave Vulcan forever. But Vulcans are being refused permission to leave. The High Council will order all off-world Vulcans to return to New Vulcan permanently."

Spock raised an eyebrow, "That is not logical. New Vulcan needs the Federation's help to provide for their displaced population."

"Agreed." The other Vulcan replied. "But fear and anger can sway logic. Your father tried. He reminded the council of all the benefits of being in the United Federation of Planets. But, a small, angry group blames the UFP and Starfleet for the destruction of Vulcan and swayed the Vulcan government."

"Because people from the Federation would no longer be coming to Vulcan, this new law eliminated my life's work, translating for and interfacing with visitors. My skills, my years of experience, are considered useless on New Vulcan now. When Yuri was told he had to leave, I decided to give up Vulcan rather than give up my … *t'hy'la*. We purchased a scout ship and I left with him, without the High Council's permission. We hoped we could find a planet where we both could live away from Vulcan's isolationist attitude."

Yuri spoke up. "We went into orbit on the outer reaches of this star system and scanned the planets. The third planet had a sentient population, but without warp drive signatures we couldn't land there. We planned to land on the fourth planet to fill our water tanks before continuing. But we ran into a ring of meteors just outside the fourth planet's orbit and the ship received minor damage. Then, after a hasty and rough landing, our ship rolled down a crumbling cliff. We took out everything we could use and brought it all to this cave we live in. We gather vegetables and fruit and have started a garden, plus what limited food the damaged replicator can make. I miss ice cream though."

Stun took up the tale. "But eleven months, three days later, mining started inside the cave. We didn't know who it was at first. After secretly observing them, we decided they must be from the third planet. To honor the Prime Directive, we hid in the back of the cave, and created a new exit that leads to the other side of the mountain. Yuri quickly engineered a series of what he called 'boobytraps' that would be triggered if anyone tried to go deeper into the narrow cave past the crystals mine. After the first, very small rock falls, the boobytraps got progressively

larger. The miners left before they triggered the latest and biggest one. Yuri stored most of the water that normally flows after a big rainstorm to use in a boobytrap flood to sweep the miners out of the cave."

"Why is the Federation here?" Yuri interjected. "If this is a protected star system, you shouldn't be here."

Spock explained. "The population on the third planet are called Chululyans. They invented and used their first warp engine last year. The Federation sent a first contact team, who are on the planet now, to invite them to join the Federation. Because the team is concerned about someone or something trying to keep the Chululyans from mining their dilithium crystals, the first contact team asked for a starship to investigate."

Yuri turned to Stun. "Wow! And we were so worried we would warp their development!" Stun gave him a raised eyebrow. Yuri chuckled. "We were so worried about hurting them, we ended up scaring them. I think we need to give them an apology."

Spock said, "More than that, I believe you can help them. Their mine is primitive. Yuri can help them control the water that periodically floods the main cave and mine. In addition, the Chululyans will need someone to deal with all the traders and others who will come once word of a new dilithium mine reaches other planets. The Federation would normally offer help. Stun, you could be that person and help them."

Stun looked at Yuri. "An interesting and logical solution. What do you think?"

Yuri grinned, "Great! We can both use our skills and visit their planet and get some ice cream!"

Stun and Yuri led Spock to the rescue party, who were making their way through the remains of the flood in the main cave as they searched for Spock. After explaining the situation to the group, Spock and his team said a temporary goodbye to Stun and Yuri, then hiked back to their shuttlecraft.

After landing in the flight bay, Spock led the way out of the shuttle to find Kirk impatiently waiting for him with folded arms and tapping toe. Doctor McCoy stood grinning next to the captain.

Kirk did a double take. He'd never seen Spock so messy and damp. Spock halted, "Captain." What a rush of emotion just from seeing Jim.

"Mister Spock. You look like you've had fun."

"No, I did not. But it was illuminating. I solved the mystery by finding a shipwrecked crew of two Federation citizens living in the mine. They avoided the miners because they thought the Prime Directive would be in effect. They have no interest in obtaining the crystals themselves. If I may speak to Ambassador Ricker, I believe I have a resolution for this situation to propose."

"Excellent, Spock. Looking forward to reading your report. First, I want Doctor McCoy to check you out. Looking at your landing party, they need more than a once over in sickbay."

"My turn first," said McCoy smugly. "SOP after visiting a planet."

The curious captain impatiently followed Spock and Doctor McCoy to sickbay, the rest of the landing party close behind. Spock told Kirk and McCoy about what happened on the planet while the doctor examined him.

“Glad I missed it.” McCoy snarked. “You’re fine, nothing a shower wouldn’t fix.”

“I’m not fine.” Kirk joked. “A new planet with a mystery, and a fun water ride, and I missed it.”

Spock thought this gentle teasing was one of the things he would miss. He looked around the sickbay then walked over to Lieutenant Teltech resting on a biobed.

“Minor concussion and a scrape. Just needs a little rest.” The nurse standing next to the lieutenant reported. Spock checked the rest of the landing party. Most of the injuries were bruises and scrapes from the cave walls.

The doctor using the bone healer on the ensign’s damaged wrist said, “Cracked a couple of bones. Will be good as new in ten minutes.”

Spock walked back to Kirk. “Captain, if I may, I will return to my cabin for the shower Doctor McCoy medically prescribed.”

“Granted. Join me for dinner in my cabin in an hour?” Kirk asked. Spock nodded.

After taking a sonic shower, Spock enjoyed the feeling of being dry. He dressed in comfortable Vulcan robes then sat at his desk. Spock remembered his thoughts when he fell over the falls, and realized his choice was already made. He decided that he needed to tell Jim. Spock rose, made his way to Kirk’s cabin door, and signaled his presence.

Kirk opened the door, wearing a black tee-shirt and worn blue jeans, his favorite off- duty outfit. “Feeling better? Come sit over here.” Spock and Kirk sat on either side of the small table they usually used for chess or dinner. “Do you want some tea?”

Spock looked intently into Kirk’s face. “I wish to talk to you about a choice I have been considering. My father’s communication informed me of the urgent need to decide now. New Vulcan is closing the planet to all non-Vulcans, and directing all Vulcans to return to the planet. I needed to decide if I should resign my commission and leave Starfleet.”

Kirk paled. “Leave? No! You can’t do that! You are too good a first officer to waste your talents sitting on a planet. Starfleet needs you. I need you here.”

Spock continued, “When I tried to meditate about the situation, I kept being distracted by thoughts about my life here on the ship. Jim, I believe *Enterprise* has become my home. Thanks to Starfleet, I am engaged in fascinating work. But, the most important factor in my decision was one facet of Vulcan culture we have not yet discussed.

“Jim, you are my *t’hy’la*.”

The Choice — Part 2
by Kandy Fong

Four days earlier

James T. Kirk, captain of the starship *Enterprise*, moved his queen, “Gotcha! Checkmate.”

Spock, his Vulcan first officer, stared at the chessboard. “I did not expect that move.” He reached out and tipped over his king. “You win, Jim.”

Jim stretched his arms overhead and rolled his neck. “The only way I can ever win is if I do something unexpected. But the more we play, the harder that gets. Do you want a refill of your tea?”

“Thank you, no. What I have is sufficient.”

“Why don’t you put away the chess set, and I’ll get myself some more coffee.” Jim rose from his chair and walked over to the food replicator across from his bed. He took his mug back to the small table and sat across from Spock.

“I think it’s my turn. Did you ever hear about Paul Bunyan and Babe, his giant blue ox?”

“No, Jim. My mother never told me that story.” Spock leaned back in his chair and folded his arms, preparing himself for another of his friend’s tales.

Thirty-six minutes later

“Then Paul Bunyan and Babe went north into the wilds of Canada and were never seen again.” Jim took a final sip of his coffee, very pleased with himself that he managed to get two ‘interesting’ and an ‘indeed’, while avoiding any ‘really, Jim?’ from Spock.

“Thank you for filling that gap in my education.”

“My pleasure, Spock.” Jim yawned. “Remember, we have dinner with Doctor McCoy tomorrow.”

“Yes. I will go to my cabin now since it’s 2300 hours and we both have the alpha shift tomorrow. Good night, Jim.”

“Good night, Spock. See you in the morning.” Spock exited the cabin.

Kirk stripped off his black t-shirt and jeans and climbed into bed. *Spock really seemed to enjoy my story, bet he had a lack of fantasy in his life growing up. I’ll have to see what I can do for him.* With a smile on his face, Jim fell asleep.

The next day Kirk and Spock had been on the bridge for two hours when Uhura announced that Spock had received a subspace call from New Vulcan.

“Why don’t you take it in your cabin?” Kirk suggested to Spock.

“Thank you, Captain.”

After Spock left, Kirk walked over to Uhura. “Is the call from Sarek, Spock’s father?”

“Yes, Captain.” As Kirk turned away to return to his command chair, Uhura said. “You have an incoming communication from Starfleet, Captain.” He nodded.

Kirk settled in his seat. “Okay, Uhura, put it through.”

An older, female Starfleet admiral appeared on the main view screen. “Captain Kirk.”

“Admiral Reed, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“We need *Enterprise’s* help with a potential new member of the Federation. We have a first contact team on Chululy, a newly discovered planet located between Starbase 11 and the Neutral Zone. The team leader, Aldo Ricker, has asked for assistance from a cruiser class or higher. You are the closest ship, so you’re it. Please proceed with deliberate speed and assist our team. I’ll send a copy of Ricker’s request to you.”

“Acknowledged, Admiral.”

As the admiral’s image faded and was replaced by the star field in front of them, Kirk started grinning. A chance at something more exciting than just patrolling the Neutral Zone. *Let’s see what the request said.* Kirk read the forwarded communication. *Spirits, huh*.

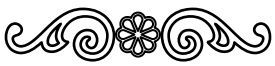
“Mister Sulu, set a course for Chululy using the coordinates sent by Starfleet. Uhura, contact all department heads for a meeting at 1100. But wait until Spock is finished with his call before you contact him.”

Spock and the department heads were seated around the conference table when Kirk arrived. He took his usual spot between Spock and Doctor McCoy.

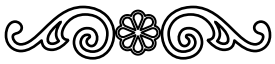
“Gentlemen and ladies, I have received orders from Starfleet. They are asking us to look into a situation.” When Spock reacted to that statement, the captain noted it but continued with his briefing. But when Kirk noticed Spock had spent the meeting staring at the table and didn’t seem to hear McCoy’s gentle jab, he decided to speak to Spock.

At the end of the meeting, when the officers rose to leave, Kirk called to his friend, “Spock. Stay a minute, won’t you?” *Was his father’s call bad news?*

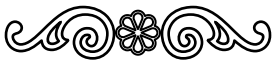
Jim was taken aback when Spock didn’t accept his offer of help or react to his ear joke. But when Spock postponed their next chess game and canceled their dinner plans without giving any reason, Jim decided not to push right now. Clearly, Spock was concerned about something. *I’ll give him a chance to settle down and offer to help him later.* Kirk sighed as he pulled up the first contact team’s preliminary report on Chululy.



The captain found it hard to get to sleep that night. *What news from Vulcan could have unsettled Spock so much?*



Kirk decided that Spock was not feeling any better the next morning. *I can't remember Spock ever forgetting to read the report for a mission, and he has never asked for time away from the bridge before. I think he is trying to avoid me. Why?*



When Spock left the bridge to meet with his landing party and gather his equipment, Kirk decided to visit Bones and get his take on the situation.

Leaning back in a chair in Bones' office, Jim said, "Have you noticed anything different about Spock lately?"

"What do you mean?"

"He seems to be too busy to join us for dinner or do any type of recreation like a concert or a chess game."

Bones scowled. "You mean he doesn't have time to play with you? What did you do?"

"That's just it. I have no idea."

"That's not like Spock."

"I know, I know."

"So, the advice from this ole' country doctor is to talk to Spock."

"Right now, he is leading a landing party to go ghost hunting."

"Bet he raised an eyebrow about that."

Jim smiled. "I'll make sure we talk when he gets back."

"And before then you might want to think about why you got so concerned over one missed dinner and chess game."

"It's my shift on the bridge, so I've got to get back."

"Want me to come with you and distract you while you wait?"

"Good idea. Come on up."

McCoy wandered the bridge, talking to the crew while keeping an eye on Jim. The doctor watched as his friend sat, popped up to pace, then sat back down for just minutes before pacing again. Jim seemed to become more restless as time passed.

Kirk turned to McCoy. "I've decided. In the future, I will ignore Starfleet's directive on landing parties and instead will go on them all. After all, I like to see what's going on, not be the man who just sits and reads reports. Spock will back me up."

"You mean read most of your reports for you." McCoy retorted.

Kirk grinned. “He is the perfect first officer and my friend. It’s just — with this communication interference from the crystals, I have no idea what they are finding down there.”

Kirk didn’t respond to McCoy’s muttered comment. “And if Spock’s okay.”

Jim sat back down in his command chair. *Why* am *I so concerned about Spock?*

The hours passed like a watched pot refusing to boil.

Kirk and McCoy met the returning shuttle in the flight bay and escorted the damaged landing party to sickbay. The captain didn’t want to wait for the official report: he had to know now why they were damp and injured. Kirk listened to Spock’s story with a sinking feeling.

“Glad I missed it.” McCoy snarked. “You’re fine, nothing a shower wouldn’t fix.”

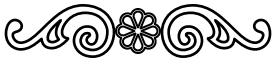
“I’m not fine.” Kirk shocked himself with that comment, then forced a joke to cover his emotion. “A new planet with a mystery, and a fun water ride, and I missed it.”

Spock turned away and walked around the room checking on his group. When Spock felt more in control, he walked back to Kirk. “Captain, if I may, I will return to my cabin for the shower Doctor McCoy medically prescribed.”

“Granted. Join me for dinner in my cabin in an hour?” Kirk asked. Spock nodded and left. Bones gave Jim a long look.

“Okay, Bones.” As the doctor smiled, Jim left for his cabin.

As he changed into his favorite jeans, Jim thought about Spock and what he really wanted from the Vulcan.



“Jim, you are my *t’hy’la*.”

Jim smiled nervously. “I need to know exactly what you mean. Am I your brother, your friend, or…” Jim swallowed, “more?”

Spock leaned closer over the table. “Much more. Doctor McCoy likes to tease that Vulcans are emotionless, we are not. We have strong emotions that run deep. I want to stay on *Enterprise*, but if you ever leave, I will go with you wherever you go.

“Jim, you are my soulmate. I want us to spend our lives together.”

Jim reached out and gently covered Spock’s hand. “I love you, too, and I want to show you how much. But first we must report our findings about the mine to the first contact leader, Riker, and the Chululyan government. Come to my cabin this evening after we leave Chululy.”

“Yes, Jim.” Spock smiled.

Communicators Can't Scan
or How Jim Kirk Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Vulcanese
by Noxelementalist

Fandom: Star Trek (AOS)

Pairing/Relationship: Kirk/Spock, Kirk&McCoy

Spoilers: none really? It's an Academy Fic, and an AU at that, so…

Rating: PG

Summary: "Invoking an anthropomorphic manifestation of inspiration to begin a historical account is highly illogical." [dyslexic Spock]

"This is gonna suck in a most unrighteous way," Jim Kirk grumbled as he entered the Academy classroom.

Somehow, he'd known. Knew from how his cadet uniform had refused to button right, how the mess hall had somehow run out of coffee during the afternoon rush, even by how it had taken six swipes to open the door into Isocrates Hall. But staring at the classroom — gray, neutral chairs clashing with fake wooden table countertops and an actual blackboard — drove the point right into Jim's gut.

Well, here goes, Jim thought as he went to sit down.

For all the highs and lows of what an earlier time would've called the mythology of Jim Kirk's childhood and youth, the one thing the people of Riverside still forgot about was that Jim was, in the end, neither rebel nor savior, but simply one hundred percent Human. And Humans had flaws.

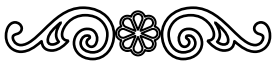
Jim's was languages.

Oh, not in all ways. Jim had read all of Riverside Library's collection twice, and he could memorize eight new pickup lines in as many languages in a bar in one night. Jim watched holos from Vulcan or in early-2000s English easily and pleasurably without captions, and his knack at code cracking would one day prove to be the bane of a communications officer named Lieutenant Uhura, whose grievance would be surpassed only by dismay at his poor life choices.

No, for Jim it was, specifically, writing. Jim could compose dirty limericks at the drop of a homebrew, but ask him to write one and the PADD would turn *itself* off. Four times, as his last attempt had proven. Grammar would fail, commas would vanish — in fact, the only writing skill

he safely had was the ability to scan metric lines, and even *that* was only because fourteen year old Jim had been irritated at discovering handheld communicators couldn't do it for him.

But Starfleet required its command officers to be eloquent on demand in speech and writing, and Jim *was* going to command his own ship one day. So *Introduction to Creative Writing* it was.



Ten minutes in, and the professor hadn't shown. In fact, the *students* hadn't shown up. Except one.

Jim looked around the table, and then checked with his PADD, yet again, to confirm he was in the right room and time. "Five more minutes," he said aloud, leaning back in the class chair.

"That policy, while commonly followed, is not the official policy of Starfleet," a surprisingly mellow voice stated conversationally.

Jim turned around and stared. The voice belonged to—

"Officially, class will occur unless prior notice was given. It has not been."

—a man with a frankly regrettable bowl cut. He was dressed in the narrow black uniform of the instructors, which Jim couldn't help noticing flattered him far more than his other professors as it lengthened and stretched just so over his chest. It matched the glossiness of his black hair while offsetting his eyes, which seemed almost tawny under the amber classroom lights.

"…I was thinking more if nobody else showed. Thought maybe I was in the wrong classroom."

"You are not, Cadet…?"

"Kirk. James Tiberius Kirk."

The professor nodded. "I am Professor S'Chn T'Gai Spock. You may refer to me as Professor Spock," Spock said as he walked around the table to sit across from him.

"So first name basis, huh," Kirk said after a moment, watching as the professor settled into his chair. "That's … casual."

"Vulcan last names are considered too difficult for Humans to pronounce, and as such—"

"Yeah, well, I'm not like all Humans, S'Chn T'Gai. I've got a *very* skilled tongue."

Spock blinked. "That would explain your verbal score," he said at last, the inflection in his tone remaining smooth. *That's right, Vulcans don't like to admit they have feelings*, Kirk reminded himself.

"Tell me, cadet," the professor went on. "Why did you sharpen the aspirations in my name?"

"Because otherwise your family name becomes Sacken Too-Gay?" Jim said hesitantly, before adding more firmly, "Also, flattening vowels can stress them, and English favors iambs, so…"

"Your name does not favor them, given the dactyl in it."

“My name is a mixture of English and Latin, the only thing it favors is imperialism.”

“Hebrew and Norse.”

“Hmm?”

“James, from the Hebrew Ya’acov, and Kirk from the Norse, both by means of English and Latin.”

Jim laughed. “Alright, so my family has had its share of European Christians for the last few centuries,” he admitted. “I will still *absolutely* be able to pronounce whatever you throw at me.”

The professor raised an eyebrow. “I shall take that into consideration for our next session,” Spock said. “But for today, cadet, the assignment was for you to explain why a text of your choice was creative.”

Jim felt himself grinning. “I chose the Iliad,” he said, watching Spock’s face, “because it’s *epic*.” Spock regarded him impassively. “You chose an oral text.”

“Yes.”

“For a written composition class.”

“Well, they did invent writing for it.”

“That is factually inaccurate.”

“I mean, may-nin eye-a-da thea Pele-ia-daw Achi-lay-us, you can’t beat that,” Kirk continued. “It’s got *style*, it’s got *flair*—”

“—It illogically invokes an anthropomorphic manifestation of inspiration to begin a historical account,” Spock said, in a tone that Jim almost swore was irritated. “Though, perhaps, suitable for the account of a historical figure with a poor emotional self-regulation.”

“Illogical? It’s entirely logical to ask for help when you’re about to begin a major recitation. And besides, since when is creativity *logical*?”

“Asking for rhetorical help is not asking for help, and many cultures have managed more logical beginnings,” Spock replied calmly. “Consider, among your own, such openings as ‘It was a dark and stormy night’, or ‘Once upon a midnight dreary’.”

“…Those are both from four hundred year old romantic horror stories.”

“They accurately describe the physical setting of the story. A most logical and fitting beginning for a reader approaching a scene they cannot otherwise observe.”

Jim stared at the other man. “Oh no,” he said with dawning dread, “you’re one of those ‘show not tell’ people aren’t you.”

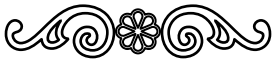
“Describe, not tell, cadet,” Spock replied. “Begin with what makes the Iliad an epic instead of a trial of one’s mental endurance.”

For the next six weeks that was all Jim Kirk did. Describe, for an hour and a half, twice a week, every week. And if the increased praise from his other professors were any sign, the class was working, and he hated that it worked because Jim was a contrary cadet who felt his professors

shouldn't have relied on written words to realize he was following them in class just fine, thanks.

But the hate wasn't so much that it kept him from falling for his professor.

Spock was *bright*. Jim knew that Vulcans being inherently intelligent was a stereotype — thanks to *Intro to Non-Terran Cultures*, but it was a stereotype Spock aptly met. A single conversation could have them winding through hundreds of years' worth of literature and pop culture from planets scattered all across the Federation. There were speeches and plays, poems and reports, monologues, and dialogues and even trilogues, which Jim hadn't even known were a thing. Jim had started bringing a white mocha for himself and a Vulcan mocha for the professor on class four.

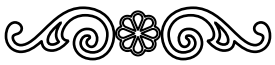


"If I'm going to review pre-Reform Vulcanese love poems, we need caffeine," Kirk told him as he placed the metal travel mugs from the cafeteria on the brown table, the light, creamy color of his drink resting in stark contrast to the dark chocolate color of the professor's. "We?" Spock asked, gazing curiously at the cup.

"Me to deal with the fact that your ancestors found choriambs of all things sexy, you to deal with me making elisions that should be there in the first place."

Spock sighed. "As we discussed, cadet, pre-Reform Vulcans did not classify language as physically—"

"They're love poems, Professor S'chn T'gai," Jim had said flatly. "Show me a singular culture that felt love poems should be unaesthetic. And my name is Jim — if we're going to be on a first name basis, it'd better go both ways."



In class seven he learned that Spock was, of all things, dyslexic.

"You teach a writing course and you can't tell the letters apart?!" Jim had said, stunned out of what had been a spectacular ramble on how the early 2000s invented Gallifreyan language bore a stunning resemblance to the ceremonial calligraphic glyphs of the Vulcan *vanu-tanaf-kitaun*.

"I can recognize the difference between shapes, cadet," the professor had corrected, sipping from his now familiar mocha. "It is the spatial and order dimensions of them that is, at times, a challenge."

"At times."

“Yes, at times.”

“I — how, exactly, does a Vulcan remedy spatial recognition with a vertical written language?”

“Often with great difficulty. However, I was fortunate enough to have a mother whose own instructional skills were quite capable of remedying a trait inherited from her ancestors.”

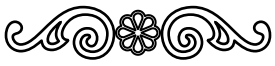
“Oh.”

“Her method,” Spock added after a moment, “was to have me read *Alice through the Looking Glass*. To learn how to order myself when the cardinal directions are confused.”

Jim grinned. “Still, she haunts me, phantom wise,” he recited after sipping from his own cup. “Alice moving under skies, never seen by waking eyes.”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “You’ve read it.”

“I really, really like the *Jabberwocky*.”



And by class ten Jim realized the whole thing probably looked like a date to anybody passing them by. That them sitting around a wood table in a gray room, dressed in grays and blacks, sipping coffee, and talking about how alliterative Orion war speech could be replicated in a Federation lab report to subtly indicate the experiment shouldn’t *ever* have worked, might be the most emotionally engaging conversation Jim had these days.

And that Jim wouldn’t mind carrying those conversations out in a dimmer, more horizontal fashion.

And the whole time Spock had sat across from him, in that black, trim uniform stretching cleanly across his chest, with those dark hooded eyes Kirk had learned sometimes flashed with emotion. Sitting with his hands serenely clasped in his lap, gentle head tilts to emphasize a point, regarding his cadet like he was … was … well, like Jim was something that if he hadn’t needed remedial creative writing classes Jim would have a *term* for, but it made him feel in ways Riverside, Iowa had never quite managed. Ways Jim hadn’t handled well, if his former bar tab was any sign.

Once Spock had come in with what Jim could only describe as ‘bed-head’, his bowl haircut sticking up around his head in a way that took Jim thirty minutes with hair gel to get, and Jim had been forced to spend actual physical energy restraining himself before launching into a discussion on the tradition of elegiac couplet battles.

Which probably explained why, in class thirteen, Jim opened his mouth and said something that six weeks ago he’d swore he would never ask. “So, ah, Professor S’chn T’Gai,” he asked, interrupting Spock’s lecture on the futility of using Andorian idioms in declarations to Aenarians, “when do we get to the written portion of this?”

Professor Spock halted in mid-sentence. “You want to compose.”

“I know, I’d rather spend it talking, but, I dunno, I feel like I should maybe write something?”

“Most cadets are content to have their other coursework analyzed in the last four classes, as stated on the syllabus.”

“Nobody, including me, deserves that fate.”

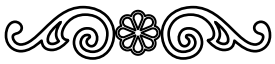
Spock tilted his head. “I have been reasonably informed that your writing has improved. Surely this would become more apparent in a final analysis.”

“I’m sure if we analyzed your mathematics proofs from age five that would also be true,” Jim replied, “but do you want to revisit them?”

“You feel your writing was equivalent to that of a child.”

“My professors did.”

“Very well,” Spock stated after a moment. “Then I shall determine an adequate, additional written assignment by our twentieth class. It will be due at our last class.”



“I asked for this,” Jim muttered to himself as he stared at the blank screen of his PADD. “I *could* be with the wrestling team tailgating for the football game. But no.”

The screen mocked him. At the top of the page sat the assignment Spock had given him: Write an *ash’yaidar t’Surak* on the color brown.

An *ash’yaidar t’Surak*, Jim thought, standing up to pace around the floor of his dorm room, which he had managed to stress-clean into flawlessness about three circuits earlier. Six lines, first and third with five feet and the rest with seven. Focus on emotional impermanence.

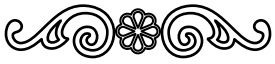
It shouldn’t have been this hard, Jim reflected as he walked. It was basically one step from a Terran *tanka*. And sure, brown wasn’t the most inspirational color, but it had some imagery.

It wasn’t like his writing hadn’t improved. Jim had stopped counting how many professors praised him for a particularly classical idiom in a mock speech, or a striking detail in a lab report. Even praise for making an allegorical turn of phrase in a verbal debate wasn’t a big deal — although that one was memorable because he’d made the other student cry, though hey, how was he supposed to know his mock debate partner had a particular fear of Hortas?

Sure, all of those were *nonfiction* styles of writing, and this was fiction. It was a poem, but Jim liked those. Jim may not have been Homer to reinvent the wine-dark sea, but that was likely a good thing given the length at which Spock had scathingly torn into the use of a “vague, culturally impermanent metaphor that was imprecise by the speaker’s own cultural standards.”

Plus, his grade was set. He knew, and Professor S’chn T’gai, who still seemed to startle whenever Jim said that to tease him, even after eleven weeks, knew his writing had gotten stronger, more complex, better structured and more imaginative. Kirk could redo the poem he wrote in high school as a pun off the early 2000s children’s television and pass.

But… “I asked to write him something, and he asked me to write him poetry,” Kirk said aloud. And that was a *problem*.



“So, this is it,” Jim said hesitantly, handing the professor the printed paper of his poem before placing their cups of mocha on the table. “What do you think?”

Professor Spock glanced over the paper. Then a second time.

“It’s that bad, huh,” Jim said with a wince, sipping from his mug as he watched Spock’s eyes pass over the sheet a third time, before glancing up at him, and doing it again.

Spock looked up. “It is … not bad,” he said, his tone sounding … strangely, almost pleasantly hoarse to Jim. “No, it is not.”

“Excellent,” Jim said, relieved. “In that case, I, ah, have a question. For you.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t want to stop our time together, and as you’re no longer my professor, and I’m relatively sure I’ve tested out of everything you’d be teaching, any chance I can just date you? I’d really like to date you,” Jim added hurriedly. “I just—”

“You may see me in a … personal fashion,” Spock interrupted. “Though, perhaps, you should wait until we have begun to determine if ‘dating’ is the correct term for the relationship desired.”

Kirk sipped from his mug. “Well, I’ve got time to convince you it is,” he said at last, “and an even more creative tongue to do it with.”

Many months later, when one Amanda Grayson came to visit her son, she found to her surprise the following poem, sitting in a Pacific blue-dyed wood frame, on her son’s desk:

Fields of ripened grain

Thresh, winnow, sift, stirring as

Tawny eyes flicker.

Rusted steel rakes, racks bare fields,

Spiced mocha snuffs thirsty mouths—

Your sand slips out to my shores.

And she was even more pleased to meet the author who had written it, as he was sitting at her son’s desk, penning another in between his classes.

Journey to Vulcan — Part 1
by MrsAtoz

“This is embarrassing…” Kirk trailed off.

He looked down at his now completely naked body, standing in front of his first officer who removed the last pieces of clothing from his captain.

“It is not.”

Spock’s statement came without a hint of emotion as usual. He tossed Kirk’s clothes aside and looked his captain straight in the eye.

“Shall we…?”

Kirk’s title hangs in the air, unspoken like so many times before, but nonetheless there. He had sometimes wondered why Spock would make use of his title instead of his first name even when they were alone. He had concluded that for Spock the use of his title was a sign of respect for his commanding officer — and friend. Kirk had learned to recognize the nuances in the Vulcan’s voice depending on the situation they were in.

He had learned to love the way Spock called him that.

With a look of resignation, he gave Spock a nod of approval.

It had been a couple of days now since he had gotten seriously injured during an away mission. This time McCoy was really worried they might lose him, but he had gotten better eventually. However, his condition did not return to what he would consider normal or at least acceptable under the circumstances. He could hardly stand for more than a short period of time, his strength all gone, replaced by a feeling of weakness and lack of power he was quite unaccustomed to. McCoy wanted to transfer him to the nearest starbase with an adequate rehab facility but he declined. He didn’t want to be away from the *Enterprise*, not even for a while.

Finally, McCoy talked to Spock for his captain would require a large amount of support in the weeks to come, and he knew the two of them were close friends. Sometimes he had suspected that maybe there was even more to that friendship than they led on, but for lack of evidence he had put these thoughts aside. Right now, Jim needed a strong helping hand even for the most basic things like using the bathroom or getting up in the morning. After a short conversation with Spock, the Vulcan had agreed to take care of Kirk so he would not have to leave the ship until he had fully recovered from the incident.

At first it felt kind of awkward to be so close to one another. Spock had been instructed by McCoy what ‘taking care of the captain’ would entail for the time being, but the reality of it took Spock some getting used to. He had to make quite a few adjustments to his usually clearly

defined boundaries and personal comfort zone. Soon, however, Spock realized how much Kirk depended on him right now. And on the reliability of their relationship.

He tried his best not to make his captain feel uncomfortable even in the more intimate moments of the day when he helped him to stand upright while urinating or when Kirk woke up in the middle of the night, his sleep disturbed by a nightmare Spock could not quite fathom. Taking a shower had proven to be a real problem, for Kirk could hardly remain standing for more than a moment. Spock however was aware how much his captain loved to feel the hot water after a long day on the bridge or after a sparring match in the gym. He knew Kirk used every opportunity to indulge himself like that. Kirk was rather depressed when he had to accept the fact that taking a shower was not an option right now.

So Spock had finally come up with an idea, resulting in the installation of a bathtub in their shared bathroom by Chief Engineer Scott who was more than happy he could contribute to the captain's recovery. The bathtub was a luxury hardly to be found on starships at the time since they really took up a lot of space — and water. Spock didn't care, and neither did Mister Scott.

And so it happened that Spock was now standing in front of a completely naked captain who looked a bit reluctant at first but finally gave in to the inevitable. With a careful movement Spock lifted him and helped him settle in the steaming water. Kirk closed his eyes as his bruised body instantly relaxed when engulfed by the heat and a scent he could not quite distinguish. He tried to lean back but a suppressed moan and a painful look on his face made Spock realize this may not have been such a brilliant idea after all.

"Dammit … I am totally fucked up!!"

The use of profane swearing was a more than clear sign to Spock of Kirk's frustration over his current impairment. Before he had really thought about it, Spock started to remove his uniform, followed by his underwear until he also was completely naked. Spock hesitated, what was he doing? His boundaries seemed to have gone with the wind, his only thought being that Kirk needed help here as well.

"Coming to join me, Mister Spock?"

Kirk's smile broke the uneasy moment. Spock was not used to being seen without a proper uniform or any clothing at all for that matter.

"You were right — it is somewhat embarrassing." Spock remarked.

"No. It is not."

Spock slowly and carefully entered the bathtub to sit right behind his captain, to support him with his body. They shifted a bit until Kirk could lean back against the Vulcan's chest. He closed his eyes.

"Oh my goodness…" Kirk sighed.

Spock felt his friend relax instantly as he rested his head on the hairy chest of his second-in-command.

Spock sat somewhat frozen despite the steaming water they were immersed in. They had shared private and intimate situations these last days for sure, but sharing a bath was taking it to the next level. He realized he hadn't thought this whole thing with the bathtub through; however, when he became aware of the slow and regular breathing of his captain, he knew Kirk was at ease and comfortable with it. For the first time since the accident Kirk really seemed to calm down, to rest. Now that Spock had established that the bath was indeed a good idea after all, he contemplated what to do next.

A bath is supposed to let you clean your body, so he reached for a sponge he had placed next to the bathtub earlier. He let it soak and began to wash his captain. Slowly at first, since he had no idea how Kirk would react but all he got in response to his ministrations was a low humming sound from time to time, indicating Kirk was really relishing whatever Spock was doing. He had started by the shoulders, moving on to the hairless chest and was working his way — down. He halted. Now there was a part of his captain's body that was private and although he had seen and even touched it on various occasions when he had assisted his captain in the bathroom — in a bathtub it was something completely different, Spock realized.

Kirk moved a little and without opening his eyes he said, his tone somewhat sleepy: "Don't stop, Spock… It feels so good." And he shifted his body to give Spock better access to wherever his hand and sponge wanted to go.

Spock was still surprised how easily they had both adapted to this new situation. When McCoy had first informed him of the seriousness of Kirk's condition and asked if he would agree to help the captain, he hadn't given it a moment's thought, but at that time he had no understanding of what was entailed in the task. How much it would take him to keep up his shields, especially during the nights they spent together in the captain's quarters. While sleeping on an additional small bed Mister Scott installed so Spock could be nearby in case anything happened, he was from time to time exposed to waves of rather uncontrolled emotions emanating from Kirk, especially when the captain got haunted by a bad dream.

Without a proper meld Spock had no way of discerning what these nightmares were about, if they were in any way related to the accident in which Kirk got injured or if they were ghosts from the past. Anyway, they challenged his mental control. When Kirk was awake he did his best to leave Spock to his privacy, only asking for his help when absolutely necessary. After a few days they had developed a kind of understanding, a rhythm, a way of doing what had to be done like going to the bathroom, yet respecting the other's personal space as best as possible. Nevertheless, boundaries dissipated more and more and they accepted each other's nearness as a naturally occurring circumstance.

At the end of the first week Spock realized that this was exactly what it was. Natural. Like he had always been that close to Kirk. And always would be. Someone had once said something to that effect to him. She had been right.

Spock's hand moved carefully further down Kirk's body, the sponge doing its job with satisfactory precision.

"What's that wonderful smell, Spock? Did you put something in the water?" Kirk asked.

So he noticed, Spock thought. When his mother had last visited him on the *Enterprise*, she had brought a gift, an expensive Vulcan bath additive which was hard to come by, being unaware of the fact that the *Enterprise* did not offer this kind of extravagance. He could easily list all the precious ingredients from memory, but all he said was: “Yes, Jim. Something my mother gave me the last time we met.”

Kirk remained silent for a while. Spock began to wonder if he had fallen into a light sleep. His musings were interrupted by Kirk, turning around as much as his sore body would allow and looking up at him.

“It smells exquisite, Spock.” And, after a pause: “Thank you for sharing it with me.”

And he settled back into his former position, head to the side and resting on the Vulcan’s chest.

Spock became aware of how long they had by now been sitting in Mister Scott’s ingenious bathtub and thought it would be time for the captain to lie down and get some sleep. He had been given a strict time schedule by Doctor McCoy which had to be followed — well — as best as was possible with a patient like the captain. While trying to develop an effective strategy on how to get them both out of the bathtub without risking too much strain on Kirk’s barely healed wounds, Spock noticed that the sponge was floating adrift in the bathtub water and his hands were by now both in a compromising position on Kirk’s body. How had that happened? The fact that Kirk didn’t seem to mind in the slightest only added to Spock’s confusion. He shifted his body carefully and was about to retreat his hands from the area in question, when he felt Kirk’s right hand on top of his, holding it in place.

“Let us stay like this a while longer, Spock, shall we?”

Kirk didn’t look up, he kept his eyes closed. He didn’t want this moment to end. Never had he felt that much at ease with himself — in the presence of another person. Even while being as incapacitated as he was at the moment, he felt peace flowing through his body and he wanted to relish that feeling for as long as Spock would be willing to let him have it.

He had had a hard time convincing McCoy that he would not get better away from his ship and friends. What he really had meant — he would not get better without having Spock there to keep watch, to keep him company. He had realized quite some time ago that this ever so logical, seemingly emotionless Vulcan was in fact his anchor who kept him grounded. Who pulled him back every time his body or mind or soul was at risk of getting lost. Maybe this accident which had rendered him pretty much broken and for a while depending on others finally added up to something good — him and Spock spending time together in a way they had never done before. And probably never would after the injuries would have healed and he would be well again.

For now sitting in a bathtub with Spock was all he needed. And he could not remember when he had last been pampered like this. He smiled. All of a sudden Kirk became aware of the fact that by now the water had considerably dropped in temperature. And what was that sponge doing there anyway near their feet?

“Captain, I really think we should get you out of the bathtub and into bed.” Spock eventually said. He had a pretty good idea what McCoy would have to say about hanging out in the bathroom for so long. Besides, the water was rather cold by now, and the wonderful smell of rare Vulcan flowers was almost gone.

Kirk complied and after a short time he was dry and comfortably lying in his bed. “Is there anything else you require, Jim?”

Kirk couldn’t help it. Every time Spock called him by his first name was — special. Bones called him by his first name, all the time. Nothing to it. But with Spock it was different. He hadn’t quite figured out if there was perhaps some kind of logical pattern as to when the usage of the first name was in order for the Vulcan? Anyway, he was thrilled somehow each and every time it occurred.

“I’m fine.” His thoughts went back to the enchanting smell of the Vulcan bath additive. Wasn’t there a tiny residue of the odor on his skin?

“Please give your mother my regards the next time you speak to her, Spock,” he said.

“I will. Thank you, Captain.”

Oh, now we’re back to the title thing, it crossed Kirk’s mind. He realized that Spock, who had been about to leave his quarters to check some things on the bridge, halted in his tracks and looked at him somewhat undecided.

Kirk smiled and offered: “Something on your mind, Mister Spock?”

He could do titles, too, but for now he settled with a less rank pulling form of addressing his friend.

“As a matter of fact, there is something I would like to discuss with you, Captain. If you are not too tired? It can wait, of course…”

But Kirk was too curious as to the nature of Spock’s request and sat up, looking straight at the Vulcan.

“What is it?” he asked invitingly.

Spock hesitated a moment, then sat down at the edge of the bed, his hands in his lap as usual.

“Jim, I am well aware of the fact that you heavily resisted Doctor McCoy’s proposal to leave the *Enterprise* in order to undergo treatment in an appropriate medical facility on a starbase of your choice.”

Kirk felt like this conversation was going in a direction he strongly detested. Was Spock already tired of looking after him? Or was all this too much of a burden for his carefully upheld posture of an emotionless Vulcan? During the last days Kirk had once more come to realize how well they did together, but perhaps the unfamiliar closeness was too much for Spock, after all. However, when he thought about the last hours they had spent skin on skin in the bathtub with Spock’s hands finally resting in his crotch, he dismissed the thought.

“I know Bones meant well, Spock … but right now I feel like everything is taken away from me —” He halted, a sudden flash of a scene from one of his nightmares appeared in his mind. He

was thirteen and abandoned on that colony which became quite famous for an unprecedented genocide, committed by a man who would afterwards be known as “Kodos, the Executioner”. He involuntarily closed his eyes, fighting the memory.

“I couldn’t take being away from the *Enterprise*.” He almost laughed at the sound of his own words — like his ship was a living and breathing being.

Away from you, he added in his mind.

Spock nodded, and his voice became soft when he spoke.

“After what has happened to you I understand your need for stability and a familiar environment. But I think McCoy is right when he proposes a temporary change to give you time to heal. That is why I would like to make a suggestion if I may?”

He halted and studied Kirk’s face for any sign of defense but all he saw was a rather impatient look on his captain’s face.

“Spock, there is no better place for me to get well than here … with you by my side.”

Spock’s lips parted slightly while he contemplated on Kirk’s confession. He had thought about this for a while now and judging by Kirk’s statement his plan was not only logical but also perfect.

“Then I have a solution to this dilemma, Captain, that even Doctor McCoy cannot refuse.”

Jim looked at him quizzically. Somehow he doubted that there was anything in this universe or any other that his two best friends could possibly agree on.

“I have calculated that at maximum speed the *Enterprise* could reach my home planet in seven point nine five days. We could make use of a shuttlecraft for your convenience and I would like you to spend a couple of weeks with me on Vulcan in my parents’ house until you get better. I estimate we both have plenty of unused shore leave time accumulated to—”

Kirk’s broad smile made him stop.

“For a terrible moment I thought you had gotten tired of me, Spock.”

His mocking tone however did not fool Spock, there was an undertone of apprehension in these words no matter how much Kirk tried to play it down by giving him that wonderful smile of his.

Spock was completely serious when he replied: “I cannot imagine a time or circumstance where I would find myself tired of your company or your friendship, Jim.”

He stood up.

“I will inform Doctor McCoy then of our plans. I have no doubt he will be delighted. Nothing pleases him more than having his way, after all.”

He raised an eyebrow thinking of McCoy’s complacent reaction when he would speak to him. But he had to admit to himself that the doctor had been right all along: the captain needed a diversion to take his mind off of all the bad memories that came to haunt him in his dreams

when his otherwise alert mind was not in control and he was vulnerable. The recurring nightmares in the past few days had proven that much.

Kirk's gaze became soft when he stopped Spock who was about to leave and talk to McCoy before resuming his duties on the bridge.

"Thank you, Spock — for taking me with you."

Spock gave his captain a long look. "You're welcome, Captain."

With these words he turned around and left for sickbay. He had to straighten his defenses before addressing the doctor who would no doubt gloat over the fact that the captain finally listened to him and did as the doctor had advised right from the beginning.

II

The *Enterprise* had diverted its course heading for Vulcan in order to give Spock and Kirk the opportunity to travel there by making use of a shuttlecraft for the rest of the way. Spock estimated they would reach his home world in approximately half an hour. He was looking forward to seeing his parents again. It had been a while since he last spoke to them in person.

"It's been a while since we last visited Vulcan." Kirk, who was sitting in the co-pilot's seat next to him, seemed to have guessed his thoughts.

"Promise me there'll be no fighting this time — all right, Spock?"

He laughed and his boyish grin told Spock that his captain was feeling well this afternoon. No doubt Doctor McCoy's extra dosage of pain-killers was still effective. Spock knew, however, from past experience that the effect was to wear off soon enough and in his mind he recalled the line-up of McCoy's medication schedule for Kirk. He had been given thorough instructions by the *Enterprise's* chief medical officer on when and how to use the assortment of hypos the doctor had packed together for the weeks to come.

"I agree that any kind of physical exertion is not advisable for the time being."

"Glad to hear that, Spock."

They had decided on arriving on Vulcan in the late hours of the day so the dropping temperatures would be more comfortable for Kirk. They reached Spock's family home at the estimated time, Spock carrying both bags to spare his captain the weight while Kirk did his best to walk up to the house alongside Spock without faltering despite the pain which became more and more impossible to ignore. The fact that walking even the short distance from the shuttlecraft to the house took Kirk quite some effort told Spock that it was time for another hypo.

The doors opened before they had reached them and revealed Spock's mother, Amanda. She walked towards the two men and without hesitation embraced her son.

"Oh Spock, it's been so long."

She placed a kiss on his cheek. Spock was not amused. She was so — *Human* — sometimes. He was fully aware of the fact that Kirk had noticed this display of uncalled-for emotions and tried his best to look — well — as *Vulcan* as possible.

“Good afternoon, Mother.”

Amanda reached out to Kirk. He looked pale and tired and she had no doubt that he felt much worse than he let them see.

“James.” She took both his hands. “So good of Spock to bring you here!”

He gave her his broadest smile. “Thank you for having me, Mrs. Sarek. It is a pleasure seeing you again.”

“Amanda. Please, call me Amanda.”

With that she took Kirk’s arm and they made their way inside. Spock couldn’t help but get the impression that it was not Kirk leading her inside — although it looked like that — but that in fact his mother was supporting his captain, having noticed his weakening condition.

The house was comfortably cool and only dimly lit.

Spock was about to put down the bags when he was alerted by his mother calling out for him. He realized right away that Kirk had reached the limit of his strength for the day, for he had dropped down on the couch Amanda had directed him to and breathed heavily, his eyes closed.

Spock was at his side in an instant, assessing Kirk’s condition. He helped him into a lying position and carefully arranged the pillows so he would be as comfortable as possible.

“There is a medkit in one of the bags, Mother, please get it for me.” Spock did not divert his gaze from Kirk.

Amanda handed him the small medkit, watching as her son expertly prepared one of the included hyposprays and injected his captain with a substance that would help with his breathing. It took a moment until the effect became visible and Kirk’s breathing slowed down to a more normal rate.

“I would need some cold water, Mother? And a towel, if you please.”

Spock had begun to take a medical tricorder reading of his captain, when his mother returned with the requested water bowl and towel. She watched her son soaking the towel with water and carefully cooling his captain’s face to give him some relief from the heat. Even at this time of day it was rather warm and the Vulcan air being thin took Humans some getting used to.

“Do you want me to call a doctor, Spock?” Amanda had expected Kirk to be weak from what her son had told her so far but seeing the captain like this tore her heart. She remembered him as a strong man who could take quite a lot of pain without complaints.

“I think that will not be necessary. The medication is already working.” He put the hypospray back into the medkit.

“So let him rest here a while before you show him to our guest room, Spock. I will prepare dinner; your father should be home soon.”

She put a reassuring hand on Spock's shoulder before she left for the kitchen. Spock had taken on a difficult and demanding task, judging from his captain's condition, no doubt. But she had seen the two of them together on the *Enterprise*, how well they communicated and how relaxed Spock was in his captain's presence. Surely they shared a strong friendship.

It wasn't the first time Amanda considered the possibility that maybe there was even something else — a kind of connection that went beyond friendship or family. The thought came back to her mind when she saw Spock taking care of his captain a moment ago. The way he helped him lie down, in an almost *tender* manner. The way he cooled his face without hesitation. She had noticed before that with Kirk her son was less reluctant when it came to being close to someone or even being touched. She remembered being startled when she became aware of the naturalness in which Kirk touched Spock every now and then.

Surely the captain knew that Vulcans objected to physical contact? It startled her even more that her son didn't seem to mind at all. After a while she realized that Kirk was by nature a tactile person, and that he had the utmost respect for Spock. After all, bringing his captain, who was obviously also his friend, here was a good idea, Amanda concluded and started to hurry up with the dinner preparations so her husband would not have to wait when he arrived.

The evening passed in a pleasant and rather relaxed atmosphere. Spock's father, Ambassador Sarek, had returned soon after their arrival and they shared a wonderful homemade meal. Due to the medication and some time on the couch Kirk was feeling a lot better and so they were all gathered at the dinner table.

Sarek was still a little confused by something he had witnessed earlier; he would have to talk with his wife about it later since she had admittedly a far better understanding of the unpredictable dynamics of Human interaction.

The captain had been resting on the couch but soon felt better, no doubt due to a strong substance injected into his bloodstream by Spock. When he started to get up he was immediately stopped by Spock who demanded he remain in a horizontal position for at least another half hour. Kirk tried to get up anyway, only to be pushed back down onto the pillows by Spock. But instead of pulling rank or reacting exasperated as Sarek would have expected, Kirk only smiled apologetically and remained on the couch as told. Sarek realized that there was *something* behind this interaction he did not understand and made a mental note to ask his wife for clarification.

The dinner passed with vivid conversation, regarding the *Enterprise's* latest missions and the ambassador's current negotiations. When Amanda realized that Kirk started to tire she decided to call it a night and began clearing the table.

"Why don't you show James his room, Spock? I'm sure it has been a tiring journey and you both could use some rest."

She all but gleamed at Kirk who got up and thanked her for the wonderful meal, while Sarek watched with slight surprise when Spock, who had taken their bags, regardless of the amount of physical contact it required helped Kirk upstairs, supporting his captain whose strength had reached its limit for the day. He needed to talk to his wife, no doubt.

III

It was the first time Kirk entered Spock's room in his parents' home and he was surprised by the mere size of it. Not that there was much furniture or anything else in it. The room was just — huge. Large windows with an extraordinary desk in front of them. He wondered if this room had ever changed throughout the years or if it was exactly as it was when Spock was a boy. Kirk knew that Vulcans put the education of their offspring above anything else, and he imagined his second-in-command being a boy sitting at this large desk, working on and understanding computers at a remarkably early age. However, since he knew how long Spock had been away from home due to the disagreement with his father regarding his career plans he concluded the room might very well be unchanged ever since Spock left this house to join Starfleet instead of the Vulcan Science Academy.

He looked around. Aside from the workspace and a similarly sized bed there was a cupboard — Kirk noticed much to his delight a three-dimensional chess board on top of it—, several ancient books and a few decorative statues. It felt somewhat like getting to know his friend better, like peeking into his past and seeing him as he was growing up. Kirk felt like he had been given a precious gift. That Spock would not only share his family home with him, but also his private and personal space.

Spock had dropped their bags on the bed, extracted the medkit from one and walked over to his desk where he put it down. He didn't turn around when he spoke up, and kept shuffling something, Kirk couldn't see what it was. Maybe he was assorting the hypos or maybe he was shuffling — something — just for the benefit of not having to turn around just yet.

"My mother prepared a guest room for you, Captain." He paused, still shuffling — whatever it was he kept his hands busy. "Logically, it would be more convenient if you stayed … here. So I can easily be of assistance in case you need anything." Spock kept shuffling.

It was a logical offer, yet — Kirk felt something change between them in that moment. He was grateful to Spock for having shown him the room he grew up in. Now he was offered to share it with him. He didn't know what to say.

Spock turned around with a quizzical yet also tense look on his face. Kirk kept silent, all he managed was to nod in approval.

Spock nodded as well, also remaining silent. They shared a long look until Kirk broke the silence.

"Thank you, Spock … for everything."

Spock started to say something but the words wouldn't escape his mouth. He returned his attention to the bags and assorted their clothing and personal stuff.

"I think you should lie down and get some rest, Captain. It has been a long day." He looked at Kirk who looked at the huge bed and raised an eyebrow, waiting.

Kirk smiled and held up his arms so Spock could easily pull his captain's shirt over his head. He knew the procedure after all this time that Spock now had taken care of him. Soon he was

only in his briefs and undershirt, lying down on Spock's bed, covered by a light blanket. "I will prepare your medication."

With these words Spock walked back to the desk where he had put the medkit and looked for the appropriate substance. When he returned to the bed he realized that Kirk had already fallen asleep, no doubt the demands of the journey had taken up all the energy he could muster so far. He looked down at the hypospray in his hand. It could wait. He decided to let his captain sleep and made for the door. Before he left he adjusted the environmental controls for his room to a temperature more agreeable to his friend. He took one last look at Kirk and, noticing the even breathing, left the room.

IV

The following weeks were filled with short walks in the vicinity of the house, games of chess and physical exercises, followed by a shared bath. McCoy had put together an exact listing of activities which took in account the hot and thin air of the planet and which were supposed to strengthen Kirk as he got better. Some he could do alone, some required a helping hand. Kirk complied with most of it, but as was to be expected had objected to others. Spock was not sure whether he had honest reservations or if it was just for the sake of arguing. In the afternoon Spock saw to it that his captain got the required — and prescribed — sleep. The time Spock relished the most however were the hours they spent together down in the living room, sitting opposite one another on the couch, each reading a book while their feet touched. Spock had never given it much thought before. Kirk had suggested to sit down and rest together with 'a good book' and had taken off his shoes in order to stretch out his feet on the couch. Spock found there was now only little space left on the couch for him and of course Kirk had noticed his discomfort.

"Why don't you take off your shoes as well, Spock, and make yourself comfortable? My feet won't mind a little company," he said playfully.

And so it happened that they spent hours together in the living room, sometimes reading their 'good book', on other occasions talking about the events of the day or the progress Kirk's health showed, while their feet touched and intermingled.

Amanda would bring them tea and cookies or some cake, always amazed how much at peace her son seemed to be. She had grown immensely fond of Spock's captain and was truly grateful for the friendship and regard he obviously held for Spock while at the same time he managed to challenge Spock's reserve and strictly Vulcan demeanor ever so often. Her husband found the reading useful but was at a loss as to why touching someone else's feet might add to the experience. She would have to have a word with him about that.

V

They were back in Spock's room after a long walk which had proven to be fatiguing but had also felt so good. Walking for almost an hour! Kirk felt his strength returning and that made him feel damn good. All his efforts — and Spock's — would eventually pay off and he would be his old self again. Deep inside he thanked McCoy for his harshness that had finally made him accept this extended shore leave time with Spock to recover.

Kirk had noticed a while ago that Spock had reduced the overall room temperature considerably for his captain's convenience and decided to address the matter for he was well aware that it was far from what a Vulcan would find acceptable. After all, he was getting better every day and didn't need to be pampered that much anymore.

"Tell me, Spock — how much did you lower the room's average temperature? I'm much better and can take a few degrees more." He chuckled. "And don't tell me this is comfortable for you because I know it is not."

Spock hesitated for a moment before replying. "Fifteen degrees."

"What??" Kirk threw him an incredulous glance. "You must be freezing at night like this! All right…" Kirk paused, closing his eyes. He knew there was no use in arguing with Spock. It was time for a command decision and he felt up to it.

"You will adapt the room temperature to a level that is at least acceptable to you — or even better — comfortable. Can we agree on that, Commander?"

The use of his title left no doubt in Spock's mind that his captain meant it. Deep inside his heart jumped a beat at the fact that Kirk was giving orders again. Even if it was a rather silly one. A simple request would have sufficed. Nevertheless, he nodded and walked over to the environmental controls to make the proper adjustments.

Turning around, he couldn't help it. He had to give Kirk that resigned look with the raised eyebrow. *Are you satisfied now, Captain?* It seemed to say.

"Thank you, Mister Spock." Kirk did his best not to grin. He took off his jacket and sat down on the bed. The shoulders still felt a little bit sore but he could manage.

"Do you require your medication? Or do you want to go without it?" Spock asked. They had skipped the prescribed hypo injections on several occasions over the last few days since Kirk had made up his mind to try and see whether they were actually still necessary.

"I think I'm good, thank you, Spock." Kirk hesitated. It was his usual time to lie down and get some rest. After the walk it would certainly have been a good idea. He would lie down, Spock would cover him with the light blanket and after a last look from the door he would leave him to his dreams. However, somehow he didn't feel like sleeping. At least not alone.

At first sharing the bed with Spock had taken some getting used to. Back on the *Enterprise* Spock had slept in that small extra bed Scotty had brought into his quarters. Here they were together in that huge bed in Spock's room, either one of them mindful not to intrude on the

other half of the bed. Initially Kirk was surprised that Spock would consider sharing the bed at all, being the private person Kirk had come to know. But he had learned over the last intensive weeks in Spock's — constant — presence, that they both could let go of boundaries and inhibitions. In a way he still could not quite understand. For the time being, he accepted gratefully the level of friendship and intimacy they were sharing.

He sighed and finally decided to lie down after all. He could by now easily take off his clothing by himself and soon was in his briefs and undershirt, leaning back onto the bed. Spock reached for the blanket as usual. He would cover his captain, he would take a last look from the door and then he would go downstairs, leaving him to a restful sleep.

Kirk's hand reached for the blanket, stopping him. For a moment neither of them moved. There was an unspoken question, almost palpable in the air between them. Spoke froze, not sure how to answer that question. When he did not react, Kirk lay down, turning around and allowing Spock to cover him with the blanket like he had done so many times before.

Spock slowly got up and walked towards the door.

"Stay."

Spock halted and turned around to look at his captain who had not moved. Spock wanted to say something but nothing came to mind. Nothing needed to be said. Slowly he walked back to the bed they had been sharing for many nights now, knowing things between them would change forever if he did as Jim asked. But Spock knew the answer to the unspoken question had been in his mind for quite some time. So he walked around the bed to the side he usually occupied and sat down. He took off his clothes and started to turn around when he noticed Kirk had been watching him and was now holding up the blanket so he could easily slip under it. There was a look of apprehension on his face, and a smile that was quite different from his usual broad and distracting grin.

This smile was shy, waiting and inviting at the same time. Spock felt like he could indulge in this smile forever but all he wanted was to get closer. How easily they slipped into one another, one holding the other, bodies intertwined. The answer to the unspoken question. They lay like that for quite some time. Spock began to wonder if Jim had fallen asleep, but he knew better. His friend was giving him time to adjust to this new level of intimacy, he would let him make the first move — or be content with what they had so far.

"Jim."

"Mmmh?" When Spock did not continue, Kirk raised his head to look at his friend. "Something on your mind, Spock?"

Spock weighed his next words carefully. Vulcans never spoke of such matters, and he did not possess any personal experience. His only points of reference were the events that occurred during his first *pon farr*, when the ancient drives of the Vulcan mating ritual and the associated blood fever made him completely lose control. He had finally opened up to Kirk but he had to make sure he truly understood what being with a Vulcan entailed. He looked at Kirk and

noticed his concerned glance. Before he could speak, Kirk sat up a little and his voice was calm and soft when he spoke.

“Spock, I’m not expecting anything. I’m more than content the way—” He was cut short by Spock who shifted his body so he was now on top of his captain.

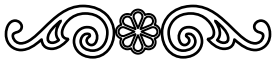
“You must understand that Vulcans are quite — possessive — when it comes to mating, Captain.”

There it was again, his title — in bed! Kirk couldn’t stand it — not now — and tried angrily to get up but Spock held him pinned down in a firm grip, his hands held so he was completely helpless. That’s when it struck him — Spock was insecure whether or not to proceed because he did not know if Kirk could take not being in control. Being dominated like that. The title was a reminder of his usual position: the one giving orders, not taking them. He had to make it clear to Spock that he not only *could* give up his control but that he wanted — *needed* — to.

Wasn’t that the reason all his former love affairs hadn’t worked? He was expected to be the one in control and he fulfilled that role each and every time. But every time it left him — empty, barren and — wanting. Wanting for something he could not fathom until he met Spock who was his equal in every sense and who wrestled him to the ancient Vulcan battle grounds in a remarkable display of elegance and relentless strength.

“Tell me what you want me to do, Spock.”

He relinquished command. Easily, without second thoughts, finally.



Spock.

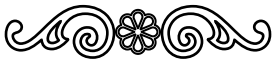
I look up at you and I see the emotion you so carefully keep to yourself. I see the love you held back all these years to give it to me now.

Spock.

I have been waiting for you for a long time. I have loved others but none like you. I have given my heart away but it was never returned. Until now.

Spock.

I am yours with all that I have to offer. It is yours. It has always been yours. It will never belong to anyone else but you.



Exhausted, Kirk opened his eyes. He was lying on his stomach, with Spock still heavily breathing and panting on top of him, but still careful not to put too much weight on his captain.

Of course, he would choose a position where Kirk wouldn't have to support himself for a longer period since he knew he wasn't up to it yet. When had he ever felt so spent? So content? Spock may have no experience but he was an attentive and observant lover who took his time to find out what his partner needed. His own experience with men was — well — limited. In no way did his short affair with Gary Mitchell compare to what he had just experienced.

Spock shifted his weight so his lover could turn around. "*T'hy'la,*" he said, the word merely a whisper.

Kirk looked at him, quizzically, while his lips formed that wonderful smile again. "What does it mean? It is Vulcan, is it not?" he lazily asked, eyes closing again.

"It is. It has no definite translation in Standard; however, it stands for a friend…"

Kirk hummed in approval.

"…a brother…"

"I like that."

"…but most of all it means … lover," Spock concluded.

Kirk looked up and with a swift movement caught his lover off guard, rolling him on his back. Now in the upper position, Kirk studied Spock's appearance. The usually carefully combed hair is a mess, and the face is still somewhat covered in sweat. Something Kirk hadn't seen often, not even during their intense sparring sessions in the *Enterprise's* gym.

He was about to make a humorous remark regarding Spock's hair — so funny! — but instead he said in a soft tone: "I love you, Spock." His face suddenly earnest and conveying the depth of his feelings.

"As I cherish thee, *ashayam*."

"I should take some time learning more of your language, Spock." And with a playful tone he added: "You could educate me."

"I am sure we can both learn a lot from the other, Jim."

This remark seemed to bring Kirk to life, for his eyes became quite alert, his breathing intensified and his body shifted into a more — dominant — position, Spock noticed.

"You're still not tired, *ashayam*??"

But Kirk silenced him with a tender — Human — kiss. He didn't care about the pain in his back which told him it was time for another hypo whether he liked it or not. All he wanted right now was to give his *t'hy'la* pleasure.

Jim.

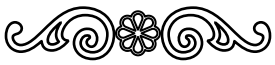
You woke me up from an endless sleep. You let me into your life and showed me the true meaning of friendship.

Jim.

You held me when no one else dared. You stood by me when no one else cared. Without you I am not whole, and never will be.

Jim.

You showed me the love I am capable of and allowed me to give it to you while you gave yours without restraint. How can I ever understand this precious gift — *you*.



Night had fallen when they finally fell asleep, resting in each other's arms. Spock had watched over his *ashayam's* breathing until he was sure sleep had eventually come. He was still mesmerized by the events of the afternoon, still trying to fully comprehend the wonder of the new nature of their relationship. He found it a challenging puzzle. Maybe one he would never fully be able to solve. He closed his eyes. Their shore leave was coming to an end, and he and an almost fully recovered captain would return to the *Enterprise*. He had no idea yet how to deal with the fact that the captain and second-in-command were now in a romantic relationship but he knew they would find a way to handle it. While drifting off into sleep Spock wondered if Mister Scott might be capable of building a reasonably large bed for the captain's quarters? Or the first officer's. Or both.

VI

"Where is our son?"

Sarek entered the kitchen looking at his wife who was preparing dinner.

"He went upstairs with James."

"My dearest, that was over three hours ago." Sarek stated matter-of-factly. He looked at his wife who kept cutting the vegetables as though they were having a talk about which dressing to choose for the salad.

Amanda didn't look up when she said:

"It can take time to look after a friend who is not well."

Sarek contemplated her words for a moment. So his wife *had* noticed that there was more to this relationship than was to be expected between a first officer and his captain.

He had given it quite some thought when this might have begun to change into a more *personal* connection. It wasn't the first time Sarek felt — *regret* — not having spoken to his son for so many years. Surely he had missed a lot. Like his son getting promoted to first officer of Starfleet's flagship. Or the time of his first *pon farr* he missed because some urgent diplomatic mission had kept him away. This memory was especially difficult for him. Instead of getting bonded with his designated wife T'Pring, Spock ended up in a fight to the death with his captain which they both barely survived.

Maybe that was the moment it happened? The moment they realized there was more to their friendship, something yet to discover but nonetheless there.

"Share your thoughts with me, Sarek."

Amanda now looked over to her husband who had remained silent for quite some time, seemingly deep in thought. Sarek lifted his gaze.

"So you *have* noticed."

Amanda put down the knife and looked straight at her husband. "A long time ago."

If she had ever seen utter confusion on her husband's face it was at this moment.

"How long ago…?!"

Amanda never ceases to amaze him. Though an extremely emotional Human being, she had

obviously noticed something he had not.

"I realized there was something going on between them the first time I saw them together. On that terrible journey to Babel when you—"

She could not finish the sentence. Her husband almost died on that diplomatic mission. A painful memory.

"I was there. I … noticed nothing."

Sarek found it hard to believe. Surely it was remarkable that Kirk in spite of his severe injury he had suffered during the course of events and obviously in quite some physical pain had relieved Spock of command so he could participate in an operation to save his father's life. At the time it seemed a logical decision to Sarek.

To save the Vulcan ambassador — himself — so the negotiations on Babel could be carried out.

Looking at these events from a different perspective Sarek suddenly realized that with his actions Kirk had given Spock the chance to help his father, to save him. He had given them both a chance to come to terms with their differences and perhaps after a while reconnect after too many years of silence between them. Kirk had risked his own life and the *Enterprise* in this dangerous endeavor.

Amanda put a hand on his arm and a smile lit up her face.

"How could you? You were so ill. I cannot even say what triggered my attention back then … perhaps it was the way they interacted with one another."

Her thoughts went back to the events of that journey.

“Do you remember how James on several occasions tried to bring the two of you together? You rejected Spock as our guide, and didn’t want him around at all. Nevertheless, he tried more than once. I guess it was his gentle and caring manner towards Spock that intrigued me the most.”

Sarek looked at his wife with his usual stoic face that did not fool her at all. Sarek cared deeply for his son though he had difficulties showing it.

“It is a good thing then that our son has — *some* — of your Human qualities, my dearest.”

It had taken him years to accept that fact but now Sarek knew this to be true. Handling an emotional and dynamic individual like Kirk surely demanded as much.

And he raised two fingers in the traditional gesture of a Vulcan kiss. When their fingers touched a smile appeared on his face.

Amanda softly kissed him on his lips — *so emotional!* Sarek thought — and handed him the kitchen knife so he could finish the dinner preparations she had begun. She answered his puzzled look with another kiss.

“I will go upstairs and look after James and Spock. Maybe they want to join us for dinner.”

With that she turned around and left the kitchen.

When she reached the door to her son’s room she hesitated. Surely she didn’t want to — *interrupt* — anything. The fact that Spock had brought his captain upstairs hours ago and had not yet returned could indicate — well — *something*. But Amanda dismissed the thought when she heard no sound from inside Spock’s room.

She knocked at the door when she realized the door wasn’t closed. She opened it a little and peaked inside. James and Spock were lying in her son’s bed, intertwined in one another’s arms, sleeping.

She could not remember a time she had seen Spock so — *peaceful*. At ease. Carefully she stepped back and closed the door.

When she returned to the kitchen, Sarek had almost finished preparing the food. He looked up and she could see the question in his eyes.

“It will be just the two of us for dinner, my love.” She stated. Sarek reached for the salad. “I assumed as much.”

When they had finished dinner and sat on the veranda like they used to in the late evenings when the air finally got a bit colder and more comfortable for his wife, Sarek contemplated the events of the last couple of weeks.

His son had come home to visit them which was unusual to say the least. And he had brought his captain so the man could benefit from time off duty and recover from a serious injury. His wife had prepared a guest room for Kirk but Spock led him to his own room to rest after they had arrived. Sarek remembered his astonishment when he realized his son didn’t mind at all. There had been a certain naturalness to it that Kirk would share his room. And his bed.

T'hy'la.

The Vulcan term for a friend that was like a brother. And eventually became a lover. This kind of relationship was so rare it was almost like a myth in Vulcan culture. And yet here it was.

Sarek leaned back and put his arm around his wife. She cherished these tender moments for they were rare in a relationship with a Vulcan. Even after decades of marriage. They remained silent; no words were necessary between them.

Their son had come home and even if he and his captain would eventually travel back to their ship and embark on another mission, they knew Spock would not be alone anymore. That he had found a place for himself at the side of a man that deeply cared for him. Who loved him. Who would stand by him even under the most difficult of circumstances. He drew his wife closer.

Even with all his suppressed emotions he felt the love that had come back to the house of Sarek in the form of a new and unexpected bond.

And deep inside he knew this love was going to stay.

Journey to Vulcan — Part 2
by MrsAtoz

Sunlight already filtered through the large windows of his room in his parents' house when Spock eventually woke up. It took him a moment to recognize his surroundings. His sleep had been long and deep and he felt — satisfied. When he moved he became aware of a weight on his body.

Jim.

He was in bed with Jim.

The events of the afternoon and the night they finally spent in each other's arms came back to his mind. His captain who was lying down to get some rest had invited him to — stay — when Spock was about to leave the room. The way he had complied without hesitation. The lifted blanket, Kirk's shy smile that conveyed so much love and anticipation, the first touch of skin, Jim's arm around his waist, legs intertwined. Like they had always been together like this. A perfect fit.

Closeness had soon brought long denied desire and wanting to the surface and eventually led to a passionate love-making Spock was still unable to grasp entirely. He had always envisioned his captain to be a man full of passion but actually *feeling* it all directed towards him when Jim ever so tenderly addressed needs Spock had not been aware of before and the way he filled him so completely — it all still amazed and mesmerized him.

Ashayam. T'hy'la. These Vulcan terms hardly described what Spock felt for the man now nestling between his legs, head resting on Spock's belly and one hand on the hairy Vulcan chest.

Spock ran his fingers through his beloved's hair, careful not to wake him. A satisfied grunt from Kirk told him, however, that his lover was already awake.

"Don't stop, Spock." Kirk kept his eyes closed, relishing the tender caress. "Mmmh … I could stay like that forever."

Spock continued his ministrations, the golden hair so soft to the touch and Jim's steady heartbeat and the warm skin against his own. During the time he spent in Kirk's quarters sleeping in an additional bed while they were still on the *Enterprise*, Spock had observed on several occasions that his captain tended to move quite a lot in his bed while sleeping which Spock at first attributed to his recurring nightmares. However, he considered the possibility that it might simply be a reminder of his lover's dynamic personality that now made him end up sleeping atop Spock's crotch.

"Are you rested, *ashayam*?" Spock asked, still wondering how easily the Vulcan endearment came to his lips.

Kirk stirred a bit and looked up at him, smiling.

Oh that lovely smile. For me. Only for me.

Moving his body until he was looking directly down into Spock's eyes, Jim pressed a soft kiss on his lover's lips. His movements indicated that the captain was not only rested but contemplating a continuation of last night's endeavors.

Spock smiled. Not a hint only visible by close observation or to those who knew him well. Spock gave him that wonderful smile Jim had only seen once in all the time he had known him. The broad smile that 'would have brought the house down', like McCoy had put it. A proof of the pure joy and endless relief Spock had experienced when he found out that his captain and friend were still alive and not killed by his own hands during that ritual fight on Vulcan some time ago.

"You are insatiable, Jim." He laughed.

"Oh Spock."

Kirk felt tears welling up in his eyes. He was still stunned to see this usually well-hidden side of Spock. During the last night he had learned a lot about the affection, the love and passion his friend was capable of. But this was so pure and open and directed at *him*.

He wanted to say something meaningful, something that would transport all the love and his devotion for Spock but he had no words. Instead, tears kept running down his face.

Spock drew him closer, once more they slipped into one another while Spock carefully moved on top of his *ashayam*. He had learned by now that tears were a means of emotional release for Humans when words would be insufficient. He had learned to love the way Kirk opened up to him like that without restraint; this was a side of his captain no one else usually saw.

Spock's right hand was still on Jim's back, holding his friend in a reassuring and comforting gesture. He moved it up to the shoulder blades when Kirk suddenly flinched and his face twisted in pain. Spock had touched a sensitive spot but was unsure what it was.

"Are you hurt, Jim?" Spock's gaze became worried. "Turn around." And he lifted his body so Kirk could move as told. Spock examined his friend's back and detected a small blood-stained wound. Now he remembered. *Things* had gotten a little out of hand during the night, his possessive Vulcan nature coming to the surface as his arousal grew and his reticence waned.

"I am afraid this was my doing, Jim. I … was not entirely in control of my actions last night…"

Kirk interrupted him, a smile appearing on his face as he turned to look at Spock.

"You could say that, Spock." He lay back down, looking up at a still concerned Vulcan. Spock tenderly caressed his face with his thumb, drying the last remaining tears on his lover's face.

"I marked you as mine, *ashayam*." His voice was soft and — seductive.

Oh, he could die hearing Spock talk like that. He let his hand trail down Spock's muscular arm, touching his waist and up his spine. Images of the night flooded his mind. Spock held him so firmly he could not move and didn't want to. His excitement was growing with every touch and every move of his lover.

His lover. Spock.

He still didn't quite understand how they had managed to move past that carefully drawn line built by rank and a long-lasting friendship, but he guessed in the end it had been inevitable. He had felt drawn to Spock for quite some time, and it had been without further contemplation or intent that he had asked his friend to stay with him the day before. To lie down with him. All he wanted was to *be* with him. He watched his friend sit down on his half of the bed, watched him taking off his clothes and turning around to face him. He remembered that he lifted the blanket so his friend could slip under it easily. There was no hesitation, no second thoughts the moment they touched and held and explored each other for the first time. It immediately felt like it had always been that way.

He felt the soft touch of Spock's delicate fingers on his face. He wondered if Spock was considering a mind meld since he knew it was common between lovers. However, for now he decided to wait until Spock would address the matter, he wanted him to set the pace, after all.

In two days, their shore leave was about to end, and they would return to the *Enterprise*. For now, Kirk was content just lying here with Spock, savoring the moment.

Spock seemed to have caught up on his thoughts.

"We are scheduled to return to the *Enterprise* the day after tomorrow. I am afraid the wound on your back will still be visible then, Jim."

They both knew Kirk was due for a medical examination by McCoy right after his return to the ship. The wound would be somewhat — difficult — to explain.

"I could tell Bones I got into a fight with … well … maybe one of these animals you once mentioned … what were they called?" Kirk grinned. He vividly remembered Bones's smile when Spock's mother Amanda had mentioned the pet her son had as a child. A pet that turned out to be quite a dangerous beast by Human standards.

"A *sehlat*, Jim." Spock elaborated. "But I find it highly unlikely that Doctor McCoy would believe such a small wound could have been inflicted by an animal with six inch tall fangs."

Kirk chuckled. Alright then, the *sehlat* was out of the question.

Spock waged his following words carefully for they addressed a delicate matter they had not taken the time to discuss yet.

"This raises another question, Jim. One I think we should address before returning to the ship."

Kirk was well aware of what his friend was pointing at. He was right, of course. He shifted his body a bit so he could lie next to Spock, looking straight at him.

"You're right, Spock. We should talk about this, and now is as good a time as any." Although he could have thought of something else he would have liked to do right now.

"You are wondering whether we should come forward with the fact that the nature of our relationship has changed."

"The question is valid, since it will affect the way we interact with one another in public and with the crew." Spock stated matter-of-factly.

Kirk could however feel a certain apprehension in Spock's tone. He had no doubt that it was far more difficult for a Vulcan to reveal personal matters to the crew than it was for him. He thought about it for a moment, and soon realized that Spock's peace of mind and his well-being were too important to him to be put at risk of getting hurt. He would have been perfectly fine with spreading the news right away, he felt like he wanted to share his happiness with everyone, not holding back anything. But Spock was after all a private person and he thought it best to let his friend decide when the time was right for them to come forward.

He reached out to place a hand on Spock's side, right above the spot where the Vulcan heart is located. He felt it strumming against the ribcage, strong and fast.

"I think we should take our time to adjust to this new situation, Spock. We will know when the time is right to tell everyone. Until then I will think of something to tell Bones regarding the cause of that bite mark on my back." His loving smile was accompanied by his hand which he held up in the gesture of the Vulcan kiss — two fingers raised.

Spock reciprocated the gesture, two elegant fingers touching Kirk's. Of course it only took a moment until Kirk leaned in for more, there was still time? They were not yet expected downstairs for breakfast, Kirk hoped.

Like so many times before, Spock seemed to have guessed his thoughts. Maybe it was not so much guessing, but something else Kirk had not yet determined.

"I think we should delay whatever you have in mind, Jim."

Kirk tried to look disappointed but deep inside he knew that Spock was right. They had already missed dinner last night; no doubt Spock's parents were wondering what was going on on the second floor.

"I admit I feel a bit hungry, Spock."

So they finally got up and after a quick shower they were properly dressed and ready to go. Spock took a look at the hyposprays from McCoy's medkit, deciding they had become obsolete. His captain was in great shape, the occurrences of last night being thorough proof to this assessment.

"I will pack away your medication, Jim. I don't think you are going to need it any longer?" Spock raised a questioning eyebrow.

"I don't think so? I feel fine, apart from your mark on my back…" He couldn't help it, he had to tease his friend with this a little while longer.

Spock raised both eyebrows, a clear sign of resignation on his part.

"It will be interesting to hear how you are going to explain it to the good doctor."

Kirk chuckled. He had no idea yet how to divert the *Enterprise's* chief medical officer's mind from guessing the truth behind the origin of his injury since McCoy was also a longtime friend of his who usually looked right through any of his pretenses.

"Perhaps there are some — smaller — animals around I could have been attacked by?" Kirk tried, his face showing a mocking expression.

“During the past weeks, how many animals have we encountered, Jim?” Spock crossed his arms in front of his chest. He knew perfectly well they had not met a single suitable animal during their walks in all these past weeks.

Kirk seemed to contemplate his friend’s question but of course he was well aware of the fact that there had been no animals worth mentioning whatsoever. *Nice try, Jim!* He would have to come up with something far better to fool McCoy. Unfortunately, nothing came to mind.

He shrugged.

“I will think of something, Spock. Don’t worry.”

Spock was about to mention that Vulcans do not worry but he knew that Kirk knew, so he skipped the remark.

“It has come to my attention that Humans often do not believe the truth when it is offered bluntly.”

Kirk’s grin broadened.

“You mean I should just tell him that I climaxed the moment you feverishly bit me?”

Spock closed his eyes in defeat. There was nothing more to say to this. Arguing with Jim was a challenging if not futile task it seemed. He decided to let the matter rest for now and reached for the medkit on his desk, grabbing the hypo sprays that were scattered on the table.

“Why don’t you go downstairs, Jim, while I take care of your medicaments? I’m sure my mother will be up already and looking forward to seeing us. I will join you in a minute.”

Kirk walked up to his friend’s desk, instantly touching Spock as soon as he reached him. *He is such a tactile person. How have I ever existed without his touch?*

“Alright, I’ll be downstairs. Don’t take too long.” He halted a moment to see if Spock would be amenable to yet another caress when his *t’hy’la* took the initiative and leaned into a tender kiss.

Kirk was about to turn around when a thought crossed his mind. They had not spoken about Spock’s parents. Would Spock want to talk to them about their relationship?

“Spock … about your parents…” he started.

“There is no need to concern yourself whether we should talk to them about us or not. They know.”

“They do? How??” Kirk was of course aware that Vulcans had telepathic abilities, but—

“The door to my room was left open last night, however this morning I found it closed. No doubt my mother has come to look for us since we did not show up for dinner.”

All right, no telepathy needed here, Kirk concluded.

“Well, in that case I will do my best to make a good first impression as your lover, Spock.”

“Unnecessary, Jim. My mother already adores you,” Spock stated. He had of course noticed the high regard if not admiration his mother felt for Kirk. “Almost as much as I do.”

Kirk was not able to say anything. And he didn't have to. They shared a long glance in silence before Kirk's lips slightly parted to reveal the sweetest of smiles and he turned to walk downstairs.

II

The sound of breakfast preparations unquestionably emanated from the ground floor as Kirk walked down the stairs and directed his steps towards the kitchen. Spock's mother was busy cutting herbs while in a pot on the oven water boiled to cook some eggs. The smell of tea was in the air. Amanda looked up when she heard footsteps approaching. When she saw Kirk her face lit up and she instantly put down the kitchen knife she had used on the herbs.

"There you are!"

She reached out with both hands and took him in his arms in a firm embrace. He greeted her, not quite sure what to say. But his broad smile said it all. Somehow it struck him that it might prove difficult to hide his emotional state from his crew when he kept walking around grinning like that.

"Forgive me, but I felt like a good old Human hug might be called for." She closed her eyes. "Oh James, allow me to call you my son, will you."

Son!

Amanda eventually held him at arm's length and studied him. Oh he was so handsome, and with her son's help he had regained his health and strength since they had come here so many weeks ago. His eyes showed a beautiful splendor and she imagined many women must have fallen for his gorgeous smile and easygoing manner.

"I don't know what to say…" Kirk trailed off. The relationship between him and his own mother was complicated to say the least.

Amanda shook her head.

"You don't have to say anything, James. I'm afraid I have a confession to make, and I hope you will forgive me — but I went upstairs last night and I happened to see you and Spock, sleeping in each other's arms." She halted for a moment. "Not that I had not suspected something of the kind—"

"You have…?" Kirk interrupted her, astounded.

"The thought had occurred to me when we met on your vessel, James. When I saw the two of you together. But I would also have been content if it had been mere friendship. For Spock it has always been difficult, being a child of two worlds."

Kirk knew very well about the difficulties Spock's heritage entailed for him. To him, it had always made Spock so special, so unique.

“Amanda — your son means more to me than you can possibly know…” He knew this to be the truth. “I love Spock, and I cannot imagine ever being without him.”

She reached for his hands and gave him a loving smile.

“I am so happy for both of you. Although—” She paused and looked at Spock who had just entered the kitchen. “I must say I would have liked to have grandchildren.”

Spock wished her good morning and for once accepted and even reciprocated her embrace.

“That is a highly unlikely scenario, Mother.” He directed his look towards his captain who couldn’t help but smile apologetically.

“I forgive you, Spock.” Amanda said in a mocking tone, just as her husband entered the kitchen.

“What is there to forgive, my dearest?” Sarek asked.

“Oh, we have been talking about grandchildren and—” she began.

“It is highly illogical to expect offspring when both partners are male.”

Obviously, Amanda had shared her observations from last night with her husband. Or maybe this did not come as a surprise to him at all because he had drawn his own conclusions. Kirk wasn’t quite sure but there was no doubt that Spock’s father did not object to his son’s choice. However, Sarek decided not to address the matter any further for now. Maybe this was his way to avoid too much emotionalism.

They eventually sat down at the table and enjoyed a wonderful breakfast. Sarek let his wife make the conversation while he observed Spock and his captain.

When his wife had informed him that Spock and Kirk would not be joining them for dinner the other night he found his observations regarding the kind of their relationship valid. Sarek had considered the fact that his son’s partner was also his commanding officer which could cause difficulties but had dismissed the thought due to the very nature of Kirk. The man was not only of bright intellect and an extraordinary commander, he was also gentle in a way he had scarcely encountered. Kirk not only addressed Spock’s logical Vulcan half but could also reach out to his more emotional Human side.

“Tell me, James, what have the two of you planned for the remainder of your stay here?” Sarek heard his wife ask.

Spock and Kirk looked at each other. They had nothing planned for the day, but there was something on Kirk’s mind and he decided to come forward with it. For quite some time he had been thinking about this but at first his weak physical condition had made it impossible, later when he got better, he was not sure how to bring it up.

“There is a place I would like to visit before we return to the *Enterprise*, Spock—” he started.

“I thought you might.” Spock’s expression made it clear he had expected this request. They shared a quiet look until Spock finally got up.

“I will go upstairs and pack some necessary things. We can leave in a few minutes.” With these words Spock turned around and left the kitchen.

Amanda looked questioningly at Kirk but he had already gotten up and followed Spock.

III

Kirk entered Spock's room and found his friend sitting on the bed, leaning over one of their bags, packing stuff. He quietly approached the bed and sat down next to him. Spock did not look up.

"You know where I want to go, don't you, Spock." His voice was gentle but could not hide his concern.

They had never spoken about it. Not really. They laughed and made fun of it. Kirk remembered their shuttlecraft trip here.

"*Promise me there'll be no fighting this time — all right, Spock?"* he had said. All in good humor.

"*I agree that any kind of physical exertion is not advisable for the time being,"* had been Spock's reply.

And that was it. A funny remark and a strictly logical answer kept them both from truly touching the heart of the matter.

The fact that they had never acknowledged the aftermath effects their deadly fight during Spock's first *pon farr* had on both weighed heavily on the captain. They had a silent agreement not to touch that sensitive spot of their friendship. Like it had never happened. Like it had been a bad dream they had shared but chosen not to discuss.

As time went by Kirk was under the impression that their friendship had kind of returned to what it was like before. They would share friendly banter, sparring sessions in the gym, and long nights playing chess. They were still effective as a command team. Some said they were the best in the fleet.

But Kirk had seen a side of Spock the Vulcan would have preferred to keep to himself. He had gotten aware of a relentless drive that could make his friend even kill someone. Kill his captain — and his friend. They had to face this and leave it behind. Kirk had made up his mind and he was hoping that Spock would agree.

Spock eventually looked up and faced his captain. Did Kirk imagine it or was there a sad quality to that glance.

"I have expected your wish to visit the place of the *koon-ut-kalifee*, Jim." He paused.

Of course, Kirk wanted to go there. Spock was not blind to the effects their fighting and the near-death experience had on his friend. He knew that all the laughs and bantering in McCoy's office when he found out that Kirk was still alive were like a bandage on an open wound. One that might never fully heal. After all, he had been capable of killing his friend who had been willing to sacrifice his life for him. And there were times these memories weighed so heavy on his mind that it took all his Vulcan discipline to suppress them.

He had agreed to go back there with Kirk but he was unsure as to the outcome of this trip. Would it eventually initiate a healing process or would the reopening of old wounds jeopardize what they had just found — their love for one another?

Spock was sure his *ashayam* had considered these possibilities as well and nevertheless reached the decision to go with the risk. He would not stand in his way.

“I must go there, Spock. I am sorry … I know it brings back terrible memories for both of us but since that day it has remained like a shadow over our friendship no matter how much we try to dismiss it.” He knew he spoke for both.

“I have packed a few provisions, along with the medkit just in case the heat gets too much for you.” There was determination in Spock’s voice. He would always follow his captain after he had reached a decision, this time was no exception.

He took the bag and got up, while Kirk gratefully watched him. “Shall we?”

IV

It was late in the afternoon when they arrived at the place of the *koon-ut-kalifee*. They had taken the shuttlecraft to get there and were now standing at the entrance to the ritual circle of large obelisks surrounding the place, not unlike Earth’s Stonehenge.

Images of their first visit here came back to Kirk’s mind. The sand as hot as he remembered it, the air thin and pressing heavily on his lungs. The fireplace was not lit, and there were of course no spectators. He and Spock were alone. Kirk stepped slowly forward and entered the circle. He could almost hear the chimes of little bells, and he imagined T’Pau sitting in her chair, watching the display before her eyes, her gaze somewhat detached and ungracious.

Spock remained at the outer ring of stones, not sure if he wanted to proceed. Or maybe he wanted to give his captain some privacy to adjust to the situation. His captain had died here. At least almost. McCoy had seen to it that Kirk would eventually suffer a simulated death during their combat so he would get the chance to bring him back to life. McCoy had been able to resuscitate him after they had beamed back to the ship. It had been risky but there was no alternative.

Kirk bowed his head. His eyes were closed as the events of that fight came back to his mind.

Oh, he had been so cocky! He remembered well how pleased he was with himself having brought Spock to his homeworld in time, against all odds. He had disobeyed direct orders before and he was sure to get away with it again. Frankly, he didn’t care. His friend would be freed here from the effects of the *pon farr* and that was all that mattered to him. Spock would live, he would marry that woman, and he would return with his captain to their life on board the *Enterprise.*

All that changed in a single moment when Spock’s betrothed wife refused to go through with the marriage and instead called for the ancient ritual fight to the death between Spock and an

adversary of her choice. When she pointed at Kirk as her champion he still thought this would all end up well somehow. After all, he had never believed in a no-win-scenario.

The subsequent fighting itself was somewhat covered in a haze in his memory, he knew he had given Spock quite a fight, but when the *lirpa* cut his chest and blood spilled on his tunic he realized this might all go wrong. Terribly wrong. He tried his best to keep up with Spock but while the Vulcan's strength was even heightened by the effects of the blood fever, his own powers weakened with every exhausting breath he took until he felt the full weight of his friend on his body when Spock wrestled him to the ground and tightened the *ahn-woon* around his neck, and he could no longer breathe, and everything went blank.

Kirk banned the memories from his mind and looked up. Spock had eventually entered the stone circle and was by now standing next to him. He looked concerned but remained silent.

"Oh Spock … I can hardly imagine what it must have been like for you when you thought you'd killed me."

He turned to face his friend.

"I want you to know that I do not hold you in any way responsible for what has occurred on that day and—"

Spock's hand moved up and touched Kirk's chest right where his *lirpa* had cut the flesh. He was aware there was no visible scar left from the injury but he knew it was there nevertheless.

Spock finally spoke to him.

"I didn't want to continue my life without you. There was no more reason to exist without you by my side."

Kirk remembered the entry in the ship's log stating Spock had relinquished command right after his return to the *Enterprise* and submitted himself to the authorities.

He put his hand on top of Spock's and looked straight at his friend. "Let's put these memories behind us, Spock."

And with new found strength he made up his mind to change the odds once more in his favor like he had done so many times before. He had come here with his friend and lover to banish the shadows of the past for the last time so they would no longer stand between them.

He remembered everything he had read and learned about the Vulcan mind meld technique and the ancient bonding ritual and he knew that this was what he wanted. What he had wanted all along.

"Meld with me, Spock."

Spock started to say something but the words would not come. Instead, he had the strangest sensation of — *tears* — running down his face he could neither control nor comprehend.

"I want you to bond with me." Jim's voice merely whispered. "Now, Spock."

Spock raised his hand, his fingers about to touch his captain's face like they had done many times before. This time however was different for they had become lovers and the meld would initiate a bond for life. He was not sure he was prepared for the overwhelming sensation of

emotions emanating from both but he found he no longer cared. He would reach out to his lover's mind, to his thoughts and to his beautiful soul. Their minds would become one until it was no longer possible to discern where one began and the other ended. They would be linked to one another for the rest of their lives through that ancient Vulcan bond.

A sensation of warmth and bright light flooded his thoughts when his fingers touched Jim's face and the meld was initiated. He sensed Jim waiting for him, reaching out to him with curiosity and anticipation, welcoming him. Ready to hold on to him, to give in to him. Sharing his very essence with him while a bond was established between them that could not be dissolved afterwards.

They stood in the middle of the ancient stone circle for a long time after their bond had come to life, holding each other, sharing tears mixed with laughter in the aftermath of their bonding while they were both trying to take in the encompassing beauty of their union.

It was deep into the night when they eventually let go of one another and decided to leave the place.

The ghosts of the past were gone, banished from their minds. The painful memory was replaced by a new and good one.

They left the ancient place behind and made their way to the shuttlecraft. It would take them quite some time to get home, with only one day left before their departure back to the *Enterprise*.

They didn't speak much during their way home, being content with each other's company. Kirk had finally fallen asleep in the co-pilot's seat while Spock maneuvered the tiny shuttle safely back to his parents' home. He watched his friend's chest move with every breath, knowing that the invisible scar would now heal and disappear forever.

Spock's thoughts turned to the *Enterprise*. They still had to find a way to adjust to the new kind of relationship they were sharing while faced with the demands of commanding a starship. The mark on Kirk's back he had left there during their first love-making came to his mind again. Another unsolved problem, he contemplated.

They would deal with it when they were back on board. Spock checked the chronometer once more, they would soon arrive at their destination. Until then he would let his thoughts drift while every now and then making sure his bondmate was still sleeping peacefully.

V

The day of their departure had come, their bags were packed and they were sharing a last breakfast in Spock's home before taking the shuttlecraft to meet the *Enterprise* which was already on its way to the rendezvous point.

The weeks of extended shore leave had nearly completely restored Kirk's health and he was looking forward to resuming his duties back onboard the ship, his energy and strength

renewed. He was still somewhat uncertain how they would reconcile their duties with the fact that their personal life had changed significantly. But he had no doubt in his mind that they would find a way.

Early this morning Spock had told him about a change he had set into motion when last contacting the *Enterprise*. He admitted he had ordered Mister Scott to see to it that the bed in Kirk's quarters was exchanged by a larger model, justifying the order by hinting at the fact that the captain had suffered serious back trauma during the accident which had resulted in this extended leave of absence and which would make a far more comfortable bed necessary than was standard.

Kirk had commented on his confession with a broad smile and subsequent kiss.

For the time being they had agreed on keeping the new nature of their relationship a secret to the crew. However, Kirk was delighted and relieved when Spock had finally suggested to reveal the truth to McCoy. He was, after all, Kirk's oldest friend. It would also solve the problem of how to explain the bite mark on Kirk's back. The doctor would no doubt tease Spock with it for an extended period of time, but Spock decided he could live with that.

Spock had gone upstairs to fetch their bags. On his return he noticed Kirk speaking to his mother in the kitchen. She handed him a small object that soon vanished in his jacket's pocket. When Kirk became aware of Spock's presence he quickly changed the subject, thanking Spock's mother one last time for all the support, help and love she had shown him. They shared a long embrace, and Kirk finally turned his attention towards his bondmate.

"Ready, Spock?"

His grin was distracting. Spock was not sure what it was he wanted to distract his lover's attention from, but he had no doubt that something was going on he had not been filled in on. He commented on it by raising an eyebrow. He knew better than to ask what it was. His captain would eventually enlighten him. No doubt.

Spock's father had to leave the day before due to ongoing negotiations which required his immediate attention, so they had said their farewells already. Spock allowed his mother a last embrace — she could have sworn he enjoyed it — and then they were on their way.

Spock set a course for the rendezvous point. In a few hours they would meet with the *Enterprise*.

The journey passed mostly in silence, each contemplating their own thoughts. Spock kept monitoring their flight path. He noticed however that from time to time Kirk's hand touched the right pocket of his jacket as if he wanted to make sure the mysterious object was still inside. On one occasion Kirk caught him watching, and quickly did his best to divert his attention to the remaining time until their arrival at the rendezvous point.

Now here was an interesting puzzle. Spock was looking forward to solving it.

VI

Under the watchful eyes of Mister Scott their shuttlecraft was safely guided into the *Enterprise's* hangar deck.

When they stepped outside they were instantly greeted by Uhura who couldn't wait to embrace her captain. He held her in firm arms for a moment, oh it felt so good to be back! Soon Scotty and McCoy walked over to them, both with broad grins on their faces.

McCoy took a moment to take in his friend's appearance. Kirk not only looked well and rested but rather gorgeous, he had to admit to himself. He seemed to have lost some weight — the upcoming medical examination would provide more information on that — and his movements showed no sign of uneasiness or pain. The best indication, however, as to his friend's well-being was his broad smile which was genuine and captivating.

Kirk moved towards him and before he knew it the good doctor found himself in a tight embrace. No doubt, he had also regained his former strength.

"Thank you, Bones." Kirk would hardly let go of him.

"What for, Jim? It seems Spock did all the work." He had no doubt that Spock's efforts in these past weeks had been enormous. And demanding for the Vulcan to say the least.

"For kicking my ass, Bones." Kirk stepped back and held his old friend at arm's length. McCoy was touched and a bit surprised Kirk would acknowledge that.

Kirk moved aside when Spock stepped up to them.

"Welcome back, Mister Spock!" McCoy had planned on saying something funny since he had found out he actually had missed their recurring bantering, but he was just so goddamn happy to have Kirk back — obviously almost completely recovered. And McCoy knew who they had to thank for that.

"It is good to see you, too, Doctor."

McCoy was almost a bit unsettled by the way Spock greeted him. Not even the smallest hint this remark was not as genuinely straightforward as it came across.

He suddenly got a feeling that something had happened on that planet they didn't let him in on. At least not for now. However, he was glad to have the two of them back.

"As soon as you're settled, Jim, I would like to see you in sickbay for a complete exam. Just drop by, I will be in my office."

He watched as Kirk and Spock exchanged a look he could not quite interpret.

"Alright, Bones. We will be there."

We?

McCoy stood puzzled for a moment as he watched the captain and first officer walk out of the shuttle bay side by side.

"Who said I invited the hobgoblin." He grunted.

VII

They made their way to their quarters while more and more crew members stopped to welcome their captain back, as well as Mister Spock. Kirk couldn't help but feel deeply touched by all the friendly comments, greetings and hugs.

He knew McCoy would not declare him fit for duty for a couple of days at least, but he was back on board his ship and it felt *oh so good*.

Not even the incredibly large amount of reports that were no doubt waiting for him could spoil his exuberant joy of *being back*.

They had reached their adjoint quarters, each one entering through his own door. As soon as the doors had closed, however, it took only a moment until Spock entered his captain's quarters via their shared bathroom.

Kirk dropped his bag and right away found himself held by his beloved's arms. They stood like that for quite some time until Spock finally broke the silence.

"Welcome back aboard, *Captain*."

Kirk closed his eyes. For once he truly welcomed the usage of his title by his lover. He was back on his ship and soon he would be in command again. And he knew it would not have happened without the incredible and untiring help of his friend.

"Thank you, Spock." He drew his lover closer. "I love you, *my t'hy'la.*" And a tender smile lit up his face.

That beautiful smile of his.

When they eventually separated, Spock's gaze fell upon the recently installed bed which he had ordered while still on Vulcan. Mister Scott had done a thorough job, that much was certain: the captain's new bed was *huge* to say the least.

Kirk's eyes followed Spock's gaze. Now there was something that required their immediate attention, he concluded. He took his beloved's hand and guided him towards the bedroom.

McCoy and his exam would have to wait.

VIII

It had been a quiet day in sickbay so far, and McCoy kept busy catching up on some reports he still had to finish when he became aware that someone had entered. He looked up to see Jim and Spock. Why did he get that recurring feeling the two of them were inseparable these days?

"There you are! Come in, I'll be right with you." He saved the entries of the report he had been working on and turned off his computer screen.

"Care to sit down for a nice little chat with your doctor? Or do you want to get it over with."

McCoy knew of course that Kirk was not too fond of medical examinations, but this one was important.

He had received regular reports from Spock, all indicating that Kirk's health was constantly improving. No doubt he had seen to it that his captain stuck to the carefully developed schedule. McCoy knew from personal experience that Kirk was not an easy patient, but obviously they had worked something out and the result was more than convincing. Kirk was already pulling off his shirt, thus answering McCoy's question.

"Well, Spock, if you care to wait, make yourself comfortable, for this is going to take a while." McCoy indicated to him to sit down in his office while he turned around to begin the exam.

Kirk's readings were far better than McCoy had dared to hope. He would see to it that he continued his exercises to eradicate the last remaining repercussions of his accident.

He was about to finish the exam when something caught his attention. A set of readings that indicated — oh come on, there had to be something wrong with his instruments! But after he checked the readings in question again, he found no room for misinterpretation.

"Something bothering you, Bones?" Kirk had noticed that his friend had checked and double checked some of the readings and was now looking at him rather unbelievingly.

"What is it?" Kirk sat up on the biobed.

"Did you have sexual intercourse during the last two hours, Jim?? These readings here seem to indicate it."

Kirk shrugged his shoulders in defeat. There was not much to say to that, now was there? McCoy's instruments were quite efficient and he knew how to read them.

McCoy looked at him in disbelief.

"What *is* it with you anyway!?" he finally asked.

Kirk hopped off the biobed and reached for his shirt.

"Oh, come now, Bones." He really hadn't planned on letting McCoy in on *everything* regarding his relationship with Spock. He had almost managed to put on his shirt when McCoy turned around and his gaze happened to fall on Kirk's shoulder blades.

They had almost gotten away with it. *Almost*. Kirk sighed.

"Now wait a minute! What is *that*…?" McCoy had detected the small bite mark wound on Kirk's shoulder and was already taking a tricorder reading of it.

Kirk closed his eyes. "Bones, please."

"Have you been in a *fight*, Jim?!"

McCoy didn't know what to make of it. The captain had barely survived serious injuries, and as soon as he was able to move again — sex, fighting, and God knows what else!

McCoy noticed that Spock had by now entered the examination room and was walking over to them.

"Doctor, there is no need for you to concern yourself. I assure you."

Spock reached across the biobed and handed Kirk his shirt.

“No need to concern myself, Mister Spock?? What is going on here!” His gaze wandered from one to the other. He got a distinct feeling his friends were hiding *something* and he didn’t like to be kept in the dark. Especially when the patient in question was his best friend.

“We wanted to tell you, that’s why Spock came here with me.” Kirk put on his sweetest apologetic smile. “Well, maybe not all of it. At once.”

He looked at Spock for support.

“What the captain is trying to say, Doctor, is that he and I have engaged in a more personal relationship—”

“A rather intimate kind of personal relationship—” Kirk volunteered. The two looked at one another.

“That is an accurate description, Jim.” Spock agreed, returning his gaze to McCoy.

“Thank you, Spock.” Kirk said.

“You’re welcome.”

McCoy sat down. These two would one day be his undoing. Of that, he was sure.

IX

Several weeks had passed, and Kirk was by now back on a full duty roster, all traces of his accident finally gone. He was back on the bridge and it felt so good! He sometimes shared a shift with Spock so that they would have time off duty together which they mostly spent in the captain’s quarters or the gym. Sometimes Kirk would come over to his bondmate’s quarters but Spock knew well that he found it less comfortable due to the much higher room temperature, so staying in the Vulcan’s quarters remained an exception.

Spock had recently noticed that there was something on his captain’s mind, but when he addressed the matter Jim preferred not to elaborate, so he had decided to wait until he would, while he tried to be more observant in the meantime to possibly find out for himself.

It wasn’t until about two weeks later that something Spock observed in the mess hall eventually shed some light on it.

It was in the early morning hours and the two of them were sharing breakfast with McCoy. They sometimes managed to get together like that, talking about ship’s business or just … talking. Although the Human need for conversation without purpose still eluded Spock. He was involved in yet another bantering with the doctor when two crew members walked past their table, holding hands. Obviously, they shared a romantic relationship.

“Oh, come now, Spock! You know I’m right. You’re just too damn stubborn to admit it!” McCoy lamented. He turned to Kirk for support of his argument but the captain’s attention was directed towards the other side of the room. McCoy followed his gaze and realized his friend was

looking over to the two crew members who had just walked by and who were now sitting down close to one another to enjoy their breakfast.

“Two more lovebirds! Is there something spreading I should know about?” McCoy’s humorous remark earned him a somewhat resigned look from Kirk which didn’t go unnoticed by Spock.

He studied his *ashayam’s* expression while they exchanged glances and was about to say something when Kirk got up and, saying something about important ship’s business, walked out of the mess hall.

“Now what was that all about?” McCoy watched as Kirk left the mess hall and returned his attention to Spock.

“Spock!” McCoy lowered his voice so they would not be overheard. “Don’t make me find out you messed things up with Jim!!”

The doctor’s former bantering had changed to a more aggressive posture. Spock had often observed that McCoy could be quite protective when their captain was concerned. He took the time to grant McCoy his personal version of a resigned look in the form of a raised eyebrow in combination with a pursing of his lips before he got up and made his way to the bridge.

X

As he had expected he found Kirk on the bridge, sitting in his command chair, while signing a panel his yeoman held out to him.

Spock was about to walk past him and sit down at his science station when he changed his mind.

They had agreed while still on Vulcan to not reveal their personal relationship to the crew for the time being. He had been perfectly comfortable with this decision and it had been his impression that this was true for his bondmate as well. Considering, however, the incident in the mess hall this morning and the fact that something had seemed to bother Jim for quite a while now made him question the validity of his assessment.

Therefore, instead of assuming his station Spock directed his steps to the center seat. Kirk looked up when he noticed him, offering a smile. But Spock knew him too well to fall for it.

“Captain, may I have a word with you? In private.”

Kirk looked astounded but eventually got up. “Of course, Spock.”

And without diverting his glance from his friend he ordered Sulu to take over the con and followed Spock into the turbolift.

As soon as the doors shut behind them Spock ordered the lift to stop. Without hesitation he closed the distance between them and put his arms around his beloved, drawing him into a tender embrace. He instantly felt his lover relax and lean against his body for — support,

protection, or perhaps a confirmation that ‘everything would be alright’. He had never quite understood the purpose of this statement but it was of no importance if it had a calming effect.

“What was that for?” Kirk tried another smile, but somehow he didn’t quite feel like it.

“You seemed to be in need of a hug, *ashayam*.” His voice became low and soft. “Is it not my responsibility to provide whatever is required for your well-being?”

This time Kirk’s smile was genuine. “It is.” He rested his head on Spock’s shoulder.

Spock ordered the turbolift to resume a course to the level of the officers’ quarters. They needed to talk, and he was quite sure Mister Sulu would not mind being in command a while longer.

XI

They were back in Kirk’s quarters, comfortably resting on the large bed, for it was by far the most suitable piece of furniture in the room. Spock was sitting up, with Jim leaning against his chest while he wrapped his arms around him. They remained silent for quite a while until Kirk finally spoke up.

“I don’t know, Spock … it’s more difficult for me than I imagined — always having to be careful what to say or how to react so no one suspects anything—” He sighed. “I feel so detached from everyone except for you and Bones…”

It became clear to Spock that he had underestimated his lover’s need to share his emotional state with friends and crew on board. The longer they kept their relationship a secret, the more his friend would eventually suffer.

“We should have talked about this much earlier, Jim. Your wish to protect my privacy was appreciated in the beginning, however by now I realize it causes you discomfort. I find that unacceptable.”

Kirk shifted his body a little bit so he could look up at Spock. “You think we’re ready for this, Spock.”

“Affirmative, *ashayam*.”

Kirk resumed his cozy position in his lover’s arms. They should be going back to the bridge but he wanted to share this intimate moment a little while longer while Spock’s arms tightened around his body.

XII

Bones fumbled once more with the collar of his dress uniform. Why did they have to make them so tight, he wondered? For there was no doubt in his mind that his collar size had not changed since his academy days. Well, maybe a little, he admitted to himself.

It had been a week now that Kirk and Spock had invited the entire regular bridge crew to a festive reception and dinner party in the auditorium. And they had asked for dress uniforms. There was something going on here, but like the rest of the bridge officers he had been left in the dark as to the reason for this invitation. Nevertheless, he had a pretty good idea what they were up to.

It had not escaped his attention that Kirk was not comfortable anymore with the fact that they hadn't told anyone except the doctor about their relationship which had come to blossom during their extended leave of absence on Spock's homeworld. Kirk was a straightforward and honest person who deep inside objected to any kind of dishonesty or falsehood. Having to hide his emotions like that had proven increasingly difficult for him, McCoy was sure about it.

He remembered an incident in the mess hall some time ago when they had observed a loving couple walking past their table, hand in hand and obviously deep in love. Surely Kirk didn't want to walk around holding hands with Spock like that, he respected Spock's need for privacy far too much to put him on display like that. But McCoy had concluded that this was the source of the problem after all. For all the years he now shared a deep friendship with him he knew well Kirk would not have hesitated to come forward with the facts right away. That was his very nature. However, none of this happened, instead they acted like nothing had changed at all between the two of them.

The forthcoming reception and party could mean only one thing: they had agreed the time to come forward had finally arrived.

Pleased with his flawless deduction McCoy reached for the small box Jim had handed him earlier. When he had been given it and wanted to open it to see what was inside Kirk had put his hand on McCoy's, asking him to keep it closed until he would ask him to give it back.

No, it could not be…? But, then again—

McCoy took the small box and with a last curious look resisted the temptation to peek inside. He adjusted his dress uniform's collar one last time and left his quarters for the auditorium.

When he got there almost everyone was already assembled. His gaze fell immediately on Uhura who much to his surprise was not wearing her dress uniform but instead a dream of dark red silk with golden filaments and edgings. He couldn't remember ever having her look so beautiful.

He wondered if she suspected something.

The doors opened and Chekov entered, the young ensign looking quite handsome in his uniform. He strolled over to Sulu who was standing at the dinner table filling his glass.

Now everyone was here except for Kirk and Spock.

McCoy decided to follow Sulu's example and picked a glass of champagne. Not his usual poison, he laughed inwardly. But appropriate for the occasion if he was not mistaken.

"Doctor! Do ya have any idea what this is all about." Mister Scott's voice came from behind.

McCoy turned around to face the ship's chief engineer who wore his red and black checkered kilt in combination with the jacket of his dress uniform. He took a first sip of his champagne and put on his best poker face.

"No, Scotty, unfortunately I've been left in the dark just like the rest of you."

He took another sip. This champagne was even better than he had expected. Not replicated but the real stuff. He wondered when they had gotten their hands on it. It dawned on him that perhaps Kirk had made preparations quite some time ago.

The doors opened up and finally revealed the captain and Spock.

McCoy couldn't help but stare. Neither of them wore the formal Starfleet dress uniform, instead they had decided on a very personal choice of clothing.

Spock was dressed in what appeared to be a festive Vulcan robe, black silk with only a few decorative silver patterns. The Vulcan IDIC symbol on a thin silver chain around his neck.

McCoy tried to remember where he had seen that suit before that Kirk had chosen to wear for this special occasion: the jacket and trousers of dark gray fabric, combined with an elegant white shirt and complemented by a silky waistcoat whose silver coloring matched his lover's jewelry.

McCoy had never seen him look so handsome, that's for sure. He heard a suppressed cry from behind and saw Uhura holding something to her face — was that a handkerchief??

Turning his gaze back towards his two friends, McCoy saw a look of tense anticipation on Kirk's face and he could have sworn to detect something similar in the Vulcan's features. But with Spock he was never perfectly sure. However, he could read the captain's expression very well: Kirk had made a decision and they would go through with it.

"Uhura, Gentlemen… Thank you for joining us tonight. Why don't we all have a seat?" Kirk invited them to sit down at the dinner table which was laden with a wonderful variety of different kinds of food to satisfy every tongue.

McCoy noticed his friend giving him a questioning look. He smiled and discreetly tapped on the little pocket of his uniform jacket to indicate the little box Kirk had entrusted to him was in place.

Everyone had taken a seat and looked at Kirk and Spock expectantly. Kirk, who had remained standing next to his chair, turned his head to look down at his bondmate.

"Are we ready, Mister Spock?" The hint of a smile appeared on his face but McCoy knew him well enough to also detect a trace of nervousness.

Well, it isn't everyday you're about to introduce your beloved to your family. And the people gathered here tonight were indeed like family to him.

Spock didn't say a word, he only nodded in approval.

Kirk returned his gaze to his assembled officers. He had thought a long time about what to say when this moment would eventually come. He had to realize that nothing he had considered

or even prepared in his mind seemed to do the occasion justice. So he had finally made up his mind to rely once more on his ability to come up with something along the way. He took a deep breath.

“My friends, you are all wondering why Mister Spock and I have asked you to join us tonight.”

McCoy began to wonder if his two best friends used such formalities or their titles even when being alone. He realized his thoughts were going astray and so he returned his attention to Kirk.

His friend was still standing but McCoy realized something was not going according to plan for he neither moved nor said anything further. McCoy began to wonder if Kirk had formulated a speech at all. He was at his best after all when making things up along the way like he had done so many times before in the past.

He found his musings confirmed when Kirk suddenly turned to Spock and indicated to him to stand up and follow him. McCoy was sure even Spock was surprised but he did as told and walked alongside his captain to the spacious free area in front of the dinner table, yet a quizzical expression on his face.

Kirk collected his thoughts and continued.

“As you are all well aware I suffered a serious injury several months ago and it took me a while to recover from it.” He involuntarily closed his eyes. The memory of that feeling of complete helplessness still troubled him sometimes but he knew he would overcome it eventually.

He turned his body towards Spock, directing all his attention exclusively at his beloved.

“I would not have made it without you, Spock.” He searched for the right words for he wanted to convey everything that filled his mind, his soul and his heart.

“You took me with you and allowed me to heal while you overstepped every boundary you might have had before to stand by me.”

Spock’s lips slightly parted but he remained silent. He had not expected that Jim would talk about this and in such an open manner, not holding back anything.

“I have no words for my gratitude, Spock. Nor for the way you opened up to me and let me into your life during the weeks we spent together on your homeworld. Or the high esteem I hold for you as a person.”

Kirk felt tears welling up in his eyes but he didn’t care.

“But most of all I am at a complete loss to put into words the love I feel for you.”

Uhura knew then she should have brought along another handkerchief, when she saw McCoy handing her a napkin while putting one arm around her.

She held her breath when she saw Kirk kneeling down in front of Spock while she could have sworn to see tears in her captain’s eyes.

Spock didn’t know what to do. This was most unexpected and he moved to kneel down as well when Kirk indicated to him to remain standing.

“Not you … just me, Spock.”

He had tried his best to focus and pull himself together but it was almost too much. Kirk concentrated on his next words. He had never done this before and he knew he would never again.

“We are bonded already according to the traditions of your people, Spock. I want to ask you to also become my husband according to Earth customs.”

Uhura was done. She could only witness through a haze of tears how Spock eventually nodded while he was visibly fighting for control of his emotions. She saw him help Kirk get up who then stretched out two fingers in a gesture of a Vulcan kiss. The tears on his face mixed with a beautiful smile. Spock’s fingers touched Kirk’s — until he decided to draw Jim closer to lean in for a very Human kiss.

Soon they were surrounded by their friends who were still overwhelmed by what had happened and hugged and congratulated them. Uhura fumbled for another napkin but Kirk didn’t mind and took her into a firm embrace.

Then he turned to McCoy. “Bones?”

McCoy had almost forgotten about the small box his friend had entrusted him with. He fetched it from his pocket and handed it over to Kirk. He knew what was inside. Had known it all along! You can’t fool an old country doctor, now can you?

Spock instantly recognized the small object the doctor produced out of his pocket. It was the box Jim had gotten from his mother back on Vulcan.

Kirk opened the small box and two rings became visible. They were of unknown material as far as McCoy could tell, black and gold inextricably intertwined.

“Oh Captain, they’re wonderful!” Uhura exclaimed. She had never seen rings like that before. Surely the captain had them specially made.

Kirk turned towards his first officer. “Your hand please, Mister Spock.”

Oh mother of mercy … they really do it with all the formalities and titles! McCoy thought. But he couldn’t deny there was a certain kick to it after all.

Spock was not sure which hand would be appropriate since he was not familiarized with this Terran custom and tentatively held up his left hand but was soon corrected by his beloved.

“The other one, if you please.”

Kirk put the ring on Spock’s finger. A perfect fit. No doubt he had asked his mother about the right size.

Then it was Spock’s turn and taking the second ring out of the small box he put it on his beloved’s ring finger.

Wearing the ring was an unusual feeling at first, but Spock knew he would never take it off again, the small piece of precious metal being a symbol of their union.

Uhura couldn’t keep her eyes off the beautiful pieces of jewelry.

“What are they made of, Captain? I’ve never seen anything like it before,” she asked.

Kirk looked down at his right hand, he had never worn a ring before. But after he and Spock had bonded back on Vulcan the day before their departure, he knew he wanted them to have rings. Unique rings. One day. He had spoken to Spock’s mother Amanda for he needed something from his beloved’s homeworld. An idea had already formed in his mind and, luckily, she could provide what he needed.

Spock almost stumbled over his little secret the day they departed when she handed him the requested material in a small box.

“They’re made out of melted gold from my grandmother’s wedding ring, combined with a rare Vulcan ore Spock’s mother provided for us.”

They were alike but not identical. They were perfect.

Uhura admired the way the gold and black ingredients intermingled, inseparable while forming a unique union. They perfectly represented the two men wearing them.

Kirk noticed Spock looking at him. He saw the way his fingers carefully traced over the smooth surface of his ring.

Ashayam. Words are failing me. Spock thought. *As does my logic*.

He knew his beloved could not yet hear his thoughts. But in time their bond would strengthen and he would be able to convey his thoughts and feelings telepathically.

But he knew Jim already understood as he looked into his beloved’s eyes.

They eventually sat down with their friends at the dinner table until late at night, enjoying a wonderful meal and stimulating conversations. Every now and then they would exchange a loving glance or their hands would touch while they regarded each other’s rings.

Every now and then Spock reached out with his mind towards his beloved.

Not yet.

But Spock knew the day was not too far away when his *ashayam* would not only hear him but would also be able to answer him in his mind.

I'll Give No Words to Sorrow (My Grief Does Not Speak) by Ahria

Kirk hovers on the other side of the room, waiting for Spock with some trepidation. The conversation with Sarek looks like it's going well but who can ever tell? Spock looks relaxed, at least.

He wonders if Spock is going to return to Vulcan with his father. The thought sneaks up on him, sudden but persistent. They hadn't discussed anything about the future, really. Spock had simply announced that he'd be joining them to face the consequences with Starfleet and wouldn't be dissuaded.

It's not like Kirk had tried very hard to talk him out of it. He'd thought his Spock was still in there, that there had been more compelling him than a sense of duty or gratitude. What did Earth hold for Spock now? Starfleet, his teaching job? It wasn't Kirk, anyway. Not anymore. Besides, Spock had had better career options for years.

Spock hadn't mentioned what he might do after the trial and Kirk hadn't asked. Maybe he'd believed he'd be jailed with the rest of them, or — he ends that train of thought. Spock had a plan because he always does, but he hadn't shared it with Kirk and there was no point speculating about it.

All that matters is that Spock is alive. Alive and free to choose whatever makes him happy, even if that choice is Vulcan, another posting, or some other ship. Even if that choice isn't Kirk. It hurts, of course. Bitterly. But anything is bearable as long as Spock is alive.

Kirk closes his eyes against the throb of the headache. It's been a more-or-less steady pain for nearly four months; no need to fuss about it today. He carefully keeps his hands away from his temples. Spock might be different now but he's still observant as ever.

He takes a steadying breath and opens his eyes in time to see Spock conclude his conversation and begin to make his way over. Kirk can't help but smile at him as he grows near, happy despite all the uncertainty.

"Would you accompany me to dinner, Captain?" asks Spock as they walk out of the courthouse together. He pushes away the hurt of being called by rank and not name, again, and answers with a forced grin.

"Of course, Mister Spock. Do you really not remember liking Italian food?"

Spock thinks over the question, a solid presence at his side. "I do not," he replies eventually and Kirk's heart sinks a little more. "However I am willing to defer to your expertise."

"That's not necessary," Kirk replies with a shrug and looks away. "What do you remember liking?"

"A preference in food is illogical as long as it meets nutritional requirements."

“Humor me, Spock,” he says softly, looking out over the campus grounds.

Spock is silent for a while longer. “I believe I am partial to *plomeek* soup.”

“There’s a Vulcan cafe not too much further.”

Spock tries to convince him that giving in to his preference is unnecessary but Kirk takes him there anyway.

“What do you plan on doing now? With your life, I mean. Returning to Vulcan?” he asks after their food arrives. He shouldn’t, he knows, but he can’t help it. The idea that Spock is a few days away from leaving the planet is too much to bear.

“I have not lived on Vulcan in many years,” Spock answers slowly, almost a question.

“I mean,” Kirk replies, suddenly nervous. “After everything you’ve been through, I wonder if it’s changed your perspective.”

“Ah.” Spock nods and sets down his spoon. “I am fulfilled by teaching. I do not anticipate a change.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he murmurs and lets go of some of his anxiety. “When do you go back?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Kirk repeats with a frown. He curls his fingers into his palm to keep from reaching out. “Isn’t that a little soon? There’s no need to rush, Spock.”

“I am physically well and my knowledge on all subjects has returned in full. There is no reason to wait.”

“Right, of course,” Kirk sighs. Like him, Spock has never been good at taking down time.

“And you, Captain? You, too, have been through great difficulty in the past months.”

The question hits him square in the chest. He feels every moment of loss anew and his eyes well with tears. It takes great effort to force them back but strength of will has never been one of Kirk’s problems. He can’t change the past but he can look forward to the future.

“They’re giving me a ship, Spock,” he says. Spock’s expression softens and for a moment, everything is like it was.

“Have you considered which personnel you might request?” Spock asks and the feeling burns away like flash paper, contentment scattering like ash on the breeze. Before, Spock wouldn’t have had to ask him.

“I haven’t given it much thought yet,” Kirk lies and picks at his food. When he glances up again, Spock is still watching him. He feels as though he’s failed some kind of test.

It’s easier to change the subject than it is to interrogate that thought so he asks how the whales will do in this time period. It’s a good gambit because Spock launches right into an explanation about viable genetic samples and theorizes what Star Fleet may do to address the problem. Kirk likes listening to him talk. He always has.

As they stand from the table, Kirk realizes that Spock has barely touched his food. He hasn't eaten any more than Kirk has, really, so he probably doesn't have the right to nag. With a pang, he realizes he no longer has the right at all.

Kirk looks up to find Spock watching him expectantly and it's then he realizes that he's avoided the elephant in the room for too long. They live together — lived together? — they had lived together in a one-bedroom apartment. Their relationship, what it is, what it was; it's not something they've discussed at all. Not since Spock's resurrection. He opens his mouth and no sound comes out.

"Are you alright, Captain?"

He isn't, not by a long shot, but there's no point in saying so.

"Do you remember how to get home, Spock?"

"I have looked up the address and am confident I am able to find the way."

The confidence makes him smile and he holds the expression even as he thinks that looking up the address probably revealed their relationship status. Or at least gave him the knowledge that they lived together. The apartment itself will reveal the rest.

"I'll walk with you," he replies because the silence has stretched too long. "It isn't far."

They don't speak on the short walk to the apartment building. Every step closer fills him with a profound dread of the coming conversation. Spock will tell him that he doesn't remember their life together, or worse, he'll remember and announce that he does not still have the same feelings he once did. He can't even call him Jim.

When they get to the door, his head is throbbing. Spock sets his palm on the locking mechanism and waits. Kirk hadn't deleted his print. Couldn't bring himself to do it. The door swings open and Spock enters, looking around as if he's seeing it for the first time. Kirk hovers in the doorway and realizes that he is deeply, profoundly tired.

He can't do this. Not tonight.

"Well, it's been a long day so I'm going to call it a night."

Spock turns and looks at him, evidently waiting for something. Kirk isn't sure what and finds he doesn't have the patience to puzzle it out so he just plows straight ahead.

"I'll see you soon. Let me know if you need anything, all right?"

"Captain," Spock begins, taking two steps towards him and pausing. "Yes?" he prompts when there doesn't seem to be any follow-up.

"You do not intend to stay here?" Spock asks with quiet uncertainty.

"We're both too old to sleep on a couch. I'll see you later," he says and rushes down the hall. Kirk's a heel and a coward too but there's no way he could stand there and look at that beloved face for a moment longer with any dignity.

Kirk walks aimlessly for a little while, replaying the moment on repeat in his head. Eventually, physical exhaustion catches up to his emotional exhaustion. It's easy enough to grab a cheap

bottle of brandy and find a hotel room for the night. The furniture is all green and gold, saturated and dark after all the neutrals of Vulcan. He's surprised to find himself overwhelmed by the color and closes his eyes against it for a long time.

The jagged stump of the bond throbs with every beat of his heart. All of his reading on the subject claims it will heal on its own so there hadn't been a point in mentioning it to anyone. It hasn't seemed to lessen at all if he's being honest, but it has to eventually. If not, it's just one more thing to live with. It's strange, the things one can learn to live with.

Kirk pours heavily into the thick glass provided by the hotel and drinks it down. It burns but not nearly as bad as Scotty's homebrew. Nothing he can't manage. He stares out at the city and drinks until the pain is dulled before laying back on the bed in relief.

Things are better this way, he tells himself as he drifts to sleep. He's giving Spock a choice, freedom. Spock had returned to Earth to stand with the crew for crimes he hadn't committed. It was that streak of loyalty in him that even memory loss couldn't shake. What form would that same loyalty take in the face of their marriage? Would he stay with Kirk because he felt obligated? Dutifully take him to bed to satisfy a promise that a different version of him had made?

His stomach lurches and it takes another force of will to keep the liquor down.

Kirk wakes with a mild hangover, which comes as no surprise, and a bad taste in his mouth. It occurs to him as he stumbles into the bathroom that he has no clothes to change into, no toothbrush, no hairbrush. There hadn't been any point in bringing toiletries back from Vulcan and they hadn't been in the past long enough to acquire any.

After several minutes of deliberation, he sneaks back to his apartment like a thief in the night. Nothing in the kitchen or living room is out of place, as though Spock hasn't been here at all. What could he have really done? There's no food in the place and he's never been one for breakfast anyway.

Kirk heads to the bedroom and stops, reminding himself to breathe. The bed is made but one of the pillows has an indent. He isn't sure if Spock remembered which side of the bed was his or if it was just a coincidence but the sight stabs at him either way. He can't help but lay on his own side of the bed and roll to Spock's pillow just to breathe in his scent.

He'd done it so many times in the week he'd been home without Spock that the scent had been gone by the time Sarek had come. But here it is again as though Spock had never been gone at all. How many miracles is one man allotted? Surely he's been given more than his fair share.

Spock is alive. That had to come with a price, and this was it. Spock either no longer remembered their life together or didn't have the emotional connection to go with the memories. Either way, what they had was over.

Kirk doesn't let himself cry but it's a close thing. Crying won't solve anything and besides, he's shed too many tears already. Anymore feels like a lack of gratitude to the universe for constantly giving him the things he wants.

He forces himself up and gathers his things into an overnight bag, careful not to disturb anything that might alert Spock to his visit. Pulling things from his dresser, he has to admit that he could have picked up any of these things in any store but he'd wanted to come here one more time. He'd been happy here. Happier on the *Enterprise*, but Spock had made an office job bearable.

On his way out, he sees a picture of them together on a shelf near the door. It's always been one of his favorites. They'd been at Sulu's wedding, standing near the back where he thought no one would be paying attention to them. Kirk had smoothed his hands down Spock's arms and taken his hands. They'd been standing so close. He'd looked up at Spock, a little tipsy and absolutely delighted, and Spock had looked back at him with such open affection that he'd thought his heart would burst.

It was a wonderful moment. He'd been more than a little surprised when Sulu had sent him the photo a week later. Kirk had been worried about displaying it, afraid that it would offend the Vulcan's sensibilities but Spock had taken a long look at it and offered that it would be best viewed here on this shelf.

Kirk reaches out to touch the glass, knowing that he should leave it behind. He shoves it into his bag anyway.

He goes back to the hotel and gets ready for the day before going to campus. If Spock can plow right back into work as though nothing happened, then so can he. He's still on leave but it isn't like he has anything to do but dwell alone in a garish hotel room.

They'd had a briefing on the classified nature of the Genesis planet and Spock's resurrection almost as soon as they'd washed ashore. The necessity of their trial had come second to the creation of a cover story. It didn't take long to circulate something about Spock's faked death and a top-secret mission. Something suitably vague and believable enough. He'd agreed to it at the time without much thought.

What he isn't prepared for is the droves of students and peers alike that question him about it before they even say hello. He spends an unbearable hour smiling and laughing questions away. It's only when Lieutenant Likar compliments his acting the bereaved spouse that Kirk has to excuse himself.

He walks through the halls at a clipped pace, hoping it and his flat expression will make him look too busy to be stopped. It works until Spock comes out of a lab and calls out to him.

"May I walk with you, Captain?" Spock asks as he takes his place at Kirk's side.

"Always, Mister Spock," he answers without thinking and carefully does not look at Spock's face.

"I had not anticipated the interest that would be given to the events of the past few months," Spock offers.

"Me either," Kirk admits and breathes out in relief. This part of their relationship, at least, is still here. Spock has always had a particular way of understanding him. "Getting tired of the questions already?"

“The repetition is somewhat tedious.”

Kirk laughs. “You’ve got that right.”

They walk aimlessly for twenty minutes, discussing nothing important until Spock announces he must prepare for a lecture.

“Good luck getting through it without interruption,” Kirk replies.

“Are you free for dinner tonight, Captain?” Spock asks, hands folded behind his back. Kirk balks. Of course, he’s free but the idea of eating together with no students to talk around is not one that he welcomes. They’ll have to talk eventually but he isn’t ready.

“I’m afraid not. Perhaps tomorrow?”

Spock inclines his head. “Until then.” Kirk sighs as he watches him go.

Kirk had contemplated the idea of pushing off dinner with Spock for another day but can’t quite justify it. Before they were ever lovers, they were friends, and with everything Spock had been through he needs a friend now more than ever. Kirk isn’t going to let him go through all this alone just to spare himself some pain.

Decision made, he’d messaged Spock and received an address in return. He hadn’t bothered to look up where Spock had picked, he’d simply hired an air car and given the location. When he finds himself outside of a little Italian place far from campus, he thinks he might have made a tactical error. It’s not a part of the city he typically finds himself in but the antique architecture is charming. It’s a nice feeling, pushing back against the dread.

He wonders why Spock had picked this place. Had he had business out here? That’s dismissed immediately. No version of Spock would think of asking Kirk to come to him in that manner; convenient for himself but inconvenient for another. It doesn’t matter, he’s just stalling. He forces himself to take a deep breath and head inside where Spock is already waiting for him.

The lights are low, romantic. Little candles burn at the center of every table and soft music hums in the background. It’s cozy but with enough room between tables that diners won’t feel crowded. He tenses, ready to walk right back outside but Spock catches his eye from a booth in the back and suddenly it’s too late to retreat.

“Good evening, Captain,” Spock says even as Kirk sits down. “I hope this restaurant is to your liking.”

“I’ve never been but it looks great,” he replies and reaches for a menu. There isn’t much of a crowd but they aren’t alone either. It’s more intimate than he wanted. At least the headache is holding at a dull roar.

“Are you two ready to order?” the waiter asks as he appears at their table with a bright smile. Kirk flounders for a moment because, even though he’s been staring at the menu for a full two minutes, he hasn’t read a single word.

“If I recall, you are partial to the *tagliata*?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Kirk replies with a soft smile. “And you used to get the eggplant parmesan.”

Spock nods once, fondness lurking in his eyes. It makes Kirk glad for the waiter's presence because otherwise, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from sliding his hand on top of Spock's. The waiter, oblivious to all of Kirk's internal drama, confirms their order and asks if they'd like a wine pairing.

"No," Kirk blurts too quickly and doesn't look at Spock. Wine is the last thing he needs right now. The waiter departs, leaving them alone. Kirk isn't hungry, hasn't been for months, but he reaches for bread and butter just for something to do with his hands.

He takes a bite and chews. Offhand, he knows that the taste is wonderful but he sets it down again. Spock watches as he pushes the little plate aside.

"Doctor McCoy sends his regards from Georgia," Spock tells him.

"You've been talking to Bones?" he asks, startled.

"He is being his usual over-attentive self in regard to my health," Spock says dryly but Kirk can't find it in himself to laugh. Spock had *died*. Someone should be attending his health and it clearly wasn't going to be Spock. Or Kirk.

"How are you settling back into classes?" he asks in a desperate bid to change the subject.

"I am acclimating well. And you?"

"They replaced me about two months ago so I haven't had much to do. Helping with a couple of ongoing projects." Kirk shrugs. "Nothing interesting."

"I must admit that I find myself baffled that you took the promotion to admiral."

"Not this again," Kirk huffs. "I told you when they offered it to me that—" he stops when he notices Spock's eyebrows creeping up. "You don't remember us talking about it, do you?"

"I do not," Spock replies, and his expression shutters. Kirk forces a smile.

"It's fine, Spock. None of that matters. I'll have a ship by the end of the year."

"Do you foresee another five-year mission?"

The smile that stretches across his face is real this time.

"There's still plenty of unexplored space," he replies. "I think I have five more years in me."

"Of that, I have no doubt," Spock says softly and sets his hands on the tabletop. They're not close, not really, but Kirk could reach out and take one if he wanted. Instead, he offers the Vulcan a lopsided smile and asks about what he's teaching.

Spock humors him until the food arrives. Kirk pushes slices of steak around his plate and watches out of the corner of his eye as Spock bites into a piece of roasted eggplant. There's a quiet look of surprise and pleasure that has him smiling into his own dinner.

"You like it, I take it?"

"Yes. I had recalled that I liked it but could not remember the taste."

Some of the joy fades at that proclamation but he tries not to let it bother him. No matter what happens with their relationship, Kirk can at least reintroduce him to all the little things he used to love.

“Jim,” Spock begins, and the hairs on the back of Kirk’s neck rise. There’s a seriousness to Spock’s face that he recognizes and he knows whatever comes next will be something he can’t ignore.

His com rings and he’s never been more grateful for an interruption in his life.

“Excuse me, Mister Spock,” he says and answers. Gillian greets him warmly and he puts her on hold. Spock’s expression is oddly cold when he meets his eyes. “I was finished anyway. I’ve got to take this but I’ll see you later, all right?”

Spock holds his gaze for a moment longer before giving him a curt nod. Kirk knows that look; knows he should ask what’s wrong but he can’t bring himself to do it. He walks quickly outside and allows himself a deep breath of the warm night air before he goes back to his call.

Gillian is doing well, given the circumstances, just a little overwhelmed as the reality of her decision fully hit her. They talk while he walks towards his hotel, not bothering to hail an air car until they’re done.

Bones is calling him before he can even get the com device back in his pocket but Kirk doesn’t want to talk to his friend, especially with an audience. The driver drops him at the hotel without even trying to speak to him, a trait that would normally annoy him but tonight it’s a relief. The headache has been creeping back to the forefront since he left the restaurant, and the last thing he wants is to make small talk with a stranger.

His com rings again and he sighs before giving into his fate. “Bones—”

“I want you onscreen, now,” Bones drawls over the line, his accent more Georgian than Kirk’s heard it in years.

“Why? I just saw you a week ago,” he replies, annoyed. He doesn’t need babying, no matter what the doctor might think.

“And I hear you haven’t been eating much in that week.”

“From who?” he demands.

“Who do you think? He’s worried about you, Jim. And if the hobgoblin is worried, then I’m worried.”

The anger fizzles out of him and he gives in just to make the nagging end.

“You don’t look so good,” Bones announces five seconds after the video feed cuts on.

“You don’t say,” Kirk mutters.

“Eat a meal, drink some water, get a good night’s sleep. Then go talk to Spock.”

“Yes, Doctor,” he says in his best placating voice. Bones just scowls at him.

“I took every day of leave I have so I can relax before you drag me back into space, so don’t make me come up there just to make sure you’re eating!”

“Alright, alright.”

“And are we going to talk about why you’re not staying at home?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I’ll accept that answer until next week.”

Kirk swallows his groan at the threat and makes small talk about Joanna and her children until Bones signs off. When the screen goes dark, he feels more alone than ever.

Kirk contemplates getting drunk again but it hadn’t helped before. It had only added to the pain in his head the following morning. He lays back on the bed and stares at the ceiling. He knows what he needs to do. He’s known since Spock looked at him and told him that it’s possible they might fail. He must let Spock go.

Sure, he’d had romantic notions of making Spock fall in love with him again but Spock had barely seen him on Vulcan. And their trip to the past hadn’t really gone any better. There were glimmers of the Spock he’d known but it was time to admit that things wouldn’t be going back to how they’d been. Memories that didn’t have emotional association were no better than reading a report of the event.

Tomorrow, he’d get the divorce papers. He’d give them to Spock with the promise of not holding him to something he no longer felt. They could be friends. God, he hopes they could be friends. He’ll make that be enough.

It’s surprisingly easy to file for divorce. Just walk right in and secure a digital packet of papers that would end the happiest period of his life. No one bats an eye, just another failure in a long list of them for James T. Kirk. His head throbs and he clutches his PADD a little tighter. He walks out of the building with his spine straight. Kirk might be a mess inside but he’ll be damned if he lets anyone else see that.

It’s his day off and Spock has a generous lunch period so he should go to campus now to talk to him. Explain in gentle, precise terms that what’s past is past. That Kirk has no expectations and they can simply continue like they have been this week. Friends. Colleagues. He’ll never ask for more.

Kirk makes it halfway to Spock’s office before he stops. He can’t just drop something like this on him in the middle of the work day. It needs to be somewhere neutral. Maybe over dinner to make it seem friendly, normal. Asking him to dinner two nights in a row might be taken the wrong way though, so it’s best to wait a couple more days.

He knows he’s just avoiding the situation as he has been for days, but he decides it’s his right. A few more days shouldn’t hurt anything. A few more days to wallow and then he’ll get his life together and carry on.

He changes course and heads to his own office. As he walks, Kirk wonders when he became the type of man who avoids instead of acts. It’s not a real question because he knows the answer. Right after the five-year mission, he’d lost Spock and the *Enterprise* in one fell swoop. It had extinguished something vital in him. He’d tried to move on both privately and

professionally but none of those attempts had really taken. Avoiding thoughts of what he'd lost had been easier than facing them.

Then Spock had come back and Earth had almost been destroyed and suddenly Kirk was needed again. By Starfleet, and by Spock. His big second chance. He'd thought he'd gone back to himself then, a man reignited. Whole again.

How many different versions of yourself were there, he wonders. Were all the former versions still inside, buried, or were they as gone as the days they had lived? Who was this version of Kirk? Was he destined to be as hollow and empty as those three years between missions or will having a ship be enough to fulfill him?

There's a treacherous little voice inside him that says it won't be, that it'll be even lonelier than those first years had been. He does his best to ignore it and hopes this version of himself is buried with the others sooner rather than later.

There is some light teasing about his being a workaholic from his peers but everyone's happy to hand over their busy work. There's always something to file, to proofread. Kirk keeps busy until he's the last person in the office, the light dim. He forces himself to leave and walks slowly back to the hotel. It's the last place he wants to be and the only place he has to go.

Kirk ends up picking at a room service sandwich and drinking the rest of the brandy while he lets the news play. It won't help anything but it quiets his thoughts.

The knock on the door jerks him from his near doze and he scrambles up, almost spilling the half-empty glass in his hand. He sets it on the table and tries not to stumble as the world tilts.

Another knock sounds at the door, somehow more insistent than the first. Annoyed, he forces his way towards it.

"Spock," he says on an exhale, all the fight going out of him as quickly as it had come. He steps back to make room for him before he can think it through.

"You were perhaps expecting someone else?" Spock says coolly. The tone sets off a red alert in his head but there's too much liquor swimming through his veins for him to find the cause.

"I wasn't expecting anyone," he answers belatedly. Spock takes the tacit permission and enters the room. He looks around as though he's searching for something, his gaze settling on something near the bed. Kirk tries to focus, tries to see what has caught the Vulcan's attention but Spock is turning back to him before he can manage it.

"Have you been entertaining the crew?" Spock asks, his voice warmer than it was before.

"No. Half of them are taking leave and the other half are catching up on three months of work," he says, the alcohol creating a pleasant kind of buffer between him and the guilt.

"Doctor Taylor, then," Spock says and sounds almost resigned.

"What?" Kirk asks, baffled. He's too tired and too drunk for what is starting to feel like an interrogation. "She shipped out on a science vessel the day the trial ended."

It's then that he realizes that he's standing with the door open so he shuts it and moves back toward the table. He stumbles a little this time and Spock catches his arm, looking intently into his face.

"You are intoxicated," he says gently. "I will leave you to rest."

"Maybe a little," Kirk hedges and pulls his arm away. "But you don't have to go. What can I do for you, Spock?"

"I had intended to speak with you about a delicate matter but perhaps it is better left until tomorrow."

"No time like the present."

Spock looks down at his hands like he's surprised to find them empty. "No," he says. "I will speak with you tomorrow."

"We could play chess," Kirk blurts, caught between hope and fear that he'll say yes. "The hotel has a set for rent. I could have them send it up."

Spock nods once. "I am amenable."

Kirk loses profoundly of course, but for just a little bit he's able to forget everything that's happened in the last four months.

"Jim," Spock says and he jerks, eyes fluttering open. Spock is hovering over him, a hand on his shoulder. "You fell asleep."

He can't exactly deny it so he just nods and moves to stand up. Spock slides his hands under Kirk's elbows.

"I can get up on my own," Kirk mutters, struggling out of his hold only to lose his balance and fall forward, face smashing against Spock's shoulder.

He should move. He knows he should. This is bound to just confuse Spock and make things harder on himself tomorrow but Kirk can't help it. He lets himself linger and breathes in the scent of him. It's better than traces left on a pillow. Hesitant arms come around him and hold him for far too short a time.

"You must sleep, Jim," Spock says softly and steps away but does not release him. He brings him to the bed and lifts the blanket, draping it around him once he's laid down. Kirk grabs for his hand, runs his fingers clumsily down Spock's.

"Stay, Spock. Don't go. Just stay with me."

He can't keep his eyes open but he thinks he feels Spock return the gesture.

Kirk wakes slowly, trying to sink back into sleep to avoid the pounding in his head. He reaches out instinctively, searching for someone else in the bed. His hands come up empty. He risks cracking his eyes open and finds himself utterly alone in the room.

He squeezes his eyes shut and remembers the last time this happened. Waking and expecting to find Spock but finding an empty hotel room instead. This feels a lot like that. But Kirk had survived Spock going to Gol and he'll survive this too.

Things from the night before are fuzzy and he groans at the memory of begging Spock to stay. It's certainly a blow to his pride among other things. He rolls onto this side and stares at the photo on the bedside table for a long time. Spock had probably seen it, but did it matter now? Spock had made his choice.

Kirk pushes off the bed and into the bathroom. Brushes his teeth with his eyes closed to block out the light before he gets into the shower. At least the hot water helps a little with the pain in his head.

He takes his time because there are things he has to do when he gets out. No more avoidance. He'll track down Spock, apologize, and present him with the papers all while pretending it isn't tearing his heart out. Past versions of Kirk have always been good at facing the music and getting out alive. He'll make this version good at it too.

Kirk steps out of the shower slightly more clear-headed and mostly able to keep his eyes open. He towels his hair dry before wrapping it around his waist. The man that looks back at him in the mirror is sallow and older than he had been only a few short months ago. Kirk shakes his head at his reflection and walks back out into the main room, stopping mid-step when he sees Spock sitting at the small table.

Food is spread out in front of him, dished out on plates, and set with metal utensils. Spock looks him over from head to toe, dark eyes glinting with a type of interest Kirk thought he'd never see again.

"I trust you still take your eggs over medium?" Spock inquires. Kirk forgets how to speak for a moment, and swallows a dozen things before nodding.

"Let me get some clothes on," he mutters and grabs a pair of sweats from the little dresser. He hurries into the bathroom, cursing himself for not grabbing a shirt, and comes back out to find Spock sipping tea from a take-out cup. Kirk squares his shoulders.

"I have to apologize. I wasn't at my best last night and I shouldn't have put you into that position. It was inappropriate and it won't happen again."

Spock's eyes widen, his brows flying up to his hairline.

"You have not acted inappropriately with me. I admit to some confusion on several matters but you have done nothing wrong, Jim."

Kirk lets out the breath he's been holding and makes himself sit. Of course, Spock is confused. He can't remember half his life and Kirk hasn't bothered filling in the parts he could because it hurt too much. Spock deserves better from him.

"What do you want to know?"

"I came here last night for clarification. A former student visited my office yesterday to offer her condolences on my impending divorce."

Kirk's stomach drops. He isn't sure how the gossip could have spread so fast, but obviously it has.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to find out that way. I was going to talk to you about it today."

“I believe I am owed an explanation.”

“You’re right. Of course.” Kirk takes a deep breath. “You no doubt realized that we are married when you saw our apartment.”

Spock frowns softly at him.

“I recalled this fact while we were in the past.”

Kirk starts and swallows the guilt before it can spill out of his mouth.

“I’m sorry, Spock. I should have discussed it with you sooner,” he says, running a hand through his damp hair and trying to smile. “Look, I’m not going to hold you to it. I know you don’t feel that way about me anymore. I just want you to be happy.”

Spock’s frown deepens until it’s real — Human real, not just a slight down-turning of lips.

“You are not dissolving our marriage in order to pursue a relationship with Doctor Gillian Taylor,” Spock says. It’s a statement but just barely.

“What?” Kirk sputters. “I don’t even know what ship she’s on. I admit I charmed her a little to get her help with the whales but I wasn’t…”

“I am relieved,” Spock says softly. “I saw her embrace you after the trial. I did not enjoy the sensation of watching you together.”

“Jealousy, Mister Spock?” he can’t help teasing. Spock dips his head in agreement and Kirk’s heart stutters in his chest.

“When you left our date early to speak with her, I took it as confirmation that you had developed feelings for her.”

“Date? I didn’t know it was a date!” He thinks back to low light, candles, the soft look in Spock’s eyes, and covers his face with his hands.

“I believed my intentions were quite obvious,” Spock says mildly. Of course, he had, Kirk thinks in exasperation.

“I suppose they should have been,” Kirk agrees. “It was the first time I’d talked to her, you know. Since she left. She was having a hard time adjusting and just needed a friendly ear. I haven’t talked to her since.” He licks his lips. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I knew my feelings for you from the moment I looked upon your face, Jim. The memories came slowly, fragmented, and out of context. You did not mention our shared past beyond friendship. You did not reach for me. I believed that the romantic nature of our relationship must have ended before my death.”

“No,” Kirk chokes out. “I didn’t think you remembered and I couldn’t bring it up. What kind of man would pressure you in that situation? You came to Earth to face consequences for something you didn’t do, out of loyalty. What would you have done if I told you we were married?”

“You feared I would stay out of a sense of obligation.”

The assertion pulls the air out of Kirk's lungs. Spock has always understood him, always followed his thought process without having to explain.

"Yes," he agrees in a whisper.

"After I remembered our marriage had been intact until my death, I believed your feelings had changed due to my own inadequacies."

"No," Kirk says sharply, surging to his feet. "Of all the ridiculous — You're not inadequate, Spock." He takes a deep breath and reaches out his hand. Spock takes it and allows himself to be pulled to his feet.

"There are still gaps in my memory. Certain recollections may never return. However, I am certain of my feelings for you and my desire to remain at your side."

Kirk pulls Spock to him, arms wrapping around his wiry frame as tears well in his eyes. He's suddenly glad that he's not wearing a shirt so Spock can feel the emotions that are surely spilling from his skin.

"I never wanted to let you go," he whispers and feels the last bit of tension leave Spock's body. Who has ever gotten a third chance like this? Suddenly, Kirk shakes with laughter.

"I do not see the humor in this situation," Spock says primly and does not so much as loosen his hold. Kirk presses his smile against the side of his neck.

"I thought we were through with over-dramatic miscommunication of our youth."

Spock doesn't dignify that with an answer, so Kirk kisses the underside of his jaw and is rewarded with a sharp exhale.

"I would reestablish the bond at your earliest convenience," Spock says, his voice low. That tone had always done things to Kirk and now is no different. There's no point in answering with words, so he lifts his head and kisses Spock instead. Long and slow, just as he's been wanting to since the moment he'd pulled him from the ground of a dying planet.

Spock, ever efficient, has him stripped and on the bed in an astonishingly short amount of time. His robe joins the sweats on the floor and Kirk could weep at the feeling of their bodies pressed together.

"I missed you," he breathes between kisses and Spock only clutches him harder. They rock together, hips aligned until lightning is dancing along his nerves. Spock pulls away and begins to work him open. He goes slowly, taking his time.

It's precious in its familiarity, something he'd never thought he'd feel again. No matter what the future holds, Kirk knows there's no luckier man in the universe than him.

"Now, Spock," he breathes when two fingers become three. He writhes against the sheets, head tossed back and body slicked with sweat. Spock ignores the order for a while longer before turning him on his side and moving behind him.

Kirk isn't exactly as flexible as he used to be but this position has always worked for them. Spock slides into him with one solid thrust, just like they both want. He wills his body to adjust,

Spock drawing soothing patterns on his arms as he waits. Finally, Kirk shoves backward in search of movement.

“I love you,” Kirk says and drags Spock’s hand to his lips where he presses sloppy kisses against his palm, his knuckles. Spock kisses the back of his neck.

“As I love you,” he whispers as he pulls his hand from Kirk’s lips and aligns it with his meld points instead.

There are the familiar, beloved words and then Kirk is falling — into joy, into unity, into *love*. It sears through him until there is no more Jim or Spock, but us. We. *T’hy’la*.

They soar together, through the memories of pain and loneliness, soothing the hurts until they are nothing but distant memories and only one remains. They move closer to the source of that pain, the jagged stump of the bond. There is panic and remorse and fear — a wavering moment where they are falling away from each other — but they slam back together, unwilling to let go. The wound is lanced with a torrent of love and pleasure and promises. The mind yearns for this; to be healed, to be made whole again.

The bond burns gold as pleasure peaks, together, and they soar and—

Kirk takes a deep, shaky breath. Echoes of Spock’s thoughts and emotions still whisper through his mind and they will for a while. He welcomes it, holding that proof of Spock’s return as tightly as he can.

Spock is still inside him, still holding their bodies together. Neither of them is in a hurry to move.

“You were on Vulcan for three months,” Spock says gravely. Kirk sighs. “You suffered needlessly. If you had told my father or even Doctor McCoy—”

“I don’t want to talk about either of them right now,” Kirk says wryly but it earns him no response. “All my research said it would heal on its own. I thought it was normal.”

He can feel the disapproval flow through the bond and it makes him smile so wide that it hurts.

“You were punishing yourself,” Spock says shortly.

“Yes, alright,” he answers, unable to summon the energy for annoyance. “But it hardly matters now.”

“My death was not your fault, Jim. Neither was—”

“Just leave it for now, Spock. Please,” he says, his voice light. “After all, by some miracle, we have the time.”

He feels the moment that Spock decides to let it go, curling around him even tighter. Kirk wraps his hands around Spock’s forearms and holds on.

Ozh’esta
by Pyroclast17

Whatever Happened to Janice Rand?
by N'an Trevone

Author's Note: Grace Lee Whitney was railroaded off Star Trek: TOS following an assault on her person by an unnamed studio executive… Was this why the Star Trek writers never let the audience in on whatever happened to Yeoman Janice Rand? Or was her character just so marginalized as a woman that no one cared? Almost sixty years later, we are called to revise some history… :)

Editor's Note: This story contains warning tags. Mind the tags for the individual chapters.

Part 1: The Personal Log

1. The Transmission

"Captain, I'm receiving a transmission."

James Kirk swiveled in his chair to face Uhura. "Proceed."

Uhura swept her arms back and forth across her control panel, scrunching up her face as she began to interpret the message.

"It's a message, sounds pre-recorded, like someone reading something … like a … lecture … or a manifesto."

"Patch to bridge PA."

"—is no reason to discontinue cultivating sexual freedom or sovereignty after life-bonding, and we eschew these tired old conventions for a more consensual approach towards growth and mutual benefit, and as members of a community based upon clear experiences of joy, pleasure, and respect."

Spock glanced at the captain, who was sitting in his chair with his chin propped up on one hand, reminiscent of Rodin's "The Thinker."

"I know that voice," the captain said quietly.

"I would venture … that we are hearing the voice of Yeoman Janice Rand," Spock responded.

Spock turned away from his console, his eyes locked on his lover's face, reading every micro-movement and slight fluctuation of color in Kirk's skin, watching the tempo of the tiny blood vessels and capillaries shift slightly, quickening … Janice Rand's voice on the bridge again. Crisp, clear, efficient as ever … but somehow missing a constrictive tone originating from the pelvic area, Spock surmised. He filed these scraps of information in the vast stacks of the endless library of his mind, and turned back to the science station.

"—to have multiple lovers, all intent on the expansion of self as an integral element of being-identity in a world way beyond the politics of that sphere. That is how true love is expressed. Through clarity.

"And upon the matter of child-rearing. How could we leave a part of many beings' lives out — especially women's lives? For we here, on Lesbos—"

And without further ado, the transmission cut to silence.

"Lieutenant Uhura, see if you can get that channel back up. Origin of transmission, Spock?" Kirk called out, all business.

"It appears to be coming from the delta quadrant, captain. Around the stars Amphion A and B. Checking ship's computers — Amphion A and B. Red dwarf binary stars with three planets — two gas giants, and a Class M planet known as L35B05. No known sentient life forms. Highly unusual source of transmission, Captain."

Kirk turned his chair away from Spock, hand still on chin, and called out, "Computer. More details on planet L35B05, Amphion system, delta quadrant."

A nasal, digital voice ensued: "Planet L35B05: Amphion system, neighbored by Class J planets Kranach and Ogun. Closest planet to binary stars, Amphion A and B, both red dwarves. Elliptical orbit, class M, no known sentient inhabitants but diverse carbon-based fungal, animal, and plant life, in order of abundance.

"The Amphion system is largely unexplored by Federation ships due to its remoteness from the Sol system, as well as the two parsec wide asteroid belt which encircles the system. The belt is the remainder of two Class D planets which collided approximately thirty thousand Earth years ago."

"Wow … that's recent. I'm surprised anything can live in that system," Sulu remarked from the navigation console.

Spock added to the computer's report on L35B05 with some of his own knowledge. "Due to these challenges of visitation by extra-system entities, very little is known about the Amphion system and L35B05. There is documentation from a nearby system, Zethus — inhabitants from the planet Gor visited L35B05 approximately three hundred and twelve point six Earth years ago. Their reports indicated no sentient life — but their methods of inquiry were quite primitive by their current standards. A few colonists from Earth have found refuge over the past twenty Earth years on Gor, incidentally."

"Captain, I've got a tenuous hold on that transmission again," Uhura announced.

"Patch again to bridge PA, thank you, Uhura."

"—and if we take a moment to examine the inherent hegemonies of traditional top/bottom penetrative sexual congress—"

Janice Rand's voice was abruptly cut off by a wall of static. Uhura switched off the bridge speaker. "That's all we got, Captain."

2. The Personal Log

Yes, it was Janice Rand's voice, disembodied and floating into the ship from far, far away. It had been a little over two years since her disappearance, Uhura calculated, as she walked to the briefing room to meet with Doctor McCoy, Spock, Kirk, and Sulu. After Janice disappeared — well, vanished, really — they scoured the galaxy looking for her; besides wishing to find a lost crew member, they had Starfleet protocol to follow. If she was abducted, they had to rescue her, and if she had, in fact, gone AWOL, protocol dictated that they must find her for disciplinary action. When she had first disappeared, they found some PADDs in her cabin, containing her personal log, but nowhere was there any clue as to her true whereabouts — in fact, the recent transmission had given them more of a lead than any of her log entries. Nevertheless, Kirk had called a meeting in the briefing room to go over the log again and decide a course of action.

When she arrived, only Sulu was in the room, sipping a coffee.

"Care for some coffee, Nyota?"

"No thanks, love, I can smell the sugar in yours from here," she laughed in response, and gave him a wink.

"Very funny — I only requested two tablespoons in this cup instead of my usual three." Sulu made a face of mock-hurt, and then his features shifted to curiosity. "Do you think it was actually her? The signal, I mean?"

"The computer verified it — it's her voice alright, though she was saying things I never expected to come out of her mouth."

"I know — that last bit of the transmission was especially interesting. You were close with her, Ny. Did she ever talk to you about sex?"

"She talked a bit about dating — I think, when she disappeared, she had something casual going with Doctor M'Benga, but she never went into detail. I could be wrong, but I think I remember her once telling me she had never had an orgasm. Don't quote me, though — my memory for nonessential factoids isn't foolproof," she laughed and winked.

Sulu laughed as well. "Neither is mine," he responded, winking back at her — the two had shared many a thoughtful joint over the few years they had been working together.

Presently, the briefing room door slid open, and Kirk strode in, followed by Spock and an already-griping Doctor McCoy.

"…and furthermore, I don't understand *why* we have to wander all over the damn galaxy looking for this girl!" McCoy's eyes pierced into the back of Kirk's skull as he harangued him. "I know she was an excellent yeoman and all, but don't you think getting found is the *last* thing she wants? I mean, it's been over two years!"

"We cannot rule out the possibility that she was abducted, Doctor McCoy, even if you are convinced otherwise," Spock calmly responded.

“Bones,” Kirk sighed, “I’m just following protocol. If she was abducted, we are bound by duty — and care, may I add — to rescue her, and if she abandoned the ship, we are still bound by duty to Starfleet to find her. This decision is not mine or yours to make,” he emphasized, for what seemed like not the first time in this argument. The three men sat down at the table, and Kirk switched the audio recorder on.

“Stardate 5945.2. Briefing room, crew members present: Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Uhura, Sulu. Meeting called to decide on course of action re: Janice Rand transmission.

“Ok everyone, we’ve verified that it was her voice in the transmission, and that the transmission came from the delta quadrant in the vicinity of planet L35B05. I’m calling this meeting so we can listen to her personal log—”

“Oh, fer chrissakes, *again*?” McCoy’s interruption was met with a sharp glance from Kirk, and a snicker from the Uhura/Sulu side of the table. Spock, as always, suffered in stoicism.

Kirk doggedly continued, “—so we can listen to her personal log to see if there is any information we may have missed two years ago. Uhura, do you still have the PADDs we found in Yeoman Rand’s cabin after her disappearance?”

“I do, captain.” She placed a small stack of PADDs on the table, and he took the one on top and placed it in the reader. Instantly, the room was filled with Yeoman Rand’s voice.

Personal Log of Yeoman Janice Rand, Stardate 1512.9:

Wow, what a life. What a world — no, what a universe! Who would have thought that little guy was behind all that drama? He even had a decoy! And all for sheer boredom… Just goes to show you really can’t predict how things will go, out here.

*“*This must have been recorded right after our visit with Balok,” Kirk murmured.

And what the hell is up with Captain Cock? Complaining to McCoy about having a female yeoman, as if it’s my idea to get him to eat salad and stop drinking — right in front of the face of the man who gave him the orders. Honestly. I am here to do my job, not be judged and caged in by my gender, or be anyone’s nurse/caretaker/mommy. Ok. Rant over. He is so cute, though — and he knows it. And he knows I know it. Is it Spock that keeps him on such a short leash, or just his professionalism? This ship … they better get updated to the twenty-third century or I’m gonna have to look for another assignment — maybe one with a female captain.

Ok, gotta go brush out the wig now. TTYL.

The room fell silent. Kirk was blushing, ever so slightly.

“Captain *Cock*, eh?” McCoy wasn’t gonna let him live this down. “Jim, you didn’t ever…”

“No, Bones, not with Janice. Let’s try and keep this professional, huh?”

“Captain, if she was as dissatisfied with her treatment here as this log entry testifies, there is a probability she did abandon ship,” Spock interjected, to a series of nods from his companions in the briefing room.

“Let’s stay on track — it looks like she only has six more entries in her log.” Kirk resumed the recording.

Stardate 1513.8:

What is with the crew members of this ship? It's like they've never seen a pair of legs before (though I wish ole' Captain Cock would show a little more interest in mine).

Sweet Sulu. I do care for him so. At this, Sulu smiled magnanimously. *I hope it works out between him and Riley … it's all a matter of that bent elbow, I suppose. Maybe he can get him into fencing to distract him from the bottle?*

"Captain, is it necessary for us to listen to every entry?" Sulu looked considerably less magnanimous.

Kirk paused the recording. "I know it seems tedious, Sulu, and much as I like being referred to as Captain Cock … it's still important to gather all the knowledge we have about Yeoman Rand's whereabouts."

Janice's voice continued. *And Green —* clearly *something was off with that guy. Am I the only one who sees these things? Feminine intuition, my ass — when someone acts off, you can never take it for granted out here. A salt-monster! The truth really is stranger than fiction. Stranger than science fiction!*

Another date with Geoff was supposed to happen after he got off shift — but he's still at sickbay with Doctor McCoy, taking apart that salt-loving alien's body. Stood-up for an alien autopsy! Well, not really stood-up. Doctor M'Benga's commitment to his work is one of the reasons I admire him, after all — just wish I got a little more time with him.

The wig calls … is my look too high-maintenance, I wonder?

Kirk paused the recording and looked around the room. "Next entry?" The amused listeners nodded in assent.

Stardate 1536.9:

I am a freak magnet. Whether I like it or not. What draws them in? The wig?

It's gonna take me a while to fully process this one. Hopefully there's a shore leave coming up — though we've only been out here a few months, I need it. But, in a weird way … thanks to that wild child's psi ability … I sort of had one.

You see, they never questioned me about where he sent me when he made me 'go away' when I wouldn't let him assault me … Those eyes. Oh, Charlie, the world that made this ship was not made for the likes of you. I give too much.

But that 'go away' world he sent me to … I have no idea how long I was away from the ship, but it felt like I was in the 'go away' world for about four to six hours. It was a beautiful, verdant place, that at first seemed completely devoid of sentient life — but when I climbed up on a rocky cliff to get a good view of my surroundings, not an easy feat in my caftan, night-dress, and slippers, I saw some sort of multi-domed complex. Far in the distance beyond stretched a long wall with what looked like watch towers every half-kilometer or so. Inside the wall, the complex appeared to be a series of giant pinkish-gold geodesic domes, kind of like the ones Terrans use for terraforming. Was it a Terran settlement? There also appeared to be a huge

satellite dish, cocked to the side, so presumably broadcasting to somewhere — maybe they could help me contact the ship? I would have loved a set of binoculars or a good telescope to see more, but alas, I don't prepare for bed with these items. When Charlie so rudely interrupted my pre-sleep routine with his bullshit and sent me away, all I had on my person were my nightclothes. Way to leave me in a vulnerable place on some mystery planet, you little prick.

So yeah, I initially found myself in a dense forest that led out to the ledge of said cliff and said view — the first thing I did, after taking in the view, was turn back around and head back into the forest to see if I could find my way down and get a little closer to the complex in the distance. There was a vast plain with some low vegetation between the cliff and the complex — when I turned back around to try and find my way down, I saw that the cliff was just an outcropping halfway up a large mountain, with more larger mountains behind it, the great wall snaking through a high-elevation valley in the mountains — or so it appeared. There were also mountains in the distance behind the complex. Perhaps the complex, besides being ringed by the wall with the watchtowers, was naturally protected by the mountain ranges? The mountains reminded me of the time I went to Switzerland on a school holiday.

I made my way down carefully from the mountain the cliff was on, switching back and forth as my slippers slid on the mud. The dirt and rain soaked my nightclothes thoroughly as I made my descent — totally destroying my look, may I add. This planet had rain, water rain, like Earth. Maybe I was somewhere on Earth? But that didn't make sense — there was a sun in the sky a lot like Earth's, but there was a smaller sun setting as the Earth-like sun was still high in the sky. So … an atmosphere like Earth's, with water and everything, but two suns.

"Binary star…" said Uhura. Kirk nodded at her.

Eventually I abandoned my slippers — they were a mess of soaking wet strips of satiny-xenylon by now — and carefully made my way down the mud and rocks to the plain. There was a great, winding river snaking its way through the plain toward the complex, coming down from between the mountain I'd descended and another one further back. A wide, well-worn footpath led towards the complex on one end and disappeared into the mountains on the other. Ok, I said to myself, whoever's in that complex will see me if I get on this road, so here's hoping they like visitors … in soaking wet, muddy pink nightclothes … and a collapsing wig littered with twigs. I even thought about ditching the wig, but those things are so hard to come by, and it was protecting my head after all.

After what felt like hours of walking on the road, with the domed complex barely getting any closer, I stopped to sit by the river, soak my tired feet at its banks, and rest for a bit. No more than perhaps ten minutes went by before I saw a glint of light in the distance, coming up the road from the complex waaaay off in the distance. The sun — just one in the sky now, and nearing the horizon — was reflecting off some sort of metal vehicle that appeared to be floating about a meter off the road. Like a flitter. Headed towards me. For a moment, I considered hiding in the reeds at the river's edge, but it was too late — as it turned out, they had seen me, and I needed food and potable water anyways. Earlier, I had strained a little of the river water

through my caftan into my mouth, but it tasted a bit too sulfurous for me to feel safe drinking it. Hopefully whoever was driving that flitter was friendly to aliens like me.

The whirring of the motor got louder as it approached and then puttered out to a low hum as the flitter pulled up alongside me and floated, about a meter off ground. No noise but the hum of the flitter and the babble of the river. Just as I was beginning to wonder if it was an unmanned vehicle, it let out a hiss of air and floated gently down to the ground. A door slid open to reveal three darkened figures, Humanoid, standing in the doorframe, just looking at me, in silence. I followed suit, standing there in what was left of my night clothes, by the river. They began to talk to each other in Standard, in voices that sounded like those of Human males.

"What do we do with her?"

"She doesn't appear to be from the capital — look at that hair. And her garments. She's been trekking through the mountains."

"No shoes? No water? No pack with food and instruments and supplies?"

"Maybe she keeps them in her hairdo?"

At this point, I had to interject — though that never occurred to me, to hide life-saving supplies in the wig. Lesson learned; thanks Charlie, you dickhead. "If you can help me, I have lost my ship — I was transported here by…" I couldn't finish the sentence, it was so outlandish. I mean, what could I say? 'Help me, I was transported here by a spurned teenage boy with the psychic abilities of a god?' So I just sort of trailed back into silence, never taking my eyes off the three male-presenting beings.

The men resumed their silence, and suddenly they stepped back into the shadows of the flitter and the door slid shut.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" I cried, and ran up to the flitter, banging my fists on the unresponsive door. The vehicle responded by purring back to life and lifting a meter off the ground, and promptly flitting away, back towards the complex. What the fuck?

So back to the road was my only option. Thank God for all that emotional stability training in Starfleet Academy — I was so mad I almost ripped my wig off and threw it at them. Almost.

The big sun had just slipped over the horizon when suddenly I was on the ship again, dressed in un-ripped, un-muddied night clothes, as if none of this had ever happened. I wondered if it was all a dream … except that there was something imprinted in the sole of one of my once-again, fully intact, clean, and dry slippers. Two letters, "C-C", and a bunch of numbers — looked like a set of coordinates. I didn't tell anyone on the ship about any of this because NOBODY ASKED. No inquiry as to where I went, nothing — the main problem was getting that little monster off the ship, and when he was finally taken back by his masters, we all were sent to sickbay for examination.

So this log is really the first time I've told my story. Geoffrey and I have a date in a few hours at observation deck C … maybe I'll tell him the story? Maybe I'll keep it to myself? Maybe I'll just tell him I don't have any memory of where Charlie sent me, as if it was a dreamless sleep.

Honestly … I don't even really feel like talking about it. I just wanna be held. Good night, for now.

Kirk switched off the recorder. "We looked for those slippers years ago, right? I seem to remember someone looking for them … right?"

Uhura shook her head, "Yes, we looked for them, and no, we didn't find them — I'm afraid that whoever cleaned her room to prepare it for the next yeoman may have just disintegrated them along with the trash."

"And we first listened to this log after that cleaning, I believe," Kirk remembered.

"That is correct, Captain," Spock responded.

Kirk turned away from the table and gently punched the arm of his chair, assimilating his own frustration for a moment. "I'll check in with M'Benga after this meeting, see if she told him anything more. Next entry?" he asked the others. His company nodded again.

Stardate 1673.2:

Am I just here to suffer? This assignment is waaaay harder than I ever dreamed it would be — and I've still got almost five years left of this. No one ever warned me how much being a starship yeoman could fuck with your head…

And seriously? Did they even do sensitivity training in Starfleet when Captain Kirk, or Mister Spock, for that matter was there? That interrogation was so bogus I don't know what to think anymore. And Spock, with his "the imposter had some interesting qualities" comment … what the fuck did that mean? Maybe he's interested in a rape-y Captain Cock … hmm. Maybe he IS interested in a toppy crazy rapeball like that. Vulcans are such wooden mysteries to me, I'll never figure them out.

Attempted rape by an evil twin of sexy Captain Cock … sort of reminds me of the time I was traveling alone in Egypt as a student, totally naive and exploring the night markets of Alexandria alone, and suddenly there were about a half-dozen grown men following me, telling me about how they were going to fuck me. I was terrified — and also terrified to realize any of these men, had I met them in any other environment and they were saying something sweet instead of something threatening, would have been viable date material. They were all handsome men — just toxic to me, a single woman, walking alone. That's what it felt like — beautiful Captain Cock, finally taking his eyes off Spock for a minute to pay attention to me, and he's a monster, trying to rape me. And then fucking Spock intimates that I liked him like that. Fuck. This. Ship.

Kirk looked at Spock. "Next entry?"

Spock nodded, stonily, as ever — though this stone had a mossy green tint of repressed embarrassment and shame. 'Such an unusual experience to be reading a diary,' more than one mind in the room thought.

Stardate 1704.5:

I swear, I am just a plaything to the male crew of this ship. Anywhere — the hallways, the turbolift, the bridge — anywhere is an appropriate place for sexual harassment, apparently. First time at the helm though — thanks to a "drunk" Cock.

What does Captain Cock want? He seems to be interested in me pretty much any time he gets out of his head, but when he's back to normal, his one true love is the ship. Or possibly Spock — there are rumors going around that he's attracted to his first officer, and I know he's bisexual because his reputation stuck around Starfleet long after he graduated — a stack of books with two legs, and a cock that wasn't discriminating. But I don't think they've gotten into anything yet — Spock still seems so, I dunno, so chaste. For the record, though … I still think ole' Captain Cock is cute — particularly when he's not rape-y. Beaches, indeed. I'll beach you, Captain Cock!

Nyota and I had dinner tonight. Geoffrey was again supposed to take me out but AGAIN was overloaded in sickbay with Doctor McCoy, playing clean-up. SHE was the first one to actually ask me what happened when Charlie made me 'go away.' I thought at first I'd tell her, but I just ended up saying I didn't remember. She's so easy to talk to usually, but the story is so outlandish that I don't think anyone would believe me, even my friends.

Me wig calleth … I come, dear wig, trusty brush in hand.

"How many more of these are left?" McCoy broke in. "Because if she's just gonna gripe more and more and ramble on about her problems with this ship, I've got more important business to take care of in sickbay."

"Doctor," Spock responded," we are assessing not just her potential whereabouts but also the state of her mental well-being at the time just before her disappearance. With your knowledge of the fluctuations of the Human mind, you are invaluable in this endeavor."

Doctor McCoy looked surprised, and then smug. Kirk cut in, "Bones, it's just three more entries. Two of them are pretty short. Be patient." He resumed playing the log.

Stardate 1709.7

At least Captain Cock finally understands I need some touch from time to time. I still see the way he watches Spock, with hunger, but at least he lets me touch him when I'm scared. Oy. I'm such a baby.

More news of the weird — I dreamt about the 'go away' planet again. This takes it up to four times, always the same dream — I'm walking back down that long road towards the complex, and the flitter shows up again. In each dream, it picks me up and I go inside it with the three men. They don't touch me or even look at me once I'm in the flitter — though they touch each other A LOT as they navigate it back down the road. It's weird — they're in some sort of uniform, and they're working, navigating the flitter, checking the computers on it, and communicating with what sounds like a woman's voice, giving them orders — but their hands are all over each other as they work. Efficient, yet … horny? Super confusing dream. I'm

gonna chalk the three horny men up to waking-life observations of the interactions between ole' Captain Cock, Spock, and the doc. Like an old married thruple when they're together.

But here's what was special about the dream of the 'go away' planet last night — this time, instead of waking up before I got to the complex, as I usually do, the flitter actually arrived at the entry to one of the larger domes. The three men stopped working/groping each other for a minute and motioned for me to leave, and I stepped out to see an open panel on the largest dome in the complex. They gestured for me to go through the door, which I did, and stepped right into an absolutely stunning garden spreading out before me, little cultivated nooks of flowers and greenery off to all sides, with smaller, shining, pinkish-golden domes inside and only a few dozen meters away from the entry — and the most interesting part? There were possibly thirty to forty workers in the gardens, in coveralls, tending to the landscaping, and every last one of them was … well, appeared to be … female. Or nonbinary maybe? Transwomen, ciswomen, who knows — but no one within the walls looked male in any way. Androgynous, sure, some of them, but no beings that looked like men, unlike the operators of the flitter. I turned around to ask the men from the flitter where I was and what's going on — not for the first time in these dreams — but all I saw was an empty patch of scrub grass and dirt on the other side of the panel. The flitter and its grope-happy men had disappeared. And then, of course, I woke up.

Geoffrey fiiiiiiiiinally kissed me on our last date. Fat lot of good that does — he got called to sickbay as soon as our lips met. High and dry for poor ole' Janice yet again. Maybe my wig will be my life partner? I have started tucking a small multi-tool into the weave since my misadventures in the 'go away' place.

Stardate 2713.8

In so much pain. My period started on the way back from the planet — as we were transported, I felt it running down the walls of my vagina. Glad to see the PMS go, but damn? Jealous of a two hundred year old teenager? … Captain Cock's NEVER gonna let me live that one down.

Another funny thing happened during transportation back to the ship. I had a vision, in my mind's eye, of a beautiful golden woman in a room that looked sort of like the bridge, but more comfortable and more … I dunno … grounded? She seemed to be on some sort of elegant divan, and she wasn't saying anything, her lips most definitely weren't moving — but she seemed to be speaking to me anyhow. She just communicated one word, "come". And then I was on the transporter pad, back on the Enterprise*, beautiful legs again and everything. And I am now happy to say … I reaaaaallly don't want kids.*

"Last entry," said Kirk.

Stardate 2818.4: *Ok.*

For the record, and if this log ever gets read by anyone other than myself, I have valued my time here in the Enterprise*, despite its difficulties. That being said,* (the sound of Janice sighing in the recording briefly filled the room), *I have felt very disrespected because of my*

appearance and my sex, but it appears inherent sexism is a universal norm that I cannot escape.

I had the dream again last night, but this time I got into the inner domes — the ones inside of the big one, with the garden all around them. Well, really, one of the gardeners looked up at me this time after I noticed the flitter had disappeared, and she directly addressed me — the first being to do so in any of these dreams. She stood up, walked over to me, and said, "Welcome. Our council would like to meet you — we sense you would be at home here," and without another word, she led me to a nearby dome.

One of the five-sided panels faded, and she stepped inside, gesturing for me to follow. As soon as I entered the dome, I felt an internal rush of comfort and strange familiarity, and an overwhelming sense of belonging, safety, and … something else I can't quite name … but it sort of felt like … a warm flush running through my body? It spread all throughout my body, like water and fire at the same time. I've never had an orgasm, despite my previous lovers' best efforts and my own experimentation, but I've heard them described to me by my few friends I've chosen to confide this very personal little detail about myself — it felt a little like that. Just a little — and just for a second. And then I was in a great atrium, with small alcoves and workstations all around it, all peopled by women and femme-presenting types, and possibly nonbinary beings here and there too, but again, no one who looked like a man. A few of the people looked up at me and smiled as I was led past them, and some of them winked at me. Again, I felt a flush of heat run through my body — such a weird feeling, it almost felt like an external thing even though it was IN my body — and suddenly I was at a great, ornate, golden door, still barefoot and in my tattered nightclothes, standing next to my guide.

As the door began to fade, just like the panel in the dome, I began to feel a lot of the same hot, wet flush spread throughout my body, radiating out from my hips — well, really, from the area around my vagina. I'd never felt anything like that before, in dreaming or in waking life. It was possibly the most delicious thing I've ever felt — and I know "delicious" isn't supposed to describe a feeling, just a taste, but there is no better word in Standard. I felt like my body was at some sort of precipice, trembling at the edge of something, and I looked into the room, seeing a council of more women and femme-presenting types and androgynes, sitting around a large table. They were busily working, talking, passing things back and forth to each other, and then a gold-colored femme looked up at me, thick curly gold-tinged black hair shining on this person's head, and again I heard the word, "come," and again, I felt the flush, teetering on the edge of something I don't know and can't explain … and then I woke up, in my cabin on the Enterprise*, the sheets wet below my hips. I got into the shower and touched my vagina (the only time I feel clean enough to do so), and it was wide open and very, very wet. My clitoris was throbbing. My alarm went off from the other room just then — time for work already? It just felt like I fell asleep an hour ago!*

So I finished my cold shower, donned uniform and wig, and headed off to the bridge, just in time to see Kirk mooning over some other chick in a fake fur mini-dress, of all abominable things, and Spock spazzing out (very reservedly, as only a Vulcan can do, but I've got the eye) with jealousy. Something tells me they aren't fucking, maybe never will. And I probably will

never fuck ole' Captain Cock either. Because honestly … and again, I repeat, I have valued my time here on the Enterprise*, but I am sick and tired of feeling like a servant and a plaything to the male crew members of this ship … honestly, I've got to go. I have to find that planet, I have to find that complex, I have to find that golden woman, and I have to find that feeling.*

The slipper said, "C-C" followed by three sets of numbers. Those are the coordinates I'll program into the transporter — and if it sends me and my life-support-stocked wig into the void of space, at least I transitioned to my next life whilst in pursuit of my pleasure. For that dream, and this job, has shifted me, and my number one priority while I am still here is to seek my pleasure. I'm going AWOL. May you beat me with wet noodles and send me forever away from this sexist bullshit-laden Starfleet. And to Sulu, Uhura, and Geoffrey — thank you, gonna miss you three. Make sure the others keep some sense in their heads.

Signing off, Yeoman Janice Rand.

The audio stopped. McCoy was staring hard at the table, Spock looked stonily off into the distance, and Sulu and Uhura looked concerned. Kirk looked defeated.

"That's all she wrote," he said, to a silent room.

Spock broke the quietude. "Excuse me, Captain, but it was an audio log."

"Fer the love of gawd, Spock, it's an idiom!" McCoy sighed. "This girl's gone and killed herself out in space somewhere, plugging random coordinates into the transporter … I mean, its range is, what, fifty thousand kilometers?"

"Forty thousand," Sulu responded.

"She turned herself into … steak tartare…" Uhura murmured, eyes wide.

The room again fell into a pensive silence. Kirk started pacing, talking quietly to himself, "…but it was her voice! I know it!"

Spock ventured, "There is the possibility those coordinates are not to the actual planet itself, but to a portal leading to the planet. A localized black hole, perhaps?"

"A wormhole?" Uhura asked.

"In a way, yes," Spock responded. "Certain sets of coordinates can access these 'wormholes' regardless of where in space the person on the transporter actually happens to be."

"A wormhole on demand!" Kirk exclaimed. "It kills me that we don't have those slippers. Computer, who cleaned Yeoman Janice Rand's belongings out of her room after she disappeared?"

"Working … working … on stardate 2819.2, Ensign Wan MacDonald was on cleaning duty for the sector containing Yeoman Rand's quarters."

"Wan MacDonald … are they even with us still? It's been two years," Kirk asked. The rest of his crew looked at him blankly. "Computer, is Wan MacDonald still on ship?"

"Working … Wan MacDonald discharged at Starbase 17A, one point four five three solar years ago."

“Damn. How would you even find that person? It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack,” said McCoy.

“Statistically speaking, Doctor, the chances of finding a needle in a haystack are seventy-three point seven three four percent greater than finding a discharged ensign in space.”

“IT’S A FUCKING IDIOM, SPOCK!”

3. Interlude

Kirk pulled his shirt off over his head, mussing his hair as he drew it down and freed his arms from the sleeves. He stood, bare chested, in front of a mirror, and gave himself a once-over, turning to the side to view his profile. “Not bad for a Human living in space,” he commented appraising his reflection, and then relaxed his posture and turned around to see the long figure sprawled on the bed. “Do I look two years older to you?”

“I suppose it depends which two years, and for what species,” a low voice responded.

“Aw, get outta here. I should’ve known better than to ask you subjective questions.”

“Ask a subjective question, and you get a subjective answer.”

Kirk laughed sardonically, and began taking off his pants. “Delta quadrant. Gives us plenty of time for doing the twelve-year maintenance on the transporter … that has to get done pretty soon…”

“It seems highly illogical to cross the galaxy at great risk to the ship and peril to its crew, for the purpose of rescuing someone who seems to not want to be found, particularly by us.”

“I know. But it’s Starfleet’s orders — find the lost crew. And no one ever, ever accused Starfleet regulations of being logical, highly or otherwise.” Kirk, now unclothed and thickening everywhere, at the end of his highly-strung workday, lay down on the bed next to the long figure — long, with a greenish tinge to his skin, keenly symmetrical swirls of dark hair adorning his body, and pointed ears to top it off.

“Besides,” Kirk continued, “with the upgrade to the drive it should only take a few weeks to get there … and, who knows? Maybe her slippers will turn up and we can wormhole our way there?”

“The probability of that happening, Captain, is approximately zero point zero nine seven eight three percent. Always an optimist, my dear Jim.” Without another word, the two prone figures began kissing. Spock reached down for Kirk’s cock, slowly yet vigorously massaging him, engulfing him first with hand, then mouth, then ass.

Part 2: The Journey

4. A Visit To Sickbay

Three weeks. Three weeks at warp nine. McCoy sighed to himself as he mused behind his desk in an obnoxiously quiet infirmary.

They really had no need to stop, the doctor reflected — at the time when they first caught Janice's broadcast, they were on a mission to transport a diplomat from Antares to Cygnus X1 for what seemed like some sort of secret society gathering hosted by elephants. Yes, he knew the indigenous Genshens who inhabited Cygnus X1 had very little to do with Earth's elephants genetically, but their long, protruding noses that hung down towards their waists were a damn sight more elephantine than not. Thankfully — so they could get this ridiculous reconnaissance mission over before too long — both Antares and Cygnus X1 were on the *USS Excelsior*'s route, and with moderate finagling, the captain managed to transfer their assignment and get the ship hoofing it towards L35B05.

There was a stop, though, coming up in a few days: Gor, the last planetoid before the Amphion system and that damn asteroid belt that surrounds L35B05. Gor was a mining planet, colonized by all sorts of beings, and some Earthlings as well. The *Enterprise* would have a brief shore leave there — only two of Gor's nineteen-hour days — during which McCoy was expected to help Kirk and Spock get information on crossing the asteroid belt. 'So a working shore leave, essentially,' the doctor mused, peevishly.

McCoy felt itchy in his uniform, per usual.

'Yep, as far as Leonard McCoy is concerned,' he thought to himself irritably, 'this mission can't be finished soon enough.' Though they wouldn't be leaving the delta quadrant right after the Janice Rand mission — a couple of days after Starfleet approved the reconnaissance mission, they assigned the ship to study other areas in the vicinity of L35B05. They weren't going to let the *Enterprise* waste a four-week journey.

He needed a vacation. A real shore leave. They had been working their asses off for two and a half years — this job was no joke. Sure, he was up to a challenge but, as Spock had so rightly labeled him, he was a sensualist, and there's only so far his stores of Saurian brandy could take him. He needed an earth, if not *the* Earth, under his feet.

McCoy leaned back in his chair, put a towel on his desk and rested his booted feet upon it. He then took another towel and draped it over his eyes, crossing his arms in front of him. Might as well take a little catnap, he figured — sickbay had been practically dead, no pun intended, for the past few weeks. Headaches, some mental health frustrations, the occasional burn from the replicators … no one had been coming in with a real crisis in what felt like a month of Sundays.

Before too long, he was dreaming. He was wandering through a luscious and elegant garden, with circular beds dotting the landscape, bursting forth with a wide array of flowers, temperate succulents, decorative vegetables, edible plants, fruit trees … the clouds were drifting by over

his head at an alarming rate, but there were two suns in the sky so it was fairly bright. Still, the whole sky had a pinkish-gold hue and a light latticework of hexagons imposed upon it. There were men around him, chasing each other around the garden beds, catching each other and pinning each other down, kissing, fondling each other — many of them appeared to be in some sort of work uniform, but some were shirtless and quite a few were completely naked. All sorts of Human men. All over each other in this impeccable garden.

There were domes of various sizes past the garden, and a panel on the largest one of them faded open, revealing a tall, muscular woman who appeared to be completely gold. She stepped out of the pinkish-gold dome, followed by scores of women, and walked to the center of a great patio. Some of the people flowing out of the domes after her looked androgynous, some looked like women with facial hair, and some looked traditionally feminine, with long hair and wide hips — and some looked more male, but with feminine features, wide hips, and long hair. Some were dressed in shift dresses, some in uniform, some in nothing at all.

The golden woman stopped at the center of the patio, and blew a curving spiral horn. A loud, clear, low note issued forth, and the laughing men cheerfully ceased their play and lined up facing the golden woman and the people from the dome, each man taking on an open-hearted, tall stance — it looked like the ancient yoga posture *tadasana*: mountain pose. The golden woman exchanged some words with a man in the front row, blew the horn again, and the crowds converged. The scores of people arrayed behind the golden woman encircled the line of men, finding old friends, seeking out new ones, taking one or a few by the hands and leading them into the gardens, the men just laughing and smiling all the while.

The golden woman had four men she had chosen just by glancing at them and nodding — as well as a small entourage of people of varying non-male gender presentations. She and her cohorts walked through the gardens slowly, their pelvises shifting as they moved like swaying bowls of water… McCoy's attention was drawn to their hips, the thick thighs of some rubbing together in shirt dresses and silk trousers and satin shorts. He could almost hear the slickness of their labia sluicing as the group passed through the garden and towards a forest beyond. He could sense the weight of the four men's' cocks as they knocked, thick and engorged with vitality, from leg to leg, as they kept pace with their leader, the gold woman cleaving the air before her with her body, like a great winged victory of Samothrace…

As the entourage passed McCoy, he felt his own cock throbbing — the golden leader passed close enough for him to see that the insides of her joints, as well as the area around her eyes, mouth, and nostrils, was tipped with the deepest ebony, as if gold dust was drifting off her sable complexion as she moved… It was stunning, like an antique settee or frame of a painting of exquisite beauty, weathering with time and yet somehow growing even more beautiful. He was leaning against a tree, and there was a conveniently placed hole about three and a half feet off the ground … he ground his hips into it, digging, digging, going in deeper, rougher, harder…

"Doctor McCoy."

With a grunt and a flail, the doctor awoke to find the towel that was on his head was now balled up in his hands and being pressed firmly to his thickened crotch. Half-falling from his chair, he barked out, “Spock, you’re as subtle as an owl. When did you come in here?”

Spock eyed McCoy with one lifted brow — the doctor had learned long ago that this was what passed for a sense of humor in a Vulcan, so he took his towel-humping transgression in stride. “Just now. I do not intend to trouble you if you are otherwise occupied,” Spock announced, charitably.

“Naw, naw … I can sleep-hump a towel any old time, I guess,” McCoy muttered. After his initial irritation subsided, he realized Spock had some sort of Spockian concern, most likely about Jim, and he was actually touched that the Vulcan considered him safe enough to seek out for support when he was in this state. This wasn’t the first time — Jim was a lot of man to love. For a being that had been trained to avoid emotion, loving somebody like Jim could present its challenges. “What’s on your mind, old boy?”

“Doctor McCoy, you know you surpass me in Earth years — twelve point seven to be exact. So ‘old boy’ is a misnomer — as well as an oxymoron.”

“It’s also an idiom. Please, Spock. I have been sitting here for the past three hours, bored out of my skull. Give me something to talk about.”

“I take it you are not in support of our current mission?”

“Well, an hour ago, I was madder’n a wet hen that we were gonna travel all the way across the galaxy to rescue a wayward yeoman who blasted off this ship on her own accord anyways. But at the end of the day, orders is orders and protocol is protocol. For some reason, I’m suddenly sorta lookin’ forward to checking out this planet, L35B05 — we might be the first folks to visit since that Gor inquiry three hundred years ago.”

“I also am greatly anticipating our visit to L35B05 and examining the conditions there. It is a mysterious source for a transmission from, as you put it, a wayward yeoman. But the wayward yeoman … Janice.”

“Yes, Janice. Are you jealous, Spock? Are ya worried Kirk’s gonna leave you for her? You know that wouldn’t be his style.”

“To me, it is highly illogical that a polyamorous bisexual Human would leave me to pursue a monogamous relationship with a woman who absconded from his ship. In fact, I find it illogical that anyone as committed to sexual freedom as Jim would wish for anything less than a score of partners. And you know I support that, even if it is a different way of conducting a sexual relationship than what we traditionally practice on Vulcan. It is a part of him, so logically, I love him for it.”

“Yeah, but folks on Vulcan still practice polygyny and polyandry at least, right? And you and Jim have some partners on the ship, last he informed me.”

“That is true,” Spock responded, then paused.

McCoy took the hint — his sensitivity for very subtle cues, even from Vulcans, had only strengthened with time.

“Let me guess. Janice has been on Jim’s mind — perhaps the way he treated her, perhaps how she behaved around him, what he did with her, what he didn’t do with her, all sorts of things…”

McCoy saw a glimmer of something in those inscrutable Vulcan chocolate-brown eyes, and continued, “Ya ever heard of NRE, Spock?”

“En-are-eee? That does not sound familiar.”

“NRE — it stands for ‘New Relationship Energy’. Quaint old Earth term for that feeling you get when you enter a relationship — no, I know you want to tell me this is not an entry into a relationship, this thing Jim’s got for Janice—” McCoy cut Spock off as he opened his mouth to object, and continued. “Look, Spock. Whatever he’s carrying for her has been rekindled. He never got to know her like he knows you, or any of his other lovers. And I see it too — he seems a bit distant, huh?”

“Precisely.” Spock’s chocolate-browns said so much more than his words, as always. McCoy sighed, again.

“He has NRE for Janice. And you have to cope with it: having a distant partner whose mind is on someone else. He still loves you as much as he always has, and continues to provide for your emotional needs — if you even have them — but he’s distracted. That about sum it up?” He raised a brow and pierced Spock with one of his crisp blue stares, catching Spock’s soulful eyes again.

“Doctor,” a pause. Then, “Your astute perceptions evince experience in these matters.” McCoy took that to be a yes, and a compliment. He mused back to his marriage in response.

“Well, Spock, my first wife and I weren’t monogamous — as was customary by then on Earth — and she was a looker, so of course she had lots of boyfriends around. I had my fair share of fun on my own in the years we were together, but she had her pick of the litter. It was always someone new. And some of those men were very distracting. But you know … until she met Martin, she always came home to me. And I always came home to her. Yes, it didn’t work out in the end, but I learned a lot in that relationship. And concerning her NRE for all those other guys — it never lasted too long. Once she got what she was looking for out of ‘em, she returned to me. Hell, I even liked when she’d tell me about it. Turned me on — which is a healthy physiological response, I might add.”

The chocolate-browns softened a bit. “What about Martin, though? Did she leave you for him?”

“Naw, she and I left each other. Martin’s a woman! My ex-wife realized she was a lesbian — we’re still friends. And from what I gather,” he added with a grin, “she still sows her wild oats.”

“She is a farmer, then?”

“An Earth idiom. You’ve got to be getting better at spotting them by now, right Spock? Lord love a duck,” McCoy smiled to himself as he turned away from Spock, seeing his confused expression in his mind’s eye. ‘I can’t help but overload him with idioms,’ the doctor mused, amusedly, to himself.

He turned back to Spock, catching the last flicker of confusion about Supreme Earth Beings' affections for waterfowl fade from his eyes. "You get what I'm saying, though, right Spock? He's always gonna come back to you, y'know."

"Yes, I understand that. I believe I am learning a lesson as we travel towards L35B05, about both myself and Jim … and possibly Janice. And definitely you, dear Doctor." Spock responded, raising a brow with his typical sense of graceful mystery.

"Be patient with him, Spock. He may seem like a space cadet now, but we're all a little whacked out from this journey — it's a whole lotta nothing but dreaming and remembering."

"And meditating," Spock responded. Following classic Vulcan behavioral conditioning, he nodded his thanks curtly, turned on his heel, and strode out of sickbay. McCoy watched him go, too seasoned to be fazed by his curt departure, and said quietly to himself, "He's always gonna come back to Spock. To those soulful, doleful, abyssal eyes. Like a black hole for Jim's soul."

Then, louder, and smiling impishly at the empty room: "Christine! You wanna play canasta or something?" And to himself, "Holy hell, I'm bored."

5. The Shining Shaft

(**Content Warning: bigoted language, anal probes**)

Gor: A small, rocky, Class D planetoid on the outskirts of the delta quadrant, visited by few, and habited almost entirely by miners of its most abundant element, bismuth ore. No indigenous sentient life-forms; for a long time, Gor was just a rock in space, devoid of life and atmosphere. Galactic needs for bismuth — a rare element on Earth, but integral to the solar panel production necessary for space travel and terraformed colonies these days — had made Gor a target of hungry space-capitalists, looking for the next planet to plunder. There was a gold-rush quality to this frontier planet, reflected in both the setup of its hastily-terraformed colonies, and in the opportunistic behaviors and attitudes of its various galactic inhabitants. Off-planet visitors were rare; tourism, unheard of.

Two days on mining planet Gor was decidedly not anyone on the *Enterprise's* idea of a pleasant shore leave. At the northern hemisphere of the planet, there was a settlement called Goruuk Staad that boasted two saloons, a boarding house, an energy depot, and some sort of general store/outfitter called "Jeans, Rods, and Berries'' — which provided the community with clothing, dynamite, and provisions. For the space-weary travelers stuck in hermitage on the *Enterprise*, though, this little world looked like paradise — or, at least, like something other than stars streaming incessantly past a viewscreen. Sure, there were beautiful things to see on the journey towards L35B05, like different novas and bubbles and all sorts of systems in various stages of development, but the ship was cruising so fast at warp nine that unless the

space object was very large, or very close to their path, it felt like they were just flying by everything.

…which, technically, they were.

Sulu and Uhura were thrilled, then, to find themselves striding down the main street of Goruuk Staad, credits in hand and bellies calling for any novel food or beverage that wasn't available on the *Enterprise*. The terraform of settlement was delineated by a giant grayish-clear dome. Within it, beyond stone hovels, huts, and fortresses, lay one of Gor's largest mines, and Goruuk Staad's raison d'être, a deep hole in the planet in which they mined bismuth ore. The locals called it "Rainbow Pit ".

A mere hundred feet from the mine itself was one of the two saloons, "The Shining Shaft" (the other saloon, modestly named "Grunt's Place", had not yet opened for the day). Sulu dragged a laughing Uhura in after him, the double doors swinging open to reveal a long, mostly empty bar, that led towards a dark raised platform in the back. Uhura gestured towards the platform.

"It sort of looks like a stage…?"

"You got it, missy," replied a wizened, tiny creature behind the bar. It stood about a meter and a half tall, with dark gray, thickly wrinkled skin, almost like that of a rhinoceros. Its eyes twinkled opalescent in the dim bar lighting, catching some of the bright light from the planet's sun filtering in through the large window at the entry to the bar. "That stage over there is at the end a' a spent mine shaft — figured it'd make a great place fer some entertainment." The creature paused and eyed their Starfleet uniforms, which were conspicuously absent of the silvery-yellow dust that seemed to have settled on any and every surface and being within the dome encapsulating Goruuk Staad.

"How long ago did they seal that shaft?" Sulu asked with gentle suspicion.

"Oh, about fifteen years ago," the bartender replied. "But there are tunnels riddled throughout the hills behind the bar, so I wouldn't be surprised if the dust from them mining operations filters in through the edges a' the seal. You two look new t' these parts."

"We are," Sulu replied, and then skirting any further questions about their origin for the moment, he continued, "Tell me, is there a kitchen at this bar? We would like to find something to eat."

The bartender raised the ridge above those shining eyes where eyebrows would have been, and replied, "Oh sure, here's the bar menu," handing over a beat-up piece of cardboard with a few items scrawled across it: Gor burger. Fried root sticks. Jalapeño poppers. *Pepsi*.

Pepsi? Uhura and Sulu looked at each other dubiously, both of them wondering if the ship's replicator might provide better fare than The Shining Shaft. "What kind of meat is in the Gor burger?" Sulu asked.

"Reconstituted eel from Delta 9," the bartender replied. "Everything's shipped in fer us on this ole' rock — except, a' course, fer the *Pepsi*. We can make that ourselves."

"Where do you get the water?" Uhura asked.

“Gor may look like a lifeless rock — and it sure is, compared t’ my home planet of Goshiinge Setbtt — but apparently there are deep reservoirs a’ water and phosphorus about three hundred kilometers south a’ here. That and the bismuth is what keeps this colony going.” Again, the bartender eyed Sulu and Uhura. “So, what brings you two t’ Gor? I can tell you’re not from ‘round here.”

Sulu and Uhura glanced briefly at each other, and she answered, “We’re Starfleet officers from the United Federation of Planets. This isn’t our final stop.”

“Oh really? You all are Earthers, aren’t ya? It’s been ages since I seen a’ Earther. Use-ta go there when I was young. Great place for tipping cows, crop circles, finding folks fer anal probes — consensual, mind ye, I’m a modern creature … that sorta thing.”

“You used to come to Earth?” Sulu asked with disbelief. “And do all those hoax-y things?”

“Oh sure, that’s how ya could git away with it! They all wanted it in the fuuuuurst place.” Their impromptu host was drawing out his words now, clearly enjoying the audience. “Your world’s cows would practically *beg* us t’ tip them. We got the touch, us Goshiinge Setbtt folk. Our crop circles are impeccable, and our anal probes have never disappointed. All those other ‘aliens’ don’t have the finesse,” the creature finished, with satisfaction. Uhura bit back a giggle.

After a second of basking in a comfortable glow of self-appreciation, the bartender returned to eyeing them and asked blatantly, “So, where are ya headed?”

Again, another glance between Uhura and Sulu. She nodded at him, and he spoke, “We’re actually on our way to L35B05, on a reconnaissance mission.” He was wondering to himself why both he and Uhura trusted this little devil so much, but something told them both that this wasn’t a strictly confidential mission. Perhaps the bartender could tell them about that mysterious planet, L35B05, in any case.

“A ha!” The bartender’s gray-yellowish face lit up. “You’re headed t’ Lesbos.” At the newcomers’ puzzled looks, the creature clarified, “That’s what they call the planet, not ‘ El- Three-Five-Bee-Oh-Five.” Their host chortled and continued, “Never been there m’self, but I hear-tell some wild stories about that place.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” Sulu egged him on, grinning. Both he and Uhura suddenly found themselves more engaged by this little creature than by the offerings of the kitchen.

“We-e-e-ell,” the bartender poured something from the soda fountain for itself — looked like a *Pepsi* — and came around to Uhura and Sulu’s side of the bar, hopping up onto a stool and looking for all the world like just another of the few grizzled patrons of the establishment.

“Hear-tell they got a funny way a’ treating the menfolks there.”

Uhura and Sulu looked at each other, and then back at their new companion. The bartender continued, “Y’see, it’s a colony (begging your pardon, lady, fer my language) fulla lesbians and homos, transsexuals, transvestites, whatever you call ‘em … whatever you can imagine. They claim to be a matriarchal culture, anti-patriarchal, whatever they say … but hear-tell they keep the men and the women apart, except on sartin days.”

“Certain days? How do they determine that?” Sulu inquired.

“Oh, they got some sorta ruling commission, some sorta leader, I’spose. Maybe a leadership council, hearing ‘bout their style a’ governing. Y’see, the colony was founded probably about hunnert-fitty o’ your solar cycles ago, so they’ve had time t’ let things evolve. Maybe six, seven generations a ‘em? Y’see, they were founded by Earthers who left the planet maybe three hunnert years ago, looking fer a way outta global patriarchy.”

“That’s right, I seem to remember in my history studies that global patriarchy was pretty much the Earth way, then,” Uhura said. “But we’ve progressed so much over the past three hundred years. You now see women and non-cismale identifying people in all sorts of fields that were unavailable to them three hundred years ago. They can’t have culturally evolved so differently from other colonies, or the people of Earth.”

“Y’don’t get it, do ya, lady? These people do things a little differently. D’ye see his uniform? Versus yours?” The bartender gestured to the two of them. “Put him in your dress, and you in his pants. You” — the creature gestured to Uhura — “you might be in charge of construction, or landscaping, or policy making, or self-defense instruction, or all sorts of jobs you might have never seen a woman working in any other colony. Him” — raising an arm towards Sulu — “he would be in Security — *if* he passed their orientation. And believe you me, he’s gotta be a special kinda guy to pass that. Otherwise, he’s outta the colony.”

“You mean, there are no men in the colony? But how do they have children?” Sulu asked.

“The men aren’t allowed in colony unless they are gay or bisexual … or pansexual, I s’pose. They let the bisexual ones in t’ breed, and then send ‘em back out t’ Security — but only on sartin days, like I said before.”

“Security? But why would such a remote colony need so much security? Don’t they have phasers and shields and other weapons of self-defense?” Uhura wondered aloud.

“Remote fer you, missy, ain’t the same thing as remote fer us. There are all sorts a’ guys from all sorts a’ planets around here that would love t’ get into them domes and snatch them up some of those Lesbos colonists. Y’see, there’s something about that place — it’s very clean, and very healthy, very vital, very beautiful … Plus, they got gold. Lots and lots a’ it. Earthers aren’t the only ones that love gold, y’know.”

Uhura and Sulu nodded in comprehension, Uhura inquiring further, “So the queer male Security protects the non-male colony?”

“Not just the colony, lady. Colony and culture. And civilization.”

“Interesting,” Sulu said slowly. After a pause, “Do they allow visitors?”

“I’ve never been there. But a few a’ our miners here come from there and told us about it. Earthers never visit — too far, or if they get all the way out there, they always been turned away. They all come here with their war stories,” the bartender sighed. “Those that survive Security, that is. And then, of course, you gotta cross the belt t’ get there, so that keeps people away.”

Uhura and Sulu glanced at each other. Sulu spoke, “This belt. You mean the Amphion belt, right? I’ve read about it — it looks pretty tricky. Did any of those would-be visitors tell you about crossing the belt?”

“Visitors? You don’t get me right, man! Those folks headed t’ Lesbos, they’re always pillagers, not pilgrims!” Uhura and Sulu both sensed their companion was loosening up as it nursed its *Pepsi* — perhaps the caffeine and sugar were having an effect. “They always moan t’ me about the same thing: ‘And I woulda gotten in if those faggy security guards had just kept foolin’ around and ignored me!’ Y’see, Security always stops them. Those guys are infallible. Intruders always think they’re just a bunch a’ dumb sissies that can’t stop pawing each other … and then the surviving marauders come back here t’ cry into their *Pepsi* before heading home with their tails between their legs.”

Their companion again took on an air of self-satisfaction as it continued, “Yep, that belt is a bitch t’ cross. It’s like the ocean on Goshiinge Setbtt — ya can’t turn your back on it, not even fer a second. The minute you pass one a’ them damn rocks, another flies right up in your face. But that’s so’s I hear.”

“Sounds like any old asteroid belt,” Sulu responded.

“Yah, I s’pose so. But there’s still a lot of space dust and small rocks — I would venture t’ send ya upwards, come in via the poles. I know it takes longer, but there’s less risk a’ bustin’ off a nacelle.”

“Yeah, but we don’t have the time. Starfleet wants us in there and studying the colony as soon as possible so we can get onto our next mission.” Uhura sighed, stretching her legs long from the stool — then catching sight of many grizzled old faces turning towards her, to look. She tucked her legs modestly beneath her at the bar stool. This old codger had a point — the Earth, and perhaps the whole galaxy, had come a long way towards viewing women as equals, but patriarchal rules and behaviors still held on, here, there, and everywhere. It was a rare planet that she had visited in which women, trans, and nonbinary people truly had the rights of cisgendered men.

“Well, all’s I can says t’ yas is good luck, and don’t turn your back on that viewscreen for a second when’s ya take that belt.” The bartender finished the *Pepsi*, stood, and shuffled back behind the bar. Uhura and Sulu stood up to go.

Sulu turned towards their host and said, “Thanks a lot, it was good talking to you…” he paused.

“Gralagh. The name’s Gralagh. Look me up next time you’re in town. Oh, by the way, I didn’t mention, besides rail drinks and rum, we’ve just got in a fantastic shipment a’ rare Denuvian heroin. Take some home fer the Cap’n? First Mate?” Gralagh looked hopeful — at this point Uhura and Sulu fully realized what a remote place this was.

They looked at each other and held back laughter, Sulu turning back and saying “No thanks, Gralagh, maybe next time,” as they hustled through the door, letting their laughter explode into the thin atmosphere and black-latticed gray sunshine.

6. Fools on a Hill

Spock eyed the back of Kirk's thighs as he strode behind him, keeping easy pace with the smaller man's climb up the hill before them. The atmosphere was sparse inside the dusty dome of Goruuk Staad, but the dome was large enough to encapsulate miles and miles of oxygenated dirt. It was a dirt-world — hills and pits dotted the landscape around the dome, and mountains even, riddled with holes — all in this dingy dome. 'This dingy dome looks almost like home,' Spock thought.

"Huh? Did you just say something?" Kirk asked, as he climbed.

"No, just thought something. This place reminds me slightly of Vulcan." Spock responded, breath mostly unperturbed by the steep climb in the thin air.

"Yeah, but Vulcan is more beautiful and ancient-feeling. This place is just a bunch of piles of dirt and hopper-stepped pits in the ground. Everything's been churned," he grunted, "and turned," he groaned, "and moved," he sighed, as he pulled himself up the steep lip of a large rock, finding himself atop of the particular hill they'd been climbing.

Spock joined him within a step, and they looked out together at the vista laying before them. Kirk was right — everywhere one looked were pits and hills. One of the pits was extremely large, and extremely deep. The yellowish-gray dirt deepened in color as the eye followed the concentric squares of mined soil downwards towards the center of the pit. It looked black from atop the hill — with a slight opalescent sheen. There were small figures in the mine, moving about, operating diamagnetic hover carts to carry the ore away for refining and processing. Most of the figures were of the same size, but every now and then there were a few particularly tall ones, and a few particularly wide ones.

Kirk took out a small telescope from his shoulder pack — thin-atmosphere planets necessitated things like a shoulder pack — and pointed it at the pit, looking in.

"Focusing … and … I think I see him! I think that's the ex-Starfleet officer. He's operating an earthmover … looks like a few other Humans down there. What time is it?"

"Thirteen thirty-four Gor time. Their shift ends in approximately twenty-six minutes."

"Plenty of time to scramble down this hill and back to the road. I'd estimate we could get to him within fifteen minutes," Kirk proposed … with a sidelong look at his first officer.

"Certainly, Captain. He will take time coming to the mine's entry, in any case." Spock responded, looking down and raising his brows. He inhaled deeply, sent out a long exhale, and felt Human hands wrapping around the front of his hips, pressing in and down on his cock. His flaccid cock — which was already beginning to change shape. To grow, and to thicken, and to sweat. Kirk was on his toes behind Spock, at the top of this remote hill of dusky dirt, kissing his neck, squeezing Spock's chest, and pressing into Spock's cock with the heel of his palm, rubbing him, grinding him down … and up.

"What can we do?" Kirk asked, licking his ear, pulling the lobe down gently with his teeth.

“What can’t we do?” Spock responded, ears widening, eyes dancing, edges of his thin lips curling. His eyes began to darken at the thrill of this impromptu encounter. They had made love, tenderly, dutifully, and perhaps a little distantly for the past three weeks aboard the ship — an outdoor adventure was a rare treat for these spacemen. He had learned to appreciate such rarities in his time with Jim — in his time with love, with love in his life. For love is a mixing, a meshing of minds, and Jim’s pervy, lusty, lust-for-life laden mind had leaked into Spock’s, and Spock’s cool and efficient logic had solidified Jim’s sense of purpose. Sense of resolve. He wasn’t going to waste his time being unsure of his path, even if his path was unsure. It was a fair exchange, an even exchange. Spock was still Spock, just now enhanced by Jim’s sense of vitality. Jim was still Jim but now enhanced by Spock’s sense of duty to logic.

And right now, the logical thing to do was to turn, to face his beloved, and to touch him, kiss him, take out his cock and suck it. Yes, in the dusty dome, the wails of pleasure from a now-prone Kirk dissolving into the low drone of heavy machinery far below them, far into the planet.

Spock licked his fingers and reached below Kirk’s balls, pulling his pants down to mid-thigh. He began exploring the pucker there, pressing with the pads of his fingers, stroking his cock to lubricate his hand, then again, pressing, pressing. Prodding. Probing. A finger slipped in, then another — Jim had been particularly receptive as of late, so it was no surprise how open he was.

“I want you in me,” Jim growled, as he clutched Spock’s bobbing head, the silky black hair between his fingers. Spock pulled back, wiped his mouth, took his own swollen, wet cock from his restrictive pants, began stroking it. The entire shaft was glistening, glowing moss green in the low, dingy dusk. Kirk pulled his pants to his knees, and bent his knees up to his chest , the crotch of his pants hitched between his knees like a bondage belt. Spock grabbed the fabric between Kirk’s knees, pulling it taut, and came up to sit back on his heels, his gleaming cock pressing up towards Kirk’s balls. Kirk lifted his hips, summoning his *rectus abdominis* muscles to obey, and let his hips come back down on Spock’s thighs, his balls draping over Spock’s cock.

He reached down, stroking Spock’s wet shaft, and guided it towards his void, pressing it into the puckers. A little help from Spock — more pressing. A little push from Kirk — the head’s in! First ridge. A little more closure from Spock — the second ridge is in. And then Kirk backed out, lifting his hips up, teasing Spock out of him. He looked up to him, gripping his cock in one hand, Spock’s cock in the other, smiled, mouthed ‘Five minutes’, and slammed his hips down on Spock’s cock, taking in his full length. He rested his feet on Spock’s shoulders, granting him full entry, relaxing his ass into Spock’s hands as Spock reached down from Kirk’s pants to grip his *gluteus maximus* muscles. Kirk loved this most — to melt into Spock’s hands, his long fingers and strong palms, those little bursts of electricity from his fingertips, Spock’s wide cock spreading the tight ring of muscles in Kirk’s ass. Spreading, massaging, stroking, nudging, pressing, pushing…

Kirk quickened his pace, pumping his own cock hard, slamming his hips down onto Spock, who was grinding his own hips in a low, slow circle, sending pulses of blood to his own cock, pulsing within Kirk's rectum…

Throbbing, the throbbing, the moaning, right out, in the open, the grinding, the bucking, the flailing, the impaling, the breaking, the spilling, the thrusting, the filling. The resting and restoring. Wet-wipes were produced from Kirk's handy shoulder pack, and asses and cocks were lovingly cleansed, kisses exchanged, wipes burnt to ash in fast phaser fire, and uniforms re-donned and brushed off. And then the two revitalized men dashed giddily off down the hill of overturned slag, towards a wayward Earther of Starfleet fame, gone bismuth mad. 'He'll come home to me,' Spock thought, with quiet glee.

"Huh?" Kirk said.

'He's learning to hear,' thought Spock. 'I love you, *ashayam,*' he ventured in thought.

"Oh, I heard that. I love you, *t'hy'la*," Kirk said aloud, as he smiled back at him briefly, loving him with voice, mind, and body. Yes, Janice lay before him (possibly, hopefully). But Spock lay with him, and walked with him, and ran down this hill with him. He never could take that for granted. 'I love you, *ashayam*,' he thought to himself.

//*Ashayam*// he ventured to Spock. //*Ashayam*.//

Kirk smiled down to the dirt flying out from under his feet. //*Ashayam*.//

7. Bismuth Donnie

(Content warning: rape)

When the two men reached the mine gates, the miners' shift was just changing. This giant pit, Rainbow Mines, was a municipal mine — open to everyone and anyone who had permission from the local government to mine the bismuth there. It was a surprisingly orderly operation — itinerant miners and mining companies would register via an intergalactic web database for six-hour shifts mining the bismuth ore with ecologically-sound methods, as prescribed by the Federation's Council on Intergalactic Mining. Exiting miners pushed out diamagnetic hover-carts — some had small, individual carts, loaded with ore, and others were in groups with bigger carts that they had managed to fill in six hours. Phaser and phaser-like bolt charger fire were the most common means of extraction, but every now and then there were miners who chiseled and dug as well — or used old fashioned dynamite, possibly purchased from Jeans, Rods, and Berries.

After a particularly large cart loaded with bismuth and resting miners — small in stature but blessed with two extra arms each — rode by weightily, a tall, hunching man stepped out of the main gate, pushing an individual cart filled almost to the top with ore, his phaser in a holster at his hip. He had full cheeks, thick, sensuous lips, and wild eyes, and his skin was gray-dusted,

as were his coveralls, boots, and hardhat. Kirk waved to him as he left the gate. The man stopped in his tracks, squinted, put a hand over his brow to try and narrow in on what he was seeing — 'Is that man in uniform? Starfleet uniform?' — and then abruptly turned, smashing his cart into a miner emerging from the gate behind him. The collision sensor on his cart alerted, and his cart locked in place, as well as the cart of the angry miner behind him trying to end his workday, and the miner Kirk sought was stuck with the decision to face these people from Starfleet, or run into the mine and abandon his day's work.

"Stop," Kirk called out to him. "Donald Haynes, stop! You're not in trouble! It's Jim Kirk!"

The man was almost through the mining entrance when the last sentence stopped him. He turned back around. "Kirk?" He called out, squinting his eyes again. Then — a flash of recognition. "Kirk!" He turned back, recognizing an old friend, and stopped by his cart, still unresponsive. He waited awkwardly as Kirk and Spock walked up to him, Kirk's hand extended. The man took off his gloves, laid them atop the bismuth ore, and clasped both of Kirk's hands when the duo reached him.

"Don! Donnie!" Kirk smiled, greeting his old classmate. Kirk had shared a summertime technology training course with Donnie many years ago in Iowa, when Kirk was very young and Donnie was in his mid-twenties. They occasionally crossed paths when Kirk entered Starfleet and Donnie would come in from time to time to give lectures on emerging technologies, but Kirk had since lost touch with him. Starfleet's personnel database had him down as honorably discharged, and Kirk's few mutual acquaintances with Donnie had reported that he had become obsessed with bismuth crystals — "a bismuth junky," they called him — and had moved to Gor for the mining opportunities there. He did have the tell-tale bismuthia of a bismuth-maniac, Kirk noticed, as he grasped his blue-grayish-yellow hands — still gray even after being protected by gloves all day in his mining work. So he's a bismuth freak, Kirk thought.

He's still an old friend, and he knows this part of the galaxy. Perhaps he has some insight on visiting L35B05.

Donnie apologized for his initial reaction to Kirk, and after a brief introduction to Mister Spock, he invited the two men to his modest stone shack for coffee and conversation.

"How long have you been out here, Don?" Kirk asked, as he settled himself around a small stone table with a mug of coffee in one hand, a dry biscuit in the other. Kirk looked around the room — it was very modest and monk-like, save for many large and elaborate, shining, rainbow-colored, stair-stepped bismuth hopper crystals on flat surfaces carved into the walls of the shack. Little ledges of metal rainbow crystal light brought an antiqued brightness to Donnie's home.

"Oh, I been here seven or eight Earth years, I reckon."

"And you came all the way out here to just mine bismuth ore? Surely there were planets closer to Earth where you could do it?"

“Oh, certainly. But I didn’t come out here to mine on Gor initially. Say, what brings you out here?”

“We are on a reconnaissance mission to L35B05, in the next system over, the Amphion system.” Kirk figured he could only benefit from detailing this mission to an old friend familiar with this part of the galaxy.

“Well, in a way, you could say I came out here for the same reason, brother. But my guess is you are looking for someone specific.”

“That is correct,” Spock answered, dipping gently into the conversation. “So you’ve been there?” Kirk asked his friend.

“Jimmy, I have nothing to lose in telling you this, because I hold no more secrets in my life now that I know the Way of the Hopper Crystal. No more secrets from myself, and no more secrets from others — for the Hopper Crystal knows no secrets in her quasi-rhombohedral perfection. Her heart is open, blasted open, to teach us of love…” Donnie trailed off as he turned slowly to gaze at a crystal couched in the wall just over his left shoulder. He picked it up and began stroking it, pressing his fingers into the shining, blue and yellow hopper-like indentations in the piece of metal, as he continued.

“You remember how I would only date bisexual girls, Jimmy? How I use to love lesbians? Well, I loved lesbians and butch girls and bossy women so much, I got roped into going on this space cruise after I discharged from Starfleet. Well, actually … I sorta discharged so I could go on this cruise. I had seen enough, I had had enough of Starfleet’s bureaucracy concerning emergent technologies and public access … I had fought the good fight for a good long time. And they let me keep my benefits, so I had all this credit and my dick in my hand.” Donnie paused, and glanced at Spock. Seeing his typical stony expression, Donnie decided to continue.

“So I got roped into going on this cruise, with some guy friends of mine, to this legendary planet called Lesbos — not L35B05, by the way — that was all toppy chicks, running the show, and fucking each other out in the open all the time. Or so we had heard. A Lesbian planet. Totally hot.”

Kirk was vacillating between looking concerned and conspiratorial. He remembered some wild times Donnie had told him about when they were younger — stories about threesomes, being dominated, watching lesbian orgies … these were the stories that inspired Kirk’s sex positivity, because, as Donnie told them, the women were always the ones running the show. It was hot. He couldn’t help but agree.

“Who told you about this place, Donnie?” Kirk asked.

“I don’t know, it was in some ad at the back of a ‘She’s The Boss’ lesbian porno mag I used to get back then. It seemed legit.” He continued fondling the delicate crystal, rubbing his thumb along its stepped edges, feeling its hardness scrape gently against his warm palm.

Kirk glanced at Spock and subtly switched into work mode. “What happened on Lesbos, Donnie?”

“To me? I got picked up by Security not too long after our shuttle landed at the foothills of a mountain range. Turns out that mountain range is inside their boundary wall.”

“Inside whose boundary wall? Security for who?” Kirk asked.

“Y’know, the funny thing is, I’m not really sure who. I think it’s because there are all these beautiful lesbians and freaky bisexual girls in there and they get all the guys to protect them … that was the impression we got from the Security guys that picked us up. Nice guys, really — they even invited us to join them, but only if we liked guys. Which none of us bros do — in that way. No homo, y’know?”

“So, the Security treated you ok? What did they do with you?” Kirk inquired further, ignoring Donnie’s last statement.

“They took us to our shuttle, and towed our shuttle to the wall. We could see domes in the distance from the wall, and there were all these watchtowers along the wall. We thought the lezzies were in the domes, and the security guys in the watchtowers. Then they opened a big gate and sent us and our shuttle into the wilderness outside of the wall — some place they kept calling ‘Outland’. See, our shuttle needed some repairs, so we couldn’t take off right away to get back to the space cruiser in orbit. Only about a half hour or so of work, but it needed to be done. And those guys wouldn’t let us do it inside the wall — they said we weren’t authorized — unless we wanted to do Orientation, which none of us did.”

“Why didn’t you? What’s ‘Orientation’?” Kirk asked

“I’m not sure, they didn’t go into detail — it was the way they said, ‘Orientation’. Hard to describe fully, but it sounded really suggestive, and as one guy said the word, ‘orientation’, a couple of his fellow security guys came up behind him and slid their hips against his thighs. His muscular thighs. Muscular thighs in very short shorts. Boots, a knife strapped to his calf, a tank top, a hip pack — known as a fanny pack in some circles — these guys were looking for guys. Not that there’s anything wrong with that—!” He glanced from Kirk to Spock and back “—but like I said before, we’re just not those kinda guys. We liked sports, fast cars, and emergent technologies. And pussy. Not cock.” He downed his coffee and stood up to pour another cup. As the kettle was coming to a boil, he picked up another bismuth crystal from a small alcove in the wall near the stove.

“We also like crystals…” he crooned to the chunk of metal, holding it flat on one palm as he gently fingered its ridged lobes.

“So did you get the shuttle back in the air and get outta there? No exploring the wilderness?”

“Well, it was pretty intense. About three-quarters of the way into finishing the repair job, I began to hear a pretty big noise crashing through the undergrowth. One of my boys took over for me and I stepped out with my phaser (see, I was the only one outta the five of us with Starfleet training) to see what was out there. I climbed a huge spruce tree and stood way up toward the top, just when you can start to see a distance. Over the wall, I saw the huge pink domes looking in the distance — perhaps where those beautiful girls were — and then about five hundred meters away from the wall in the wilderness, there were about a dozen really

gristly looking guys stalking towards the shuttle. Real wild-eyed, crazy-looking men with crude weapons and wearing furs. Almost a predatory kinda look." Donnie shuddered.

"Did you guys get the shuttle fixed in time?" Kirk asked.

"Now Jimmy … I usually don't tell people this story. I have a lot of hidden folds, just like some of these crystals." He held up a large, diorama-like chunk of bismuth, shining gold and green, with square folding spirals of ridged stairwells collapsing within its depths. The kettle cried, and he poured himself another cup of coffee.

"It's ok, Donnie, you're here now, and that's what matters." Kirk responded, feeling immediately like some sort of corny after-school programming aimed at pre-adolescents.

"But these crystals, in all their inner folds, are glorious, and praise be to The Great Hopper Crystal for its grace! Praise be that I was saved! That I was brought here, that a great mining company recruited me from that godforsaken wilderness and those shitty dudes! You see, the shuttle began working while I was still coming back down from the tree — but another group of those riff-raff-rumpus men had beat me there and were climbing all over the shuttle, trying to take it over. The only way the shuttle could get rid of them was to take off, and they only had enough power to return to the ship — no time to come back and get me. My bros deserted me." Donnie seemed despondent, but after a moment, he picked up a crystal that resembled a whale's vertebra, shining pink-to-green and pixelated.

"But as I said before, fate saved me — and my boys sent out a distress signal. It was received by a mining company ship on its way from Gor to Lesbos to recruit. I was up in that spruce tree for three days before it arrived, though. I watched those men. They are terrible. They boss each other around, fight and hurt each other, all trying to be the top dog. None of them are gay, and there are no women around, so they fuck whatever they can — I saw quite a few of them raping various ruminant animals in the wild, mountain goats, sheep, the like. They'd rape 'em, then kill 'em, then eat 'em. In the three days I was up there, I learned the faces of about twenty-five different men."

"Did any of those men also get recruited by the mining ship?" Kirk asked.

"Two others. I climbed down and ran to the shuttle when I saw it descending near the barred-shut entry in the great wall. So they brought me here, and I haven't left since."

Donnie sat in silence; his story clearly finished. After a moment, he said, "You know, bismuth is radioactive, but has a half-life one billion times longer than the current estimated age of the universe."

"That's pretty incredible," Kirk said, without much enthusiasm. To him, Lesbos sounded chaotic — outside the wall at least. But at least he had some confirmation of Janice's accounts of the security guards. He looked over at Spock, who made an infinitesimally small nod when their eyes met, and he turned back to Donnie. Donnie was stroking a crystal the way you'd caress a small pet, cooing to it: "So multifaceted … so radiant … so quasi-rhombohedral … so non-toxic … so diamagnetic…"

“Great seeing ya, Donnie! Let me know if you ever decide to go off-planet,” Kirk called out to him … but Donnie was lost to his crystal. Kirk turned back to Spock.

“Back to the ship?”

“Replicated *plomeek* soup awaits,” Spock answered sardonically, raising his eyebrows to subtly indicate he was making a joke.

8. The Amphion Belt

The Amphion Belt, by the few and sundry accounts available in the *Enterprise’s* computer, was reported to be either two or two point six astronomical units wide, slicing between the orbits of gas giant Ogun and Class M planet L35B05.

“With a collision only thirty thousand Earth years ago, this belt’s gonna be rocks and dust everywhere…” Sulu said to Chekov and Uhura as they left the transporter pad at the end of their visit to Gor.

“Good thing Scotty had a chance to give those shields and phaser banks an overhaul during the trip out here,” Uhura responded. “We’re gonna need all the help we can get, crossing this mess.”

“And for vut?” Chekov added. “To find an absconded crew member who doesn’t vanna be found.”

“Well … maybe she does, though. She did put out that broadcast,” Sulu countered.

“You haf a point. But who knows? Maybe she flipped her lid and is just a space vacko now.”

“Chekov, that’s no way to talk about a former crew member!” Uhura scolded. “Space wacko yourself!” She laughed as they entered the turbolift.

“Bridge,” she commanded the lift. “Who knows. She might wanna be found. She might not. I’m looking forward to catching up with her either way. Hopefully I’ll be in the landing party,” she continued.

“You just wanna be in the landing party because the planet’s called“—and at this point, they reached the bridge, the lift doors sliding open just as Sulu finished his sentence—” Lesbos.”

The other crew members on the bridge glanced towards the lift doors, some smirking, and then turned back to their consoles. Kirk took mild consternation to this — he always felt mildly consternated when facing an asteroid belt, especially a particularly dense one like the Amphion Belt.

“Yes,” he called out to the denizens of the bridge, as he stood behind his chair. “On Gor, we learned that this planet is called LESBOS. Not L35B05. Take note.” He stood a moment behind the chair, both hands planted on the backrest, and leaned forward over it, looking around the bridge at the plethora of poorly-stifled smirks. Amused expressions — sometimes somewhat stubbornly — faded as his eyes scanned the room. Morale. Ship’s morale was always of

utmost importance, especially in space, especially facing an asteroid belt … Kirk could feel his annoyance fading to amusement. He turned to look towards the closed lift doors, hiding a smirk himself, and then turned back around, spun his chair once, idly, and continued.

“Yes, Lesbos. Like the Greek island on Earth which gives its name to the word,” he paused for dramatic effect, “*lesbian*.” He looked around the room again. Puerile smiles were stifled again with downward glances, back-of-hand biting, and sudden, pointed focusing on consoles.

Spock took the bait. Whether or not he was in on Kirk’s joke would remain a mystery of the universe. “Ah, the Standard Earth term, ‘lesbian.’ Meaning, if I am correct, a woman who loves women romantically and/or sexually.”

Kirk continued, egged on by his first officer, “Some of you may be wondering how a modality of love could be named after a Greek island. Rear camera on viewscreen — let’s wave goodbye to Gor.”

“Rear camera on viewscreen,” Uhura responded to his order. The yellowish-gray hunk of rock that was Gor shrunk behind them.

Kirk continued, “It is all due to a woman of Lesbos who walked the Earth some three thousand years ago. A poet. Warp factor six, Sulu.”

“Aye, Captain, warp factor six.” Sulu responded, smiling to his console. The captain was in fine form on this shift.

“Energize,” Kirk ordered. After a brief moment of quiet as the ship stepped into the next level of time space, Kirk called out over the thrum of the engines, “‘It’s no use / Mother dear, I / can’t finish my / weaving…’ forward viewscreen, Uhura.”

“Switching to forward viewscreen,” Uhura confirmed.

At this point, the lift doors opened and Doctor McCoy strolled onto the bridge, looking surprisingly refreshed and non-itchy, a small bismuth crystal in his hand. “Jim, you wouldn’t believe—” Kirk held up his hand from the captain’s chair, quieting his friend, and continued.

“‘You may / blame Aphrodite / soft as she is — ’” Kirk paused, looking around the room at a markedly larger proportion of smirking faces and shaking shoulders, and a raised eyebrow from McCoy. The captain glanced towards Spock, his beloved, at the science station — he could sense the smile in Spock’s eyes as he continued.

“‘ — She has almost / killed me with / love for that boy.’” As he finished his recitation, he looked towards the viewscreen, watching the stars fly by them like driving rain on a windshield. “Mary Barnard translation.” It was such a rare treat for Kirk to have an opportunity to recite three thousand year old Earth poetry on the bridge — but an even rarer treat to discuss it.

“So, there you have it, everyone. An example of Sappho’s work — the poet from the Earth isle of Lesbos, for whom the meaning of the word ‘lesbian’ is derived. As some of you” (more shaking shoulders, and an unstifled smirk on Kirk’s face) “may have deduced, this poem makes reference to a boy, as the object of the writer’s affection.”

McCoy had taken an empty seat near Spock and the science station. “This is a fine how-do-you-do … how long has this little poetry lecture been goin’ on?” he said under his breath to Spock.

“Undoubtedly. Five point three four minutes,” Spock responded quietly.

Kirk continued, “And you may be thinking to yourself, ‘but this is Sappho! The woman who put Lesbos on the map, the woman for whom lesbians are named! Why is she writing about a boy?’ Valid concern.” In the viewscreen, two especially thick bright lines thickened.

“Approaching Amphion system,” Chekov announced.

“We’ve got just Kranach and Ogun to pass before the belt,” Kirk responded. “Cut to warp one.” The lines of light condensed themselves to slower-moving blurs before Kirk continued on his impromptu poetry/Earth history lecture. “Aye, sir, warp one,” Sulu confirmed.

“By many accounts, Sappho was not exclusively homosexual,” Kirk continued. “So ‘lesbian’ refers to only one element of the writer’s sexuality — which, if nothing else, is to remind you that things are not always what they seem. Sexuality can be fluid, and love flows, like water, indiscriminately for many. Keep this in mind as we contact L35B05 — locally known as Lesbos, and probably for a reason — there is always more than meets the eye. What’s up, Bones?”

McCoy stood up from his seat by Spock, and walked over to Kirk. “To what do we owe the pleasure of this little poetry lecture?”

“Snickering on the bridge necessitated it. I figured a little history lesson on the origin of the word ‘Lesbos’ was in order.”

“Ah.” McCoy held up the crystal. “Can you believe this is the stuff ancient Terrans used to cure digestive ailments, amongst other things? I mean, in compound form, but still! And it’s not toxic, even though it’s a heavy metal and a pnictogen. Incredible.”

“You sound like Bismuth Donnie.”

“Who?”

“An old friend Spock and I visited in Goruuk Staad. He told us a little bit about Lesbos — but it seems Uhura and Sulu got more information from that bartender they talked to in The Shining Shaft.”

“The Shining Shaft?” This time, it was McCoy’s turn to smirk.

“A bar in Goruuk Staad. Didn’t you visit the main street during your shore leave?”

“Naw, I just went to the crystal labs and then spent the past two days aboard. That place made my skin itch.”

“Everything makes your skin itch,” Kirk responded, laughing.

“Mostly these godawful xenylon uniforms, though. But I did learn a little about Lesbos from the crystal growers in the labs.”

“Oh?” Kirk looked at him, intrigued, and then glanced back at the viewscreen as the first gas giant approached — the larger of the two, nearer in its orbit. “That’s Kranach. Apparently, that’s a seventy thousand year old storm on the south pole there.”

The approaching planet was a mass of beige and purple swirls, concentrating into a massive blue-black whorl towards the bottom.

Doctor McCoy continued. “No one from the crystal labs had actually been to Lesbos, but they heard tell the colony is run entirely by women, and, get this…” he raised his eyebrows, “the capitol city — populated entirely by women and nonbinary people — is called ‘Cunting-Coxbury.’”

Kirk exploded into laughter. “What are we getting ourselves into, Bones?”

McCoy smiled, “Perhaps a lot more than we bargained for.”

The ship passed Kranach, with just the orbit of gas giant Ogun left before they reached the belt — which still looked like a mass of space dust in the distance. Ogun was far to the ship’s left — much closer was a trojan asteroid following in its wake: a large, gray chunk of space rock being pulled along by the larger planet’s orbit. The dust cloud grew closer, beginning to take up more and more of the viewscreen.

“Sulu, let’s take it down to impulse. Use your discretion, we may have to take this slow.” “Impulse drive activated,” Sulu responded.

“Aw hell, Jim, this ain’t his first rodeo, or yours. I’m gonna head back to sickbay — ya never know what sort of calamities will happen when crossing a belt. See ya on the other side.” McCoy walked off towards the lift, the doors sliding shut behind him.

The dust cloud enveloped the whole screen now, grayish-blue with dark gray chunks coming into focus here and there in the distance.

“Entering the Amphion belt in sixty seconds,” Chekov called out.

“Spock, just in case — any life forms in this mess?” Kirk called towards the science station.

“Negative. Sensors indicate no life forms in the Amphion Belt. Due to the recent forming of this belt, the velocity of many of the asteroids is still high and unpredictable. Recommend the readying of phaser banks.”

“Recommendation noted,” Kirk responded, and then called to Chekov, “Ready the phaser banks, Chekov. Shields up, too. We’re gonna try and avoid as much of these rocks as we can, but some might need to be scattered.”

“Phaser banks on the ready, shields up, Keptin,” Chekov responded.

The viewscreen was now completely gray. Sulu monitored oncoming asteroids as he kept a mostly straight course through the belt. Every now and then, a dark patch would come up on part of the viewscreen, and Sulu would shift the trajectory slightly, sending the dark patch off the screen. “Entering the thick of it now, Captain,” Sulu called out, as he looked down at the sensor monitor to see more chunks of rock ahead of them. A very large, very dark chunk of rock began filling the viewscreen quickly.

“Pull starboard! Let’s save our phaser power if we can,” Kirk called out, as the ship narrowly avoided collision. Within a half-second, another dark chunk filled the screen. “Port!” Kirk called out.

The ship swung to the left, just as another giant gray mass grew on the viewscreen. Sulu steered the ship starboard again — right into yet another giant gray mass.

“Chekov! Phaser banks ready. We don’t know what’s around the next asteroid,” Kirk called out, as Sulu swung the ship to port, starting to get the hang of this. After a brief, few-second respite, another gray mass loomed, this one too big to dodge.

“Fire phasers!” Kirk called out sharply, Chekov responding almost before he had finished the command. The ship fired, the rock exploded, and rubble was everywhere, further clouding their vision as more and more gray shapes emerged. The ship’s shields rippled under the impact of unknown tons of rock and debris scattered freshly before them. This was the Amphion Belt. ‘Like digging your way through a field of volcanic rock — which, technically, a lot of it is,’ Kirk thought.

Minutes of dodging and weaving and blasting and being pelted with showers of space dust became hours, hours became most of the shift. Eventually, unsurprisingly, between Sulu’s weaving navigation and Chekov’s ready trigger-finger, Kirk began to relax into trusting his officers to get them through this navigational nightmare … to the degree that, after about five hours of this unpredictable weaving, he felt obliged to recite more Sappho. He felt the tension in the bridge keenly, practically hearing the clenching of muscles in almost everyone’s pelvic floor, and recited:

“‘Must I remind you, Cleis, / that sounds of grief / are unbecoming in / a poet’s household?…’ Sulu, port!”

A hulking mass spanned out towards their right, and in a moment, was gone, replaced by thinning dust and gray rocks in the distance.

“…‘and that they are not / suitable in ours?’” Kirk finished his quotation, looking around the bridge at the poised, smiling officers. He graced them with one of his smiles. “No sounds of grief on this bridge, everyone. We’re almost through it,” and he winked, to emphasize his point, turning his gaze back to the viewscreen to see a rogue asteroid, a massive chunk of gray density, roll up from under and to the left of the screen.

Though the thing seemed to be lazily rolling along in space, the asteroid was ineffably fast, and it took the edge of the saucer with an undercut punch, throwing the denizens of the bridge around like rice in a salt shaker. The ship’s alerts blared instantaneously. “Hold back, Sulu!” Kirk called, as the megalithic rock keened up and off to the left and the ship recovered its equilibrium. “Ok, let’s keep pressing forward,” he called to navigation after a quick scan of the room for injuries. Everyone seemed to be fine, but the trill of a boatswain’s whistle signaled news from Scotty in Engineering.

“Engineering to bridge! Cap’n, the main phaser banks have received soome damage from that bonnie wee blow, there,” Scotty’s voice crackled through the ship’s PA. “Shields operating at sixty-eight percent. Hoo much moore of this rock field have we got to endoore?”

“Kirk to Engineering,” Kirk responded. “We’re about one point five AU through the belt … just hold tight, Scotty. She’s not through with us yet. How much power have those phasers still got?”

“It’s hard to say for shoore as the blow knocked some things aroond and we’re still recovering the phaser data, boot I would say ye still got a few good blasts left. Save them, though, for iffn’ yuh need ‘em.”

As he finished his sentence, a small, fast-moving asteroid whizzed down towards them from above, quickly blocking the viewscreen’s image of what lay beyond. Pulling up, down, left, or right, was not an option—” Fire phasers!” Kirk called out, as Chekov responded, each knowing this had to be close to the end. The rock exploded into dust and small fragments, again pelting the ship’s shields as it cleared, leaving view of … the clear, deep blackness of space, lit by binary stars Amphion A and B, and in the distance, in the far side of its orbit from the *Enterprise*, with a dusty ring trailing it: Lesbos.

“‘The stars around the fair moon fade / Against the night, / When gazing full she fills the glade/ And spreads the seas with silvery light.’ Here we are, everyone. Amphion A and B, and beyond them … Lesbos. A planet we know almost as little about as we know of our dear Sappho. Gives you an idea of the stubborn endurance of bigotry that her life was so shrouded in infamy, misinformation, and slander. Contemporaries and their descendants condemned her for being a ‘tribade,’ and historians vilified her further by erasing any hint of tribadism from her work. Let’s keep this in mind as we hopefully complete this mission, or at least bring it to fruition: let the subject speak for herself.”

He looked around — those who weren’t looking at the viewscreen nodded at him when he caught their eyes. Spock stood up from the science station, walked over towards the captain’s chair, and rested his hand casually but obviously on the back of it. A subtle message to his captain he was ready as any of the rest of them to call this shift over.

“You all have done a beautiful job this shift,” Kirk called out. “Let’s clear out for beta and get restored.”

9. Restoration Sleep

“‘I took my lyre and said: / Come now, my heavenly / tortoise shell: become / a speaking instrument.’”

Kirk flopped down on the bed as Spock finished *his* poetry recital, closing his eyes as the exotic sound of the Vulcan lyre issued forth from Spock’s hands. “I didn’t know you were a Sappho admirer, Spock?”

“I, too, became familiar with her work in my academy days, Jim. She was a lyric poet, and, after all, I play the lyre.”

“That you do, and so well, my love.” Kirk rolled over on his belly, kicking off his boots as he gazed out the porthole towards Amphion A and B, and Lesbos beyond. “If there’s anyone down there, they’ll hopefully pick up on our presence soon enough.”

“Sensors did indicate life-forms at a great distance from our position, at the end of shift. Whether they know we’re here or not remains to be discovered.” Spock ended his song and replaced his lyre, shrugging off his shirt and kicking off his boots unceremoniously — an indication of the Vulcan’s own personal exhaustion.

Love, as Kirk had found over the years, is a process of blending … and it had been two long years since he had first bedded his first mate. He remembered the early days, how Spock would neatly disrobe and fold — fold! — his clothes before nestling into bed with his beloved. He still did that from time to time — but he also allowed a surprising amount of that rigid structure he upheld within himself to sway when he was alone with Kirk. It never bothered either of them — there was structure within structure within structure in this Vulcan person, so some softening of the edges was good for Spock … in Kirk’s opinion, at least.

Kirk had been trained long ago in many ancient Earth practices of physical cultivation and energetic cleansing — and, within his training, there were more than a few practices devoted to the softening of structure. It keeps the soul supple. He saw Spock borrow one of those practices now, shaking out his whole body vigorously and roughly, like the way a hairy dog shakes his coat dry.

“Long shift, eh, Spock?”

“Remember, I was there for gamma as well.”

“Hey, you’re the one who claimed he didn’t need sleep that last night on Gor!”

“How else could I properly take readings of all those bioluminescent nocturnal Gorian invertebrates?” Spock looked at him with the edges of a smile curling on his lips. The captain wasn’t the only one prone to absurdism. Poetry recitals on the bridge! Spock almost envied his confidence — if envy were a feeling he’d allow himself, which he didn’t. The same credo went for jealousy — a wasted emotion. Spock tried to save his rare emotional outpourings to less detrimental emotions. But insecurity … that was a tricky one to meditate away. Gently, he tested the water.

“Jim…” He loosened his pants, stepping out of them and subtly folding them, casually placing them on a chair with the rest of his discarded uniform. Kirk looked up at him, expectantly, cluelessly, so keyed-up from the recent shift that he had no idea what could possibly be on Spock’s mind. His brain was in its front seat — the goings on in the subtle realm between his mind and Spock’s were more obscure to him. He tried to reach out with his mind, tried to actively listen…

“Jim … what if she’s there?” He gazed pointedly into his lover’s eyes, standing there, facing him, naked and bare.

“Well, we’ll hear her story, I suppose, and bring her back to the ship unless she requests dishonorable discharge. I dunno. It’s hard to really mete out punitive action so far from Federation territory. She may be matriculated into the culture of the planet, in which case I suppose it’d be against the Prime Directive to drag her away.” Kirk looked thoughtful. “I suppose we could offer her a place on the ship, if she seemed in distress. But she didn’t seem distressed in her broadcast.”

“Affirmative. I gathered as much for our course of action — it is proper Starfleet protocol, despite how highly unusual this situation is.” Spock paused, again diving into Kirk’s open expression. “Do you feel … as if there are loose threads for you to tie up with Janice?”

Kirk kept looking at him with the same open expression, and then a second later, it registered. Spock had seemed somewhat withdrawn the past few weeks, even alone with Kirk — and Kirk suddenly realized why. She had been in Kirk’s mind — and Spock had sensed it.

…and perhaps felt there wasn’t enough room for him. It was clear as the light from the binary stars. He proceeded carefully.

“In a way, Spock, I do. Janice fit around my world like a glove on a hand. My subconscious was loose when we began this mission — it was easy for me to place her in the empty spot in my heart. She filled a gap energetically — even if she didn’t know it, or knew it and didn’t want it. I know my magnetism — I suppose that’s one of my strengths.” he said, sardonically. “But I don’t feel the same now as I did then — really, since you and I became close, and then closer, and then bonded, and then … well, I dunno … that hole in my heart is no longer there. Would you like me to avoid … tying up any ‘loose threads’ with her?” The question was asked gently, with sincerity.

“No.”

“Would you be upset if I fucked her?”

Though Kirk had had a few female lovers since he and Spock had connected, none of his connections with any of the women were a threat to his and Spock’s bond. Theirs was a relationship of trust built on honesty and experience — extra-relationship sexual escapades were not discouraged, but were typically described in great detail afterwards, and often followed by a good pounding of someone’s enthusiastic orifice. Spock knew how to let Kirk’s stories of sexual adventuring condense his blood and send it pumping straight to his cock. And every now and then, he had stories of his own for his love. This was not new terrain. But Janice — there was history, and history that predated the partnership of James T. and his beloved Vulcan.

Spock chewed his thoughts thoroughly before digesting his own answer fully.

“I think it is most logical for you to join with Janice, if she is indeed there and wishes for it. I am, above many things, a scientist. I don’t believe in leaving any stones unturned. And she already sensed our kinship before it was a reality — I have no reason to believe she will draw you away from me.” He said it plainly, matter-of-factly, as if he were negotiating a deal with a space hustler … which, in a way, he was.

“Would you like to be with me?” Kirk asked.

“No, I never sensed any sexual interest between us. I would much prefer to hear of your exploits … if you think they are worth relating … at a later time, between us, intimately…” The amount of trust that poured from that statement alone made Kirk stand up from the bed and walk over to Spock, still naked and quickly cooling down in the captain’s cabin, and hold him.

“I will always make time to relate any exploits to you, intimately,” Kirk said, as he nuzzled his lover’s neck, feeling the warmth flush through Spock’s body as he stroked his hand up from the occipital bone, through his silky black hair. “It’s been a while since I’ve had any exploits to relate — or we’ve had any exploits together to discuss!” He reached down and slapped Spock’s ass, Spock’s response being a quick bite on Kirk’s neck and the winding of two strong Vulcan arms around Kirk’s hips to grab both cheeks. ‘It’s the glue,’ Kirk thought. ‘Sex is the glue.’

//but I have a feeling we would hold together even without it// an external thought floated into Kirk’s mind.

Kirk closed his eyes, giving it a whirl, //I have a feeling you’re right, *t’hy’la*.//

And aloud, if only to playfully scandalize the passing, snickering ensigns in the hall outside his quarters — there always seemed to be at least one of them at any given time—”but until then, *ashayam* … let’s fuck the hell out of each other.”

“Affirmative,” Spock responded, picking up his love like he was a sack of potatoes and carrying him to the bed, ripping off his pants for recycling (and for sonic effect for any of those aforementioned passing ensigns — this was a game that had developed between him and Kirk), and probing his asshole with tongue, slickly oiled fingers, and, eventually, the self-lubricated, throbbing, emerald jewel of his sex.

Deep moans filtered through the edges of the captain’s door, as chuckling ensigns scurried by from station to station.

10. The Coordinates.

The boatswain’s whistle trilled in the captain’s quarters about seven hours into Spock and Kirk’s slumber. Groggily, “Kirk here.” Scotty’s voice ensued.

“Cap’n, I’m in the transporter room — been called doon here to rewire the console after our baby had her little bump on the noggin — and looks like that boomp knocked a few things loose besides the wiring in the transporter console. We foond a pair a’ pink bedroom slippers — one a’ them with some noombers written on the bottom.”

“I’m on my way. Kirk out.”

Scotty plugged the coordinates from the bottom of the slipper into the transporter. “Aye, it seems a shame we dinna find this slipper until we nearly arrived, but here goes nothing.”

He stared at the four men on the transporter stage as their bodies shimmered away to nothingness. The men themselves — Kirk, Spock, and two security officers — felt a cold pull, and then a rush of heat, as the transporter room dissolved into a large, pinkish-gold-walled chamber, lit with warm light from an unknown source. There were three figures in the room, all presenting as female, talking amongst themselves, one with her hands on her hips.

“—not the way it works. You have to pour water to grow oats, as they say — you must nurture your craft.” This statement came from the woman with her hands on her hips. She was wearing a loose shift dress with a leather apron, tool belt, work boots and a welder’s helmet opened to reveal her face. Three large metal abstract structures, perhaps sculptures, were set up behind the women — it was hard to tell if any were complete, as there were large pieces of metal strewn about their bases. One sculpture was markedly less intricate than the other two.

The object of her admonitions, a dewy looking female-presenting Human teenager, stood silently, stoically. ‘Almost looks like how Spock stands and listens,’ was Kirk’s first thought as he began absorbing information from the room. An art class? A welder with two apprentices? Home economics?

As that last marginally-sexist pondering popped into his head, the admonishing welder looked over at him, “What the … Where did they come from?” At this point, she turned and strode past the sculptures to the wall and hit a gray button by the door panel — “Male breach in sector T-4201. Return beam.” Her voice had barely risen, though she was clearly surprised and alarmed … and just as Kirk was marveling at her efficiency of action and communication, he felt a cold pull, then a warm rush, and then the transporter room of the *Enterprise* materialized before his eyes.

The four men on the transporter looked around at each other, and then over to the control console, where a bewildered Scotty stood and stared at them, blinking. “But aye joost beamed ye ool doon!”

“And they just beamed us right back,” Kirk responded.

“Using localized teleportation, no less,” Spock added.

This was Kirk’s turn to efficiently stride towards a gray button on the wall, “Command crew not actively engaged at the moment, come to meeting room C. Kirk out.” He turned towards Scotty. “Scotty, you have the conn.”

11. Back to Plan A

Command room C was closer to the bridge than the transporter room, so when Kirk and Spock arrived, McCoy was pouring coffee for Uhura, and Sulu and Chekov were already seated at the table.

“Back to plan A, everyone,” Kirk declared as he entered the room. “Remember those pinkish-gold domes we saw on the surface scan?”

Uhura nodded, “The source of the transmissions, Captain,” she acknowledged.

“It seems those slipper coordinates transported us into one of them — but they seem to be equipped with localized teleportation, and they immediately transported us back. But what we can say, with certainty, is that the colonists survived.”

McCoy was the first to speak, “And they don’t like guests, or so it seems. What happened down there?”

Kirk looked towards Spock, who filled the room in on their short visit to the coordinates. “Some key points of note are the presence of teenagers — thus signifying the colony’s continuance — and what appears to be a policy of return-beaming unauthorized entry. Specifically, unauthorized male entry,” Spock concluded.

“So, as you all now see, our original plan of taking a shuttle down and finding a suitable private place in the wilderness of Lesbos, ideally close to the dome’s point of entry as indicated by surface scans and life-form readings … well … we’re gonna have to make Plan A our Plan B.” Kirk looked around the room to gauge comprehension. “Who’s in for a bit of an adventure?”

12. Shuttle Life

Sulu navigated the shuttle deftly through the growing atmospheric turbulence, but the ride was still jaw-rattling, as shuttle rides always are. Uhura came to this realization as her teeth clamped together, her seat lifting up from under her slightly as Sulu fought to keep the ride smooth. Spock appeared completely unperturbed, but she could tell Kirk was feeling it too, as his normally golden complexion had tarnished to a greener hue. She glanced at Doctor McCoy, next to her, and looked down — he was white-knuckling the armrests of his chair.

“I see a forest with a field past it, and the domes beyond that,” Sulu called out. “Head for the forest,” Kirk called back.

“I was afraid he was going to say that,” McCoy said, barely audible over the speeding shuttle working against itself to slow its descent.

“Engage cloaking,” Kirk called out.

“Cloaking engaged,” Sulu responded.

Uhura hoped no one at this supposedly thriving colony noticed the young trees being plowed down by an invisible force, as the shuttle crashed and crunched its way to a landing on the planet’s rocky forest floor. The shuttle lifted up violently in the back, sending everyone forward into their seat belts as it struck a large boulder upon landing. Mowing down trees as it righted itself and slid along the ground, the shuttle finally came to a stop, just meters before another elephant-sized boulder, now visible through the front windshield.

“They really gotta hammer out the landing kinks for these shuttles,” McCoy muttered, pale-faced and sweaty.

Uhura nodded and patted his shoulder gingerly as he began unbuckling himself, “Oh, you know you needed a little excitement today.”

The landing party suited up in their protective gear — nothing too heavy-duty, as the planet’s atmosphere had registered comparable to Earth’s, but hiking boots and rain gear were always invaluable when exploring a new planet. Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Sulu, and Uhura exited the shuttle, secured it, and surveyed the surroundings.

They were in a forest near the edge of some sort of clearing — there was light beyond the trees. Upon closer inspection, the tree line ended a few meters from a steep cliffside, looking out upon a vast plain, sparsely dotted with low brush. A few meters away from the base of the cliff was a long, tall, stone wall with guard towers every few hundred meters, snaking into the distance on their left and right before them. The plain was also cut in half by a slowly winding river that appeared to be flowing towards pinkish-golden domed-shaped structures in the distance. “The domes,” Sulu said aloud, as the group gazed off towards them.

They clambered down the cliff, grasping at thin tree trunks and branches as stones crumbled around them. At one point, there was a small avalanche of McCoy onto Sulu onto Spock, but it was so close to the base of the cliffs that no one was injured.

And there, before them, was a sturdy stone wall.

“Left or right?” Kirk asked cheerfully, when everyone reached the bottom of the cliff.

“I detected a guard tower three point five four kilometers to our left, versus one four point six kilometers to our right, Captain.”

“Left, it is!” Kirk called out — maybe a little too joyfully? They were getting somewhere. After four weeks of warp nine, they were getting nearer to this mystery of ‘Where’s Janice? Was that Janice’s voice? Whatever happened to Janice Rand?’

Kirk and his crew began walking to the left, heading towards the bigger sun, high in the sky, with the smaller sun lower to the horizon.

‘Yes, whatever happened to Janice Rand?’ Kirk thought. ‘And, more importantly,’ he pondered further, ‘…does she still think I’m cute?’

Part 3: Cunting-Coxbury

13. Second Try

After a short while, they came to the watchtower. There was a door with a rounded top, located at the bottom of the tower. The door was about two meters wide, belted with iron, and had no handle.

“I guess we knock,” Kirk said, unceremoniously rapping his knuckles on the thick wooden door.

A man opened a window high up on the watchtower and looked down at the small group of off-worlders curiously. He said nothing.

‘Why do I feel like they’re going to ask me for a shrubbery?’ Kirk wondered to himself. After a momentary glance at his companions, he called up to the man in the window, “We are from the Federation starship *USS Enterprise*, seeking a lost crew member. Can you help us?” He looked around at his companions and shrugged.

The man at the top of the tower turned and said something to someone behind him, and then disappeared from the window.

The enormous door opened, revealing a small room with another door at the other end of it. There were two uniformed men standing in the room — perhaps members of the Security force the captain and crew had heard about? The men said nothing — though one was stroking the other’s arm surreptitiously behind his back.

Everyone just stood there for a while, until Doctor McCoy blurted out, “Well, can we come in?”

“You must see Atmah,” one of the uniformed men replied. “Walk through this door and follow the river to the domes.” He opened the other door and gestured through it.

“And don’t try any funny business! We’re watching you,” the other guard warned, before slyly pinching his cohort’s earlobe. Then both guards stood still, trying to contain what looked like amusement behind their feigned impassivity. They stood with their hands behind their backs, waiting by the open door leading out to the river. The domes could be seen far away in the distance, like low hills wrapped in shining pinkish-gold cellophane.

“How long is it to the domes?” Sulu asked one of the guards, and received no response.

So Kirk, Spock, Doctor McCoy, Sulu, and Uhura stepped through the door into a large plain divided by a river on their left. A wide dirt road stretched out before them. As Kirk turned around to thank the guards, he noticed the door was closed. No one was there but the five of them.

Spock looked down at his tricorder. “Sensors indicate the domes to be six point three kilometers due east, along this river.”

The group looked downstream. Kirk smiled sardonically, saying, “Due east it is. And what awaits us is anyone’s guess.”

The vast, shrubby, high desert plain stretched before them. The wall, framed by forested cliffs, lay behind them, and far in the distance across the plain from them rose great wooded mesas and rock formations that resembled enormous hairy hands. Beyond these massive structures of rock lay imposing, snowcapped mountains, and before those structures, in the shrubby desert grasslands between the crew and the rock outcroppings, lay the pinkish-gold domes, glinting seductively in the sunlight. The group looked at each other. “Does anyone else feel like we’re in ‘The Wizard of Oz’?” McCoy asked with a smile.

Uhura patted his shoulder. “Well, I get to be the Scarecrow,” she laughed and smiled. “He’s got the best dance numbers.”

“I’m the Cowardly Lion, then,” the doctor smiled back at her.

“Ooh, that means I get to be the Tin Man!” Sulu exclaimed, laughing. “Oil! Oiiiilll!” Spock looked at Kirk, expectantly raising an eyebrow.

Kirk sighed in mock-resignation. “Well, I guess that leaves me Dorothy.” His face brightened, “Spock, you could be Toto!”

“Nonsense, Captain,” Spock responded, appearing churlishly offended by this juvenile display of whimsy amongst his fellow officers. He looked at everyone with a dour, clinical expression — eyes a’twinkling. “I get to be the Wizard.”

14. The Domes

After about an hour and a half of walking along the dusty path that ran by the river, they reached one of the domes. Unsurprisingly, there was a front door. It was actually a panel — a hexagon shaped panel with a large, round button to its left. This specific panel was a bit difficult to find, as the domes were all made of two-meter-wide hexagonal panels, but the button did set it apart, implying to the party from the *Enterprise* that it must be good for something. And, as this dome was the largest, the captain and crew easily came to the decision that this was the dome to try. Perhaps it served as a meeting hall.

Kirk experimentally pressed the large button. A voice cut through static. “Yyyyes?”

‘Oh, how to word this?’ Kirk thought, pausing briefly to consider his approach. ‘It’s one thing when you are on a mission to find a lost crew mate — it’s another when you have to describe said mission to her possible captors. Here goes nothing.’ He cleared his throat.

“I am Captain James T. Kirk of the *USS Enterprise*. We are searching for a missing crew member — we believe she may be here.” Brevity had served him well in the past, as curiosity was common-law in his encounters with various beings of the universe.

“Juuuussst a second,” the voice responded, followed by silence.

Kirk looked around at the others and shrugged. McCoy shook his head, Uhura looked concerned, and Sulu seemed over-engaged — as Spock stared stonily at the door.

The voice returned, “Are there mennnnn in your party, Caaaaptain Kirk?”

Unsure if he was giving the right answer, he responded, “Four men, one woman.”

The voice’s response was unexpected. “Ohhhhh, Caaaaptain Kirk, tsk tsk! What kiiiiiiiind of numbers are thoooose?”

“I … ah … I … numbers?” Kirk responded, internally struggling for the right protocol to properly deal with this increasingly strange interaction.

“Sennnnd in the woman and twoooo of the mennnn, the otherssss can retuuuurrrrn to your craft. You’re lucky you’re gettingggggg any mennnn at all, by the waaaaay,” and the voice silenced.

Again, another completely confused look from Kirk to the others. The door faded away to reveal a dark red tunnel leading towards a closed door. “A quarantine chamber,” Uhura conjectured.

“Bones, Sulu — wait by the shuttle. If you don’t hear from us in six hours, drive the shuttle here, and beam some female crew members down just in case. Something tells me this colony favors women.”

“Aye, Captain,” Sulu responded, and the two men turned to go. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” McCoy called over his shoulder as he left.

Kirk, Uhura, and Spock turned back towards the door, entered, and saw the chamber around them darken as the gateway to the outer world faded shut. They were encapsulated.

A computerized voice began speaking.

Sensor indicates one female Human, one male Human, one male Vulcan-Human hybrid. Begin general decontamination.”

The dark space was suddenly illuminated on all sides by UV lights, sweeping on tracks back and forth across the room. A red sensor laser scanned across the ceiling and the room went dark again.

“General decontamination complete. Female Human may proceed.”

The door at the far end of the room faded away to reveal an enormous chamber, vast and shining golden-pink. Uhura stepped over the threshold and the door faded back to opaque behind her, again locking Kirk and Spock in the chamber.

“Sensor indicates two male beings. Begin fertility scan.”

Again, the red laser.

“Fertility scan complete. Vulcan-Human hybrid may proceed.”

Kirk and Spock glanced at each other as the door faded open again. “See you on the other side, I hope?” Kirk said, as Spock stepped through the door.

“You will,” Spock responded calmly, and the panel again became opaque, trapping Kirk alone. “Sensor indicates male fertility. Begin sterilization process.”

“Wait, what? Sterilization?” Kirk called out to the room, hoping against hope the voice was conversational.

“Sterilization of all fertile males upon requested entry to the Domes, per statute 5, section 3a. Male fertility returns one week after sterilization. There is no damage to the system. Begin sterilization process.”

Unsure if further protest would be fruitful — particularly concerning the fact he was vasectomized — Kirk watched a third red laser sweep the ceiling, nonconsensual scanning his fertility away. 'The trials of being a spaceman,' he thought to himself in the course of a sigh.

"Sterilization process complete. Male Human may proceed."

The door faded away a third time, and he stepped into the bright pinkish-gold dome, its vast translucent walls and ceiling towering away from him. Within the dome were other domes of various sizes, from town-hall-large to single-dwelling-unit small. The rest of the space within the domes was exquisitely and expertly landscaped, and he saw various Humans in coveralls dotting the environment, working in the gardens. There were also many female-presenting beings in simple, form-fitting, long shift dresses, milling about and talking to each other, some carrying bags or backpacks, headed resolutely somewhere … he felt strangely small, and yet, somehow, cradled by the space.

Spock and Uhura were sitting on low couches in a nearby garden on his left. 'Like a waiting room,' Kirk thought, as he walked over to them and took a seat on a comfortable, firm divan. He really had no option but to recline, so he propped himself up on one elbow and lay back, taking in his surroundings … feeling a little like a subject of the Roman empire on Earth so many centuries ago.

"Captain, they told us to wait here," Uhura filled him in.

"Who is 'they'?"

"One of the women in the shift dresses."

Kirk shifted with slight discomfort on the divan. "You know," he said under his voice, "they sterilized me in the decontamination room." Uhura's eyes grew wide, and Spock's brows shot to his hairline.

"Permanently?" Uhura asked.

"They said it would last a week. Male birth control, I guess? The lasers didn't seem to pick up that I've had a vasectomy."

"Hmm, an odd foresight. Perhaps they were scanning you for the ability to produce sperm. In that case, your assumed fertility would indeed be logical. Lieutenant Uhura and I were of lesser concern, apparently," Spock responded frankly, gesturing towards Uhura.

The three sat pondering this in silence. Eventually, a panel on a large dome nearby faded open, and a beautiful golden woman strode out, hooded head held high. She was in a golden shift dress, her arms bare and muscular and … golden. Everything about this being was golden — the color of her garment, the shade of her complexion, the luster of her eyes, the burnt caramel of her kinky-curly hair, cropped close to her head. Even the field of space which her body occupied had a golden glow to it — fading out behind her like a dusty trail as she crossed the gardens towards the seated trio.

As she approached, Kirk felt his blood pumping down to his hips, filling him, thickening him. He glanced down at his hips — 'glad these Starfleet uniforms are well-fitted,' he thought as his cock pressed into his leg. He glanced at Spock, who had followed his lead and was also

reclining, gazing at the space around the approaching woman like a mountain lion hiding trailside in the darkness. Kirk could make out the lines of Spock's cock down the right leg of his pants — a familiar and beloved sight — and yes, it was happening to him, too. Thickening boyfriend.

Always a welcome sight to Kirk, regardless of the source of stimulation.

He glanced at Uhura — she had claimed the best, though smallest, chair. It had armrests and low back support, and she leaned back on it like a queen. Her face was lit by the approach of the golden woman, and it grew brighter as the figure stopped and stood in front of her chair, addressing her.

"I am Atmah. I welcome you to Cunting-Coxbury."

15. Atmah

Atmah took a relaxed seat on a chaise longue, lying on her side, like Kirk, and propping herself up on one elbow. She stretched her legs out along the length of the chair, one ankle crossed over the other, and she pointed her body only at Uhura, whom she addressed exclusively when speaking.

"From where do you come?"

"Greetings, Atmah. I am Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, chief communications officer of the starship *USS Enterprise*." Uhura had picked up on the unspoken cue from her training — and from Kirk — to take an authoritative tone, even though she was not the superior officer present. After all, under certain conditions, she could be the superior officer present in any situation.

"These are my crew mates, Captain James T. Kirk and First Officer Commander Spock. Many of our crew is from Earth; we are a Federation starship."

Atmah bent her top knee and placed her foot behind her outstretched leg, her slitted golden shift dress sliding down to reveal skin. She had continued gazing at Uhura, and then briefly glanced towards the reclining figures of Kirk and Spock. In turn, she glanced into each man's eyes, and then looked his body up and down appraisingly, returning to the eyes for just a moment longer before turning her gaze back to Uhura.

"Security tells me you are seeking someone."

"Yes, we came here because we believe our missing yeoman, Janice Rand, may be here. Do you know her?"

"Yes, Janice is here, but I see you have men on your ship, in positions of power. They are your responsibility — but they are not allowed in here. You will have to ask them to leave."

Uhura turned briefly away from Atmah, her chagrined face looking to Kirk and Spock for a clue as to how to proceed. Kirk looked in her eyes with his best "you have the conn" expression — which was a gaze so deep that if she hadn't known better, she'd assume he was trying to fuck her. It was almost as if his pupils nodded assent.

She turned back to Atmah, “Are men banned from this colony?”

“Not exactly. We prefer to keep cisgendered men out of the domes because of our ancestral planet’s patriarchal history. We are an intentional community of feminist matriarchs, and non-binary and trans leaders. Because so many of us identify as female, and our home planet has such a long history of violence against women, trans, and nonbinary people by men, we relegate the men to Security. These men you have brought with you may stay no longer.”

“These are nonviolent men that respect women and trans and nonbinary people as equals. Is there no way they can accompany me, under my auspice?”

“Unfortunately not—” Atmah glanced at Kirk’s and Spock’s open and augmented hips (‘longingly?’ Kirk wondered) and then looked back towards Uhura. “—unless they have been through our Orientation program. After Orientation, they may be permitted to shadow Security until the next Men’s Day or holiday.”

“I see. Has this always been the practice here? And why didn’t Security stop us from approaching the domes?”

“Security did not stop you because we wanted to observe your party before interfering. Believe me, we knew the moment you arrived in your shuttlecraft. Besides, our satellite is watching your ship in orbit. As for more details of our colony’s practices, I can answer these questions and many more,” at this point, she gestured towards Kirk and Spock, “but they must not be here.”

Uhura looked towards the men. Kirk spoke for the first time, addressing Atmah. “What does the Orientation entail?”

Atmah glanced at Kirk briefly, and then turned to speak to Uhura.

“The Orientation is for us to determine if we can trust your men around our people. I already sense that your men are quite stimulated — the Orientation helps us to understand if that sense of stimulation is accompanied by a need to possess and control. It is not a long process — and for the right kind of man, it’s quite enjoyable.

“Lieutenant Uhura, please stay with me and talk a while. I will give you a tour of the domes, tell you about our culture, and help you find your missing crew mate. You may beam back to your ship at any point, and you may communicate with them freely. You are welcome to send down any female or non-male crew members you may find helpful in your search and visit. We so rarely get any unannounced female company — it would be my honor.”

Uhura smiled graciously, “I appreciate your offer, and I will visit, but—” she again turned to look at Kirk and Spock, desperately trying to read their faces as to how to proceed.

Kirk, never one to turn down a challenge, addressed Atmah again. “Commander Spock and I will do the Orientation. Uhura, you have the conn planet-side, please report back to the *Enterprise* as appropriate.”

As soon as he finished his sentence, Atmah nodded at a woman standing far away by the dome wall, silently watching them this whole time. She pressed a button on the wall, said something quietly, and within seconds, Uhura sat alone with Atmah.

16. Check-In

Kirk and Spock were transported away again, but this time, when they re-materialized, they were not back on the ship, but rather in a long, low hall, with walls and a ceiling that looked like metal railings along the length of the hall. Kirk felt like he was looking down a long, smooth tube … and for whatever reason, he began to think about Spock. He turned to look at the object of his thoughts, and saw Spock gesturing down the hall with a tip of his head—

“There appears to be a man at a desk at the end of this corridor, Jim.”

Kirk squinted into the distance, and yes, he did make out a large squarish shape with something largish sticking out of the middle of it. A man? At a desk? What sort of “orientation” did he and Spock have ahead of them?

Wasting no time, Kirk and Spock began walking towards the man at the desk, locking step effortlessly. After a surprisingly long amount of time — or so it felt to Kirk — the man and the desk grew from tiny specks to nearly life-sized. Kirk paused in his steps about twenty yards from the man at the desk.

“Spock—” he muttered under his breath, “Spock, he has a Hitler mustache.”

Spock glanced towards the man before turning back to Kirk. “It appears his mustache is quite short, laterally speaking … perhaps he is a fan of the comedic work of Charlie Chaplin, or Oliver Hardy?”

Kirk gave Spock a withering look and continued on. As they approached the desk, the lean, wiry, dark-haired man with the Hitler mustache looked up from the desk at them, as if just noticing the two figures before him for the first time — and batted his long, purple-tipped false eyelashes at them. He had a small plaque on his desk that read, “Ronald Roland” .

“Well! What can I do for you two boys?” the man enquired, smiling up at them affably.

“Hello. I am Captain James T. Kirk of the *USS Enterprise*, and this is my first officer, Mister Spock. We were sent here by Atmah for, uh, ‘Orientation’ … to Cunting-Coxbury…?”

“Oh yes, Atmah sent me a message about that! But just the two of you? Don’t any more of your men want to experience the charms of Cunting-Coxbury?” Ronald Roland inquired, his smile widening and showing an impressive array of pearly white teeth — and a small rhinestone emblazoned on the corner of one of his front teeth. The rhinestone appeared to wink at Kirk as he asked.

“We, ah, we were chosen by our crew as emissaries.”

“Oh, certainly, I’m sure!” Ronald Roland responded, looking up and down both Kirk and Spock in a way that made Kirk feel a little off — he was used to being the one who looked up and down a body. And yet … something about this place, about how beautiful Spock looked in the clear, pinkish light that came from somewhere behind the metal railings — maybe the setting suns above? … he was hardening, again. He wondered if it was just him or if Spock’s pants

were shrinking too, again — but he dared not hazard a look. Not in front of this guy. He'd be all over the two of them in half-a-bat of a false eyelash.

"Well … no matter — perhaps you'll let the other men know what a fantastic program we have here when you finish," the Lesbian man smiled down to his desk as he talked to them, feeling around in a drawer for something. He pulled out a thermometer and scanned their foreheads, wrote something down on a tablet, nodded, ran some sort of instrument that looked like a tricorder over their chests, nodded again, and pulled something down from the ceiling that looked like a small microphone. He spoke into it, "Two, one Human, one hybrid Human/Vulcan. Clear."

As Ronald Roland released the microphone and it slid back up towards the ceiling, a buzzer rang loudly, echoing down the hall behind them, and a door opened to the left of the man and the desk. "Enjoy," the man smiled graciously to them one last time, as he gestured towards the open door and the darkness that lay beyond.

17. Atmah's World

"Walk with me." Atmah stood, and turned to walk through the gardens. Uhura followed suit, keeping an easy pace with the taller woman as they strolled through the elaborate hedgerows.

"We are a colony founded on the principle that the female orgasm is sacred. It is our highest goal as an intentional community to achieve transcendence through orgasm. The male orgasm had long been used as a tool of oppression towards women and other non-males on our planet of origin — we sought to form a world free of that.

"For this reason, our men are kept in their place, as Security. They live rich and full lives, loving each other freely, and loving us on Men's Days and holidays. When men of Lesbos are of age, if they do not chose to leave the planet or abscond to the wilderness with the other heterosexual men, they may join Security — provided they are properly oriented."

At this point Atmah paused in her speech and came to a stop in front of a juicy philodendron plant. She stroked its leaves and caressed its ripe, swelling fruit.

"What does the Orientation consist of?" Uhura braved a question to her haltingly beautiful, imposing host.

It was as if Atmah didn't hear her — she continued stroking the philodendron absent-mindedly, gazing through Uhura and saying, "We value our male citizens here at Cunting-Coxbury, but we keep them in a safe place for everyone. Orientation ensures that they know how to be receptive, nurturing and collaborative with other men instead of competitive. Our men must take care of themselves, and each other. So we have them to thank for protecting the domes from foreign assault or penetration by heterosexual men — many have tried to invade Cunting-Coxbury, but so far, none have succeeded.

"Within the domes, domestic violence is minimal to non-existent. The same goes for violent crime, terrorism, and assault. Yes, people have disputes here, but we have various methods of

working through them to everyone's satisfaction. Satisfaction is our priority—" and at this point her gaze narrowed right into Uhura's curious upturned eyes "—vaginal satisfaction is the keystone of our entire civilization."

'Uh-huh. My panties are wet,' Uhura thought to herself as she gazed at Atmah with a mix of wonder, confusion, and arousal. Professionalism urged her to stay stoic, but Atmah was very compelling.

"Let me show you our council chambers and university. The council centers are where we hold meetings to discuss issues within or surrounding the domes. Perhaps you have some other non-male crew members who would like to join us? You must be our guests! We do love to entertain."

"I can call down some more crew members over the communicator — but tell me. No male crew members, ever?"

"Unless they are properly oriented, no. And once they are properly oriented, then yes, but only on a Men's Day or a holiday."

"Are there any Men's Days or holidays soon?"

"Yes, there is a Men's day in five days. We will be celebrating the Harvest Moon."

"How long is the celebration?"

"Two full nights. They must return to Security by the first sun's peak on the second day."

Five days of being entertained by a goddess in a lavish queer intentional community focused on celebrating the female orgasm … 'All in a day's work,' Uhura sighed to herself. 'Who would I bestow a fate as harsh as this upon…?' She glanced at Atmah.

"How many crew members should I call?"

"If they are queer and female-identifying or nonbinary, as many as would like to come. The more, the merrier!" Atmah smiled and laughed, her voice sounding like a sexy ray of sunshine.

The lieutenant opened her communicator. "Uhura to *Enterprise*. *Enterprise*, do you read me? Do you read me, *Enterprise*?"

Scotty's voice responded. "Aye, we read ye, Uhura, loud and clear."

"Scotty, the captain and Mister Spock are in some sort of Orientation — I'm in command planet- side."

"Aye, aye, cap'n," Scotty said brightly — Uhura could sense his smile over the comm. They always had a soft spot for each other.

"So Scotty … I seem to be in an unusual situation here. This is an intentional community which restricts male visitors unless they have been properly oriented—"

At this point, Atmah interrupted, leaning in towards the communicator, "But our Orientation Program is open to any open-minded male-identifying person wishing to explore his sexuality."

Uhura resumed speaking. “Uh, yes. So, you heard that. Also, all female-identifying and non-binary crew members are welcome to beam down for a tour of the grounds and a potential shore leave for the next week.”

“Wha’s ‘appening in five days?” Scotty said after a short pause. “And wha’ aboot the men? Do they get a shore leave?”

“Five days from now is their next Men’s Day. Those are the days oriented men are allowed entry into the domes and visit with the citizens within. The men can come down and do the Orientation if they want some sort of leave … but make sure that the men who beam down are feeling … ah … spicy. Otherwise … Scotty, how do you feel about one hundred and fifty hours of orbit?”

“Music to me ears, lass — I’m going to do that warp drive overhaul I’ve been dreaming aboot since we reached orbit. Foour week’s a’ warp nine is noo jooke!”

“Great. I’ll check in when I can.”

“Take ye time,” Scotty chuckled. “It’s not every day we get to Lesbos.”

“Very funny. Uhura out.” She smiled into her communicator as she closed it, and then turned to address Atmah. “More representatives from our ship should be arriving soon.”

“Fantastic! I’ll place some sentries at the point you beamed to, to send them towards the council rooms for a casual reception. But first — care to visit our thermal baths before entering upon our houses of council?” Again, her thousand-yard stare had shifted pointedly into the depths of Uhura’s slightly glittering eyes. ‘This person wants to get me naked, wash me, and fuck me silly,’ Uhura realized. She sighed. The life of a starship communications officer.

“I would be delighted,” she said, smiling as took Atmah’s proffered hand. Uhura suddenly had the feeling that no one was in a hurry to go anywhere — not Scotty, not the rest of the crew aboard ship, and possibly not even Kirk and Spock. ‘It’s not every day we get to Lesbos, indeed.’

18. Within Shadow

The door shut automatically behind Spock and Kirk, and they stood in place, their eyes adjusting to the darkness of the chamber they had just entered. It was another hall-like, long room, though this time paneled with large, dark slabs of something that looked like wood. In each meter wide panel, to their left, there were oval shaped holes cut, sanded, and sealed with oil and time … and use … and, Kirk swore his eyes were playing tricks on him…

“Spock.”

“Captain.”

“Spock. Correct me if I’m wrong. Spock. *T’hy’la*. Are those asses sticking out of some of those holes in the wall? Men’s asses?”

Spock considered the wall for a second, taking a step closer to it. “It appears so, yes, Jim.” “Spock. Spock … this place is so bizarre. Hey, Spock … are you getting hard at all?”

Again, Spock considered this, looked down, looked back up at Kirk in the darkness — a faint orange glow was coming in from the holes in the wall around the asses, but that was all the light in the room. His cock was indeed growing thicker and pressing into his pants — but it was an all-over thing, very, very relaxing. “My body feels very relaxed, and yes, I am getting hard. Are you?”

“Oh, I’ve been hard since back in the first hall. Something about the receptionist — not that I wanted to fuck him, especially, but he was hinting at something I wanted to know more about. He scanned us for disease again as we entered — did you catch that?”

“I did — perhaps our entry was contingent upon our sound sexual health?”

The asses waved a little at them, in a manner Kirk could only describe as beckoning. “Spock.” He was trying to keep his cool, keep his professionalism about this whole Orientation ordeal, he really was … but the Vulcan could sense a quality coming off his lover like tiny bubbles of gas rising in a liquid, similar to the bubbles in the Terran beverage, champagne.

“*T’hy’la* … I sense you are indeed very stimulated—” Spock observed Kirk’s quick, hard glance at one particularly round and fine ass, covered in soft dark hair. He began to imagine the pink, or brown, or black, or green … or blue … wet, warm asshole, glinting in the low light from the room which housed the rest of the bodies attached to these asses, some dark in hue, some light, some soft and fuzzy in the dimness, some smooth and shiny … and yes, he did seem to see glistening light in the center of these asses, as if the holes were open and well-fucked, shining with other mens’ seed. Spock turned back to see Kirk, cock in one hand, licking his other palm for a little more lubrication. At the sight of his lover’s unabashed display, his pants grew uncomfortably tight.

“I think this is part of the Orientation, Spock,” Kirk said, in a low, breathy voice. He was gently but firmly pumping one, then both hands, up and down his cock. “Look—” and Kirk pointed up towards a huge sign carved into the wood-paneled wall, just below the ceiling— “FIRST CHANCE,” it read.

“Logical,” Spock responded, as he began unbuttoning his pants slowly, eyes on Kirk. At this point, Kirk was completely naked — he like to cultivate a reputation for never doing anything half-assed — and walking along the wall the way a commanding officer walks down a line of his charge, except that instead of visually inspecting his men, he ran a smooth hand over the different asses, the different surfaces, textures, qualities … he settled on a firm, mid-toned, large round one, with a glistening deep-toned asshole that was immediately receptive to a finger, a second finger, and in almost no time, his cock.

“Oh, Spock … this one’s sensational,” Kirk called out to his love, marveling at the openness of the ass that ground back into his cock like it wanted to milk every last drop out of him. Spock approached Kirk, clothes still on but cock in hand, standing like some alien monument to truth, beauty, logic … the only logical thing, Spock thought to himself, humanistically, sardonically, was to join Kirk and see what all the fuss was about.

He stepped behind his naked lover, and without warning, lifted him, with Vulcan strength, effortlessly holding Kirk's hips in front of his own, his cock resting below Kirk's, and stroking them both together as Kirk braced himself against the well-worn, well-oiled wooden panel on the wall. Kirk pressed his forearms and chest against the wall, his legs now wrapped around Spock's waist, feet even wrapped at the ankles, his belly supported by this mystery ass he was now fucking. Spock stood behind Kirk and The Ass, stood behind Kirk buried in The Ass, and guided his own tumescent shaft below Kirk's, into The Ass. Through the edges of the hole around The Ass, they could hear the man on the other end groan with pleasure, accompanying himself with the quick slapping noise of appendage rubbing appendage. Kirk and Spock's cocks slithered together, entwined in a fervent mating ritual of snakes, their pleasured groans joining the muffled voice of The Ass in a wet chorus of low groans.

"Spock, Spock!" Jim called out breathlessly.

"*T'hy'la*" Spock responded in a low voice, his eyes almost fully black.

"Spock, I … I…" and he was coming what felt like only moments after Spock had glided in with him. He withdrew with a shudder and turned around to sit atop the man's ass, his legs wrapped around Spock's waist, his arms wrapped around Spock's shoulders, kissing his love, as Spock finished in this man, Kirk's balls resting on the top of his cock, Spock's cock sliding back and forth along Kirk's asshole as he drew it in and out of the proffered ass.

In another minute, Spock was pumping his seed into this overflowing well, a deep cry into the dark of Kirk's ear as he came hard. Kirk's cum, Spock's cum, and who knows who else's fluids mixed in this dark space, in the dusky ass. The quick slapping noise slowed, then stopped, and Kirk and Spock heard a deep grunt issue from the other side of the wall. The room became illuminated as The Ass drew itself away, the light coming from the now-empty hole permitting a better look at their environs.

Yes, it was a long, wood-paneled hall with more asses waiting on the left — save for the one spot recently opened — with the words "FIRST CHANCE" written above. At the end of the hall, directly across from the point of entry, was a heavy wooden door labeled, "SPA." Next to the door was a hook with two dark blue robes hanging from it.

Kirk looked at Spock, regaining his composure and professionalism, smiled a charming smile, and gestured, nude, towards the door. "Shall we continue?"

Spock raised an eyebrow, "Indeed, Captain" and removed the rest of his clothes. The two men put on the long deep blue robes, which had hoods and covered them both completely to the floor, perfectly accommodating their respective heights. Thus cloaked, they opened the door to a warm golden-pink glow, beckoning them in.

19. The Civilization of Cunting-Coxbury

A beautiful sea-shell pinky orange room, high up on the inside of the dome, underneath the curved bubble of glass that formed each hexagon comprising the dome's impenetrable surface

… the chamber lit up by the orange and golden hues of the twin suns setting, one just above the horizon and the other at a 35º azimuth … Uhura rolled over on her bed and dug her smiling face into warm blankets the color of yam flesh. ‘What a world…’ She reminisced about the past few hours.

One minute she was following Atmah from the garden to the hot springs, the next … she was wildly fucking this golden woman with every ounce of energy in her body on the flagstones around a hot pool. Rubbing her entire face in her hole, tongue out, eyes closed, that old the-world-and-its-people-and-reality-are-going-on-all-around-me-and-yet-here-I-am-fucking sort of feeling zapping through her being like a live wire, as she ground her own soaked pussy into the Atmah-being’s face, fast, deep, slow, lazily, languidly, for hours, forever … such a relaxing time by the baths with Atmah. And then, to top it off, bathing!

A bath on the *Enterprise* was unheard of — it was seen as a waste of floor space and resources when sonics were available to everyone, and water showers available on most decks. Self-cleansing was done, but bathing in a tub was only available off-ship. So a bath, particularly in a natural hot spring which just happened to be on this part of the Lesbian terrain within the dome, and required a twenty-five minute barefoot hike to reach from the gardens, was a highly valued experience amongst Uhura and her fellow “spacers,” as Atmah called them.

Bathing with Atmah was interesting. Fucking Atmah was interesting. Talking to Atmah, listening to Atmah, doing *anything* with Atmah — it was all interesting. Sexy, of course, but also very interesting. First off — this began happening while Uhura and Atmah were fucking by the hot pool — Atmah was not actually golden. Beneath the gold dust she covered her body in daily was deep ebony skin, lustrous in the poolside sunlight.

“Gold is plentiful on this planet — just part of our staple composition,” Atmah had languidly informed Uhura earlier that day, as they lounged within one of the hotter of the six pools, between poolside love-making sessions. Uhura had taken note of the other people bathing in the pools — there were some trans women cleaning each other’s hair, a butch woman relaxing in the cold pool, and a couple of nonbinary femmes smoking something fragrant as they dangled their legs in hottest pool—”the lobster pot” . She also had noticed one section of the springs was cordoned off, with women in work coveralls doing masonry work.

Uhura gathered a lot of information about life in Cunting-Coxbury, and on Lesbos, in that lazy poolside conversation with Atmah. She learned about the land outside of Security’s Ring Wall — Atmah alternately referred to it as “the wilderness” and “Outland“—the domain of Lesbos’s small population of rogue heterosexual men. She wondered how Doctor McCoy and Sulu were faring out there, retrieving the shuttle in Outland. Atmah had told her a little about her civilization’s relationship with the men of the wilderness, but it was clear her focus was on those inside the Ring Wall.

“The heterosexual men of the wilderness would like to fuck the women of Cunting-Coxbury,” Atmah had said to her by the pool, “and many of us love fucking men, but we do not trust men who cannot be receptive to other men. Our culture was founded upon one principal — the

sacredness of the female orgasm. There are heterosexual men who may appreciate this, but they will always want something for themselves. And our history showed that the Something they wanted led many of them to subjugate women, enslave women for their sex, rape women, imprison women in their homes, and generally abuse our sex. The female orgasm must be free to wander where she will, without shame, guilt, punishment, or control from an outsider.

“And because this is a planet colonized by very sexual women and queer people, all pursuing orgasm as the highest goal of life, it presents an ideal opportunity for those wishing to take advantage of our charms. To dispel these predatory types, we have our Security force, thus creating jobs and purpose for the men who love us, and each other. There is a role for men here. There is a place for men here. However, if they cannot love another man, we cannot trust them to love us either.”

Though Atmah’s world seemed very focused in purpose, Uhura was surprised to learn about the complexities of the colony’s conflict resolution system and child-rearing practices. It wasn’t until she had had a full briefing that she finally got any information on the whereabouts of Janice Rand.

“Well, Janice … let’s see … she arrived some six years ago.” Atmah had told her. Uhura calculated that to be about two Earth years which was the amount of time Janice had been missing.

“How did she get here?” Uhura had asked.

“She had the coordinates. Her arrival was an unusual one — usually, the people who join the colony have been invited. She, on the other hand, showed up here one day over at the cliffs. Security picked her up briefly and then left her to report back to us — and then, when they went back to find her, she had completely disappeared. We ran sensor scans but turned up no foreign bodies — she had vanished as obscurely as she had arrived. I tapped into her energy, and sent her the coordinates.”

Uhura remembered being very intrigued by Atmah’s telepathic abilities. Apparently the people of Cunting-Coxbury were trained in lucid dreaming, and the ability to affect the dreams of others. Atmah had watched the body camera footage from the Security officers who had interacted with Janice, read her energetic code, and tapped into her dreams, like a telephone operator placing a call. “The dream sphere of all dreaming beings is very fluid — it’s quite easy to travel that river if you know the way in. I, personally, feel as if I’m at headwaters a lot of the time,” Atmah had informed Uhura, as she exited the bath and dried herself off with a long, curved bone.

‘So that explains the dreams Janice wrote about,’ the lieutenant thought, as she watched the first sun of Lesbos slip below the horizon from her warm amber chamber in the dome. ‘This is the woman who beckoned her to “come”’.

But why would she tempt away Janice Rand? It was still over four days until she could even see Janice and ask her — apparently, she was bonded with a woman named Harriet, who acted as Cunting-Coxbury’s prime liaison with Security. At this point, Janice and Harriet were on the edge of the wilderness, training some of the heads of Security in newfound survival

techniques based upon new technologies Janice learned from her subspace radio communications. As Atmah had put it, “the boys” loved learning from Janice and wouldn’t let her go until the training was complete. ‘Nothing to do but suffer here for a few more days,’ Uhura rolled over on the bed, looking out through the rounded ceiling of the room at the darkening sky, now lit by only one sun.

After their bath, Atmah had led Uhura to the room in which she was now relaxing — her room for the upcoming days, and her authorized point of entry for transport. Although those of Cunting-Coxbury had harnessed the power of localized singularity and could teleport to and from wherever they pleased, they preferred to enter and exit via what Atmah called their “proper spaces.” The room was on the side of the inside of the biggest dome, like a bubble within a bubble, a few stories above ground level, amongst other similar rooms. Looking out from the hallway outside her room, Uhura had seen a very large atrium, which was part conservatory, part workspace, part park, part studio.

“This is the top. I figured you’d like a good view,” Atmah had said, as she showed Uhura her room. Solid logic, Uhura thought — the view was indeed spectacular, whichever way she looked.

A bell chimed — a doorbell?

“Come in!” Uhura called out, realizing this must be Tanghi, the colleague Atmah had told her to contact if she needed anything.

A small, honey-skinned femme person with short, curly umber hair stood at the panel. As it faded fully away, Uhura noticed she had full lips, freckles, green eyes, and a broad nose.

“Hi! I’m Atmah’s cohort, Tanghi. I figured I’d come by to meet you, see if you needed anything from me,” the small, muscular woman said.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Communications Officer Nyota Uhura of the Federation starship *USS Enterprise*.”

“Oh wow, communications officer? I bet you know tons of languages. Have you been all over the place?”

“I’m in year three of a five-year exploratory mission, so I have seen a lot of planets, and tried my hand at a lot of tongues,” Uhura responded, suddenly realizing with a small smile how that last statement could be construed.

“Well…” Tanghi looked her clearly in the eyes as she said, “just let me know if you need anything … or another tongue. You can call me on frequency 66679.” She gestured to a panel by the opening to the room. And, like Atmah, she winked on her way out the door.

‘Suffering!’ Uhura laughed into the pillow as the panel faded opaque. A juicy 145-or-so hours awaited.

20. World's Hardest Orientation

Kirk and Spock crossed the threshold from darkness into light as they entered the next room — which was, indeed, a spa. The room was oval-shaped, and at the end of its length across from them was another door, labeled "SHOWERS". It dawned on Kirk that he needed a shower, and he was sure that Spock felt the same way, so he turned to his lover to suggest it when he noticed there were also showers in this room, right next to the door from which they entered. There were also two Human men, both smoothly muscular and wearing incredibly short shorts, and nothing else. The room felt about eighty-five degrees Fahrenheit.

//Eighty-five point six degrees to be precise// Spock thought, and Kirk heard, in a rare moment of catching Spock's mental transmissions to him while they were not touching. This was good, Kirk thought, 'now we can communicate without these two knowing.'

//It depends// answered Spock //because they may be telepathic as well.//

//Ah// thought Kirk. //Care to join me in the shower?//

Spock looked at him and nodded, and the two hung their robes on pegs to the right as the two men in shorts sat on the edges of what appeared to be massage tables, talking quietly to each other.

Kirk and Spock stepped into the showers, each man delighted when he turned on the faucet and was immediately sprayed with fine mists of warm water. Spock adjusted his a little higher, thinking to Kirk //These men are not reading our thoughts.//

//Why do you say?//

//I've been reaching out using multiple methods of telepathic communication without any avail. Either they can't sense me, or they have an incredible capacity for shielding, in which case they would be using more of their mental faculties to focus on keeping me from sensing them than on catching what I'm sending to them.//

//Huh// Kirk thought. //My turn to say, "Fascinating."//

The men soaped each other. After the previous room, there was a tacit agreement between the Human and the Vulcan that during this Orientation, anything goes. Some thoughts didn't need to be thought "aloud" to be understood between them. Kirk luxuriated in the feeling of Spock's strong hands smoothing soap over his back, his ass, his chest, his shoulders — he felt himself hardening again; a surprise, after such a big release in the previous room. But there was something about this place, something about these men, this Orientation … everything was relaxing, laid-back, sexy. He looked into Spock's eyes, then down to his own thickening cock, then back to Spock's darkening eyes, then down to Spock's cock, which he also saw filling and flushing to a deeper green.

//You too?//

//Affirmative. The quality of this planet is very open, flowing, warm, and aphrodisiac. I sense a slightly higher degree of oxygen in the air here, in the rooms of this Orientation center, than I do outdoors. This may be what they do with some of the oxygen they collect in the domes.//

//They collect oxygen in the domes? How do you know that?//

//Atmah told me telepathically.//

//Since when did you and Atmah begin communicating telepathically? You didn't tell me about that!//

//You didn't ask. She's been in touch with me since we arrived, checking in approximately every thirty-two point six minutes on our progress. She has checked in now twice.//

//And she told you about the domes?//

//I asked.//

//What else did you ask her?//

//I asked why there are only male energies here. She responded that the men are guards and are banned from the domes except on holidays, as well as on what she called "Men's Days".//

//"Men's days" ? So that explains why there are no men in the domes — I suppose today was not a "men's day"?//

//No, Jim, and that is why we are here. No male visitor can enter Cunting-Coxbury unless he has been oriented, and after that, only on holidays and "Men's Days" .//

"You don't say," Kirk said aloud, forgetting their attendant muscle men by the massage tables. Spock glanced towards the men, Kirk nodded, and they turned off the showers and dried off with long bones. 'Like a horse's rib bone,' Kirk thought.

//Or that of a sehlat// Spock responded, Kirk flashing him an amused smile as they walked towards the men at the massage tables.

One of the men greeted them. "I'm Cy — this is Olaf. Anything we should know about?" he said invitingly.

"Uhhh," Kirk responded, "We, uh, are … having a lovely time…?"

"No, I mean, any injuries? Any places we should avoid, or focus on?"

"Oh yes! Uh, upper trapezius, both sides, rhomboids, deltoids, calves, *gluteus medius*, plantar fasciae — oh, and the *quadratus lumborum*. And for him," Kirk gestured at Spock, "anything and everything."

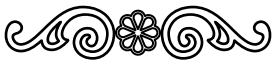
"Excuse me, but I would also like explicit focus on my psoas and oblique muscles," Spock interjected, lying face up on the table before him at the prompting of Olaf, his massage therapist. Kirk's therapist, Cy, placed him face down. And with no other audible conversation, the men got to work.

//I'm waiting for the catch, concerning this "Orientation"// Kirk thought to Spock, as he was deliciously pounded into the table by the therapist's elbows and knees.

//My thoughts precisely. They seem to bear no ill intent. Perhaps this is a matter of testing how open-minded we are.//

//Or how gay we are.// Kirk smiled into the face rest.

At this, the two men surrendered to the rubbing, kneading, pounding, and pulling of the flesh, melting into their respective tables and mental landscapes.



After what felt like about an hour to Kirk and fifty-nine point three minutes to Spock, the men paused in their ministrations. “Ahem. Excuse me, sirs.”

‘He said “ahem,” ‘ thought Kirk.

//I caught that too, Jim// thought Spock, back at him.

The man on Kirk, Cy, a toffee-skinned guy with rich brown eyes and very strong hands, cleared his throat again. Kirk was still face-down — Cy had spent about twenty minutes on a spot on his left upper trapezius — the place he carried his responsibilities, like a heavy bag upon his shoulder — and he felt him move his hips closer to Kirk’s upturned palm.

“Sir, we do offer happy endings here.”

“I figured,” grunted Kirk into the table. He felt his hardening cock begin to press into the heated cushion of the massage table. ‘And what’s more,’ thought Kirk, aware that Spock was listening, //I can feel the tension around my ass just dissolve. I’m opening up, Spock.//

//I sense it, Jim// replied Spock in thought. //And … I mirror it.//

Kirk smiled into the face rest, and suddenly felt something warm and pulsating and just slightly damp in his upturned hand.

“Sirs, would you be interested?”

Kirk didn’t move his hand. //Spock!//

//Me too, Jim.//

//A thick cock in your hand? Dripping?//

//Dripping may be an exaggeration, but slightly moist would suffice in describing the cock in my hand.//

//Spock — would you be…//

//Absolutely affirmative.//

“Yes,” Kirk groaned into the table, opening the floodgates. //Spock … he’s massaging my ass…//

//Yes, Jim. Mine is too.//

//Spock! Spock. Spock … he’s sliding a finger into my ass. It feels extraordinary!//

//And that is where we differ, my *t'hy'la*. Mine is sliding his cock up and down between my gluteus maximus muscles.//

Kirk arched his tail up towards a licking and probing tongue and set of fingers. The massage therapist's other hand was lubricating his own dark walnut, glistening cock with the massage oil. As Kirk felt his ass lifting into Cy's ministrations, he propped himself up on his forearms to look over at Spock.

Spock was on his knees, ass in the air, chest on the table, with his head turned to face Kirk. An intense Nordic giant stood behind him — Olaf was a large, tall blond man with a broken nose and prominent veins in his calves. He was stroking his cock in the cleft of Spock's ass, now shining with massage oil.

//Spock!// Kirk made eye contact.

//Jim.//

//Spock, mine's rubbing the head of his cock against my ass … he's … he's putting the tip in the hole and taking it out again … he's … he's … Spock…//

//Jim … enjoy it, savor it…//

//Spock … Spock, he's stroking my cock … I'm throbbing … Spock!//

//Take it, Jim.//

Kirk thrust back on the cock that was just gently dipping its tip in him, and he took in a quarter of it, and out. A half, and out, two-thirds, out, three-quarters, out, the whole thing … As Cy worked his ass open, Kirk watched Spock, who naturally engulfed Olaf's whole cock with his ass in one smooth slide. 'Never have I seen a man top from the bottom the way Spock can. He's a born top, and he knows it,' Kirk thought, his eyes shining as he watched his love writhing and bucking his hips in pleasure, back and forth along the man's thick pink-and-cream cock.

//I do know it … but as you know, there are many dimensions to my sexuality.//

//Yes!!!// Kirk gasped, feeling the body worker maneuver his cock in and out of him at a slowly increasing tempo, pressing and pushing into Kirk's prostate gland as he held Kirk's low back with one hand and pumped Kirk's cock with the other.

//Spock…//

//*T'hy'la.*//

//Spock, Spock … you're so fucking hot … he's so fucking hot … Spock…//

//*T'hy'la.*//

//Spock, I love you. I love this…//

//As I do thee.//

Kirk was coming — yes, this time Kirk came first. His man couldn't hold himself against the powerful waves of the contracting muscles ringing Kirk's anus, and was coming a few moments later, still massaging oil into Kirk's more-slowly-throbbing, loosening cock, mixing it

with Kirk's come. Kirk laughed, and Cy reached around him to hug him and kiss him, saying, "thank you."

"Thank you," replied Kirk softly. "That was possibly my favorite massage not given by him," and he gestured with his eyes over to Spock, who was ramming his hips violently back against the blond's own pounding pelvis. It was like watching fire and iron joining, like flint and steel.

'One of the more beautiful sights I've seen today,' Kirk mused, as he sat on the table, watching, mesmerized, one knee bent up under his shoulder, his upper arm resting casually upon it. Cy stood behind the table watching with him for a moment.

"Olaf is really something, isn't he," he murmured down to Kirk.

"Stunning," Kirk responded, and he meant it. Though much of his adult sexual experience was with female-identified or gender-neutral entities, he had always admired male bodies — even before he and Spock collided.

Like a factory whistle sounding for shift change, Olaf was crying out, coming, diving and dipping and drilling his hips into Spock. Spock felt the man's cock throbbing within him, felt Olaf's hand pumping his cock, sliding his fingers between the twin ridges dexterously. Calling a sound from deep within his core, Spock released his hold on his orgasm, filling the room with his rich baritone howl. Olaf massaged Spock's ass with one hand as he pumped the come out of him with the other, slowing his thrusts as Spock hips rolled themselves to stillness and he sat back into child's pose. Olaf withdrew, and squatted down to look into Spock's eyes. "Sank you," he said, looking deeply into the void-dark depths of Spock's intense gaze.

"The pleasure was all mine," Spock responded gallantly.

Kirk smiled at the scene, absently stroking his surprisingly-still-thick cock. 'Wild,' he thought, 'it's taking a while to go down.'

Spock broke his gaze with Olaf and shot a look into Kirk's eyes. He didn't even have to send anything telepathically — the moment he locked eyes with Kirk, the captain was standing, walking over to him, pulling, stroking, tugging his slick cock as he reached Spock's table.

//May I// he looked into Spock's eyes, having his turn in Spock's immeasurable depths.

//It would be my honor.//

//And my pleasure.// Kirk entered him like a cliff diver slicing into a lagoon, nary a ripple formed in the process of complete immersion. Spock was open. Spock was always open. Even when he was uptight, he was open. 'The depths of this man.'

//The reaches of this one.//

'Vulcans have no refractory period when sufficiently stimulated…' Kirk mused. //Spock?//

//*T'hy'la.*//

//Spock, are you hard again?// Jim thought, pumping away into him as if he hadn't just experienced a deep orgasm just minutes earlier. The massage therapists smiled, glancing up every now and then from their work of cleaning Kirk's now-vacant massage table. "I luff when zey get haw-nie," Olaf said in a thick Germanic accent to his colleague.

Kirk put his hands on either side of Spock's hips, kneeling on the table, and nudged him to flip over. Kirk pulled forward into a wide legged squat, knees down, toes curled beneath him, Spock's ass ringing his cock. Spock's re-hardened cock bounced thick and green and veiny right below his face. Smiling warmly, Kirk lifted Spock's hips and slid some folded up blankets on the table underneath him before continuing to pile himself into his ass, both hands now free to pump Spock's hot, throbbing handle.

"Just wait'll they get to the showers," Cy murmured to Olaf, as the two men finished cleaning up Kirk's table and putting their oils and towels away. As they left the room, Kirk was crying out, coming, his voice echoing down the hall past the open door, Spock's baritone again joining in as the door swung shut, sealing the container of their pleasure.

21. Outland

"Of course, I'm pissed I'm not goin' in there with them — from what I understand, those domes are crammed with beautiful, powerful women. And queers." Doctor McCoy proclaimed, for perhaps the third time, as he and Sulu kicked up dust on their walk back to the shuttle.

"Did you get a load of those Security guys?" Sulu asked. "They were all over each other!"

"I guess they have different policies concerning fraternization," McCoy responded. "Looked like they were having a pretty good time at their jobs."

"Yeah, but it also looked like they were pretty good at their jobs," Sulu responded. "I mean, does this place ever get truly penetrated by attackers?"

"Who knows. Things seemed pretty peaceful by those domes — no evidence that I saw of attack. Maybe those guys in Security always get a hold of anyone fixing to bust the gates."

"I wonder what it's like in the domes. D'you think we can get in at some point?"

"I hope so. I'd love to get a peek of what goes on in there. Hey, looks like we're coming up on the wall again."

Sulu looked up from the trail they followed in the fading daylight to see the Ring Wall approaching them, about thirty meters away. In no time they reached it, and were waved through by three sleepy guards, piled against each other, seated on a bench. Beyond lay the cliffs, leading to foothills — and somewhere in there, the shuttle.

The two men approached the darkening cliffs, and McCoy turned on the flashlight function on his phaser. "Better safe than sorry. You don't want a snakebite."

As they climbed and the darkness increased, Sulu turned on his light as well. "D'you hear that, Doctor McCoy?" he asked.

"Wait a sec—" McCoy paused in his tracks, holding his hand up to stop Sulu. They listened, hearing in the far distance the dull thud of wood striking metal. Looking at each other, the two men picked up their pace, scrambling up the cliff. Climbing up onto a large, flat embankment on the hillside, they looked up towards the shuttle, now visible in the increasing starlight. Large

figures were climbing around on the shuttle, beating it with long poles, thick logs, and long femur bones, trying to bust and prise it open at any seam.

“We’re gonna have to sneak up on them,” McCoy said under his voice to Sulu, as the two split up their approach towards the shuttle, crouching down and taking strategic positions in the undergrowth. Sulu began firing, stunning the assailants within his range, and the doctor followed suit. Before too long, four of the figures on Sulu’s side were prone on the ground, stunned and no longer a threat. Sulu approached the shuttle to see Doctor McCoy waiting there, with three stunned beings laying around his feet. The shuttle appeared to have withstood the assault stoically, and seemed mostly unmolested.

“Should we wait for them to come to and talk to them?”

“This is a reconnaissance mission and these guys are outcasts from a colony. This ain’t first contact and we don’t owe them shit. Let’s get the hell outta here,” McCoy responded, stepping over one of the prone figures to key in the entry code for the shuttle. “Maybe they’ve got a lot of good, interesting stuff to tell us about this place, but frankly, I don’t wanna stick around to find out.” The shuttle door slid open, and McCoy and Sulu entered.

“How long has it been since we left the others?” Sulu asked. “Feels like it’s been a few hours at least.”

“Yeah, it’s been about four, four and a half. We’re supposed to stick around in the area for another two hours, according to the captain. My vote is we drive around and get to know the terrain here a little bit better, and if bands of what-look-to-be-Human males start attacking the shuttle again, we pull her up about six hundred meters. How does that sound? Lots of energy use, I know, but she got a lot of power today from those two suns.”

“Sounds legit to me,” Sulu smiled, and the two drove away from the stunned Human figures, lying comfortably amongst the mosses and grasses of the cliffside.

22. Showers

Spock and Kirk lay together, spooned close upon the massage table, Kirk dozing, drifting in and out of sleep, hugging Spock close to him. Spock slowed the rate of his breathing, his heart, his metabolic functions, and mentally processed the past few hours.

In his telepathic check-ins with Atmah, Spock had learned that Janice Rand was on Lesbos, within the Ring Wall of Cunting-Coxbury, but colony regulations decreed that they could not enter the domes until the next Men’s Day to retrieve her. Thankfully, that was in four point five six days, so they would not have to wait too long … Kirk grunted and shook violently for zero point two seconds. A falling dream, Spock sensed.

Janice Rand. Spock had never connected deeply with Janice, but then again, neither had Kirk. The difference was that Kirk wished to connect with Janice, wanted Janice, lusted for Janice, and Spock … Spock could consider calling her a friend, but his eyes were mostly on male-presenting and gender-neutral entities. Occasionally he found himself attracted to very sturdy,

powerful, healthy women with strong hands, and he sensed Janice was hard-working and self-preserving — but he also sensed Janice's pain, and that pain was too much work for him to manage energetically to want to become intimate with her. So he had simply never thought of Janice sexually — it was not logical.

'But here we are,' Spock mused, 'being tested to see how gay we are. Granted, I find these tests highly pleasurable and I always find enjoyment in seeing Jim pleasured, but I question what privileges we are allowed on this man-suspicious planet once we have been properly oriented.'

Spock understood that, as a supposedly two hundred year old Earth colony, Cunting-Coxbury was somewhat of a time-capsule of the Earth two hundred years prior — an Earth that was still very warlike, still a global patriarchy, still very xenophobic. The original colonists of L35B05, who went on to establish Cunting-Coxbury and its memorable domed landscape, were keen to escape a world that they did not feel suited their way of life. Earth legend had it that they wanted to establish a space colony completely devoid of cis-gendered heterosexual men — those they deemed responsible for Earth's global patriarchy and its myriad of problems — but as Spock understood, those labels were flexible. And how could one guarantee that future generations of colonists were not going to be cis-gender, heterosexual Humans — or that the non-men of Cunting-Coxbury would never be despotic or tyrannical?

'There is always something suspect about exclusionary environments,' Spock thought to himself as Kirk dozed on. He glanced towards the door to the next room, which was labeled "Showers". 'In-fighting is a traditionally Human trait, and quite difficult for even an intentional community to avoid. The Human capacity for egotism is not a force to be ignored.'

Kirk stirred, awake and well-rested as quickly as he had fallen asleep. Spock continued to hold him wordlessly.

"How long was I out?"

"Twenty-six point six three minutes."

"Wild, it feels like I fell asleep just a minute ago. But I did have a dream that I was running in water."

"Did you get anywhere?"

"No." Kirk smiled and stretched his length against Spock. "I supposed we're expected to shower now. How much do you wanna bet there are hands coming out of the walls that jerk you off with soap?"

"That sounds mildly irritating."

"Aw, c'mon Spock — you know they've got something sexy in mind for us … I hope." The two men re-robed and Spock pushed the door marked, "Showers" , holding it open for Kirk.

Kirk beheld a large, round room, high-ceilinged and glass-domed, and lit by the diminishing light of the twin sunsets, filtering down to a light green-tiled floor. The steamy chamber was ringed with showers and round porcelain tubs of various capacities. There were men scattered

throughout the room, some showering, some bathing, some bathing each other, some jerking each other off in the showers…

At the center of the showering room, on a platform, right below the dome, was a curious sculpture. It was almost two meters high, and it appeared to portray a small group of cherubs hefting a enema bottle joyfully on their shoulders, all in shining bronze.

“Wait a sec…” Kirk turned to Spock. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“In all fairness, Captain, they do seem to take their enemas quite seriously,” Spock responded. “This appears to be an Earth relic of the early twenty-first century — I think I’ve seen this piece before. It was from an ancient Russian spa in the town Zheleznovodsk.”

“How do you know so much about ancient Russian enema sculptures?”

“Mister Chekov is full of fascinating accounts of his homeland.”

Out of nowhere came an impish-looking redheaded Andorian man, lean and wiry with muscle. His teeth were beautiful and his eyes sharp green, and there were dark blue freckles all over his shoulders and back. Like everyone else in the room, he was naked. “Need someone to show you how the showers work?” He winked confidently at both robed men.

Spock glanced at Kirk. “I think we can manage,” Kirk responded, interpreting Spock’s glance as a rejection of the man’s advances.

The man smiled genuinely and said, “Just let me know if you need any assistance — I’m Nick, the shower master.” He turned away from them, and walked off towards three other men at a far shower. Two of the three men were washing the third, and Nick stepped right up in front of the bathing man and began lathering his stiffening staff with soap, jerking him off. Kirk looked back from the scene towards Spock, remarking, “More opportunity awaits, I s’pose.”

“Indeed.”

“Tell me, Spock,” Kirk began, as he turned on a nearby empty shower and stepped into its warm mist gratefully, “was the redheaded Andorian not your type?”

“Was he yours?”

“You know I don’t have a type! But seriously … not interested? Look at how he grips that man’s cock — so firm, yet so … tender.”

“I do perceive he is a skillful manipulator of sexual organs. He is indeed beautiful, a true object

of rare beauty, but I want to observe how these men deal with sexual rejection — can they accept ‘no’ for an answer and still be the gracious hosts they appear to have been, up to now? I wonder if they are trying to get something from us — so I wish to examine their ability to respect boundaries as expressed through sexual rejection.”

“You mean, you’re trying to see if these guys are rape-y?”

“Precisely.”

“I get it. I guess we’re used to a lot of male-dominated cultures where the men use sex, gender, and sexuality as a means of control … sort of like back on Earth, especially in the old

days and Vulcan's male-dominated society as well. I imagine there are some men there who can't take no for an answer."

"As you know, Vulcans are very private about all matters pertaining to sexuality. Polygyny and polyandry are so engrained in our culture that no one considers those arrangements to be scandalous or unusual. Homosexuality is tolerated, and in some spheres encouraged, but it is rarely discussed. Rape or sexual coercion of any sort is not tolerated … but, again, it is scarcely discussed. My impression is that rape is only possible for a Vulcan in *pon farr* — but again, reports of that are rare. But Earthlings have a terrible reputation for rape, especially in prisons."

"Do you believe we're in a prison of sorts?" asked Kirk. Having finished lathering his whole body, he joined Spock in washing his, sliding the soap up and down his back and between his cheeks.

"Not exactly. I think we may be amongst the males who are permitted to visit the domes on Men's Days — I believe Atmah called them Security."

"And in this all-male environment, that Andorian guy knows how to take 'no' for an answer gracefully. He's not hounding us, nor guilting us. No hard feelings — except for that guy he's jerking off. So what sort of security force do you think this is?"

"I can't truly say. You may agree it reminds one of the ancient Roman or Greek empires from Earth's history, or different tribes of pre-Surak Vulcan. These men are employed as security to guard these domes from, as you call them, 'rape-y men' and other intruders, yet it appears they are fully encouraged to love each other as part of their position. This is indeed a very unusual, though not unprecedented, arrangement." Spock stepped back under the shower's delicate spray and washed his face, the water plastering his hair to his head like that of a newborn baby. He stepped out of the mist, refreshed, reborn, his body washed clean of soap.

Kirk felt himself thickening as he watched his lover dry himself. Spock was watching the group of four in the corner — the redheaded Andorian man was now getting his dick sucked by the man he had just been jerking off with soap. The other two men had disappeared through a door at the end of the room, marked "LOUNGE" .

"So…" Kirk asked, "would you actually fuck that guy?"

"You refer to the Andorian man receiving fellatio?"

"Yes — in theory. I know he's busy right now."

"Oh yes. Affirmative, under the conditions of energetic compatibility between him and I."

"Interesting. Do you think they all take rejection as well as he did?"

"Difficult to ascertain. But it appears this community approaches male sexuality very uniquely."

As the two men watched the couple in the corner, another man, semi-erect and covered in soft brown hair, pushed the swinging door which read "LOUNGE" open and strode through, affording Spock and Kirk a glance at what lay beyond. From their perspective it looked like a huge knot of arms and legs surrounded by men jerking themselves or others off, some draped

upon what looked like plush stadium seating edging the room, laying back and receiving oral sex … and then the door swung shut, erasing an extremely stimulating scene.

Kirk glanced at Spock — he was again engorged, as well. Kirk glanced at his own well-fucked cock — was there something in the air, or in the water? How was he hardening after busting three nuts?

“I guess there’s only one way to know for sure, Spock, if this culture has space for rape-y patriarchal behavior … let’s see how these boys play.”

As the men strode together towards the door at the end of the room full of showering, singing men — ‘Singing? Maybe the ones with mouths around their cocks instead of vice versa,’ Kirk thought — their cocks floating side to side with each step, each footfall drawing the bowstring of their anticipation back even tighter. //Let’s see how they orgy// thought Kirk.

//Affirmative.//

23. The Lounge

Four eyes — two Vulcan and two Earthling — entered the Lounge, followed by two minds, two bodies, and two subjective experiences of what lay before them in this chamber. The room was indeed arrayed like a stadium, but softer-edged. There was seating extending all the way to the vaulted ceiling of this vast, underground room. On the floor of the chamber were many well-worn but smoothly ergonomic … ‘what would you even call those things?’ thought Kirk. ‘Little chairs with holes in them? Wedges? Fucking-stumps?’

And of course, there were naked men everywhere, sprawled all over these lumps and pieces of furniture, using them for the purpose of more creative and intricate fucking positions. Case in point — Kirk gazed into the center of the room to see stump-sized cushions coming up from the floor, with men leaning over them getting fucked — and possibly sucked as well, if there was a hole in the stump.

“I guess this is what Security does in their off-hours?” Kirk wondered aloud to his lover.

“Spock, I have a feeling this may be the last phase of our Orientation,” he mused. “I don’t know about you, but … I’ve somehow got more in me.”

“You know we Vulcans have no refractory period after orgasm,” Spock responded matter-of-factly. “That being said, Jim … I’d like to watch you for a while.”

Kirk turned and looked into his love’s eyes, tearing his gaze away from the tangles of men in the chamber. He read his expression as only a lover of a Vulcan with a few years of experience can do — he touched Spock’s hand and allowed a wave of thought and feeling to wash over him.

//Please, I want to see you pleasured…//

//But this is all so new for you! I’ve been to gay orgies before — it’s been a long time since my Starfleet Academy days, I’ll grant you — wouldn’t you like me to keep you company?//

//I believe I can handle myself sufficiently// Spock gave him a loving, pointed look. //Go on. I will keep an eye on you, and join in if I feel it necessary.//

Kirk smiled up at him and released his hand — telepathy was so much easier when they were touching. Yes, they were cultivating something, some means of communication, even without touch, but the flow was much clearer when touching.

“Well … when in Rome,” Kirk said, turning back towards the tangles of limbs and cocks before him. Most of the men appeared to be fairly engaged with each other, dipping in and out of each other’s bodies randomly. ‘STDs must not be a huge issue on this planet,’ Kirk mused to himself. He took a few steps forward into the room, and saw Spock take a seat in the dark edge of the room, on the plush stadium seating.

The scientist in Spock needed to observe, needed to watch the energy of this place. Spock was pretty sure Kirk would be safe — he certainly wouldn’t get any diseases, as Atmah had informed him telepathically that Ronald Roland at the front desk had reported them both disease-free. In addition … Spock had always been a bit of a voyeur. He believed he and Kirk would not be so compatible as friends and lovers if it weren’t for his voyeuristic and clinically observational tendencies, and Kirk’s ebullient, exhibitionistic qualities. A soft stadium for men to fuck in? This was Kirk-Observational gold. Spock opened his robe, gently massaging his hard cock with its natural lubricant and watching his lover in the pit. Watching his Human.

His focus shifted briefly from Kirk to the scene already in action on the floor — the score of men down there were like a whole swarm of bees, pollinating … each other. “Fascinating…” Spock murmured, as he gazed back at Kirk, who was heading for a padded sawhorse next to the throng of men at another one, fucking each other silly.

‘When in Rome…’ Spock could hear Kirk’s voice still saying it. He looked down — his lover was talking to a big, muscular man with a beard, full cheeks, and a luxurious belly. Thick lips surrounded by soft hair … within moments, Kirk was leaning back over the sawhorse as the man kneeled on a cushion, sucking his dick.

‘He’s putting on a show for me,’ Spock thought, as his fingers slowly but firmly massaged between the ridges of his cock, every now and then taking breaks to stroke the shaft.

Another man had approached Kirk, this one long, dark-skinned, and lean, with a thick, long, dark cock with a pink tip. It curved up as he reached Kirk, who winked, nodded, and was soon taking as much of this thick, extravagant curve into his mouth as possible, his head tilted back over the edge of the sawhorse. After a moment, he flipped around, the two men waiting patiently as Kirk found his comfort. He carefully placed his cock through a hole on the sawhorse, and leaned down to hug the cushioning, his ass prone and offered. The long lean man with the dark and pink cock came around behind him and began eating his ass, while the large and thick man squatted beneath the sawhorse, still sucking Kirk’s cock while stroking his own.

Another man approached Kirk — Spock saw Kirk look the man in the eye, then at his cock, which was firm, very long, wide at the base but narrow at the tip, and thick with foreskin. It reminded Spock of the horn of the rhinoceros, a long-extinct Earth creature. Kirk looked that

man in the eye again, blessed him with a nod and a smile, and now had one cock in his mouth, one tongue in his ass, and one mouth on his cock. Spock graced his fingertips along his shaft, watching, luxuriating … 'how many more is he going to engage?' Spock wondered. He began to be aware of the men around him, all seated, watching, stroking, some being fucked, some being ridden. Every now and then he'd see a woman, maybe stroking her own cock or being sucked or fucking one of the men's asses, or at the epicenter of a big twist of men, pushing, pounding, loving, giving.

Some commotion — the man fucking Kirk's ass was coming, deep in Kirk's ass. Kirk looked up at Spock, face red and mouth stuffed full of cock, veins in his neck and forehead throbbing, and nodded and winked twice — his code for 'it's safe' between them. Spock knew it was — but he was touched by Kirk's gesture. Consideration was one of Spock's favorite Human qualities.

As the lean, dark man shook the rest of his orgasm into Kirk's shining asshole, the man with the rhinoceros-horn-shaped dick looked down at Kirk, who had pulled him out and was saying something. It appeared to be an invitation, and soon Rhinoceros Horn was fucking Kirk's ass. Another two men approached them — one had a cock small and up-curved like a banana, and the other's comfortably-sized shaft flung out to the left. He saw Kirk nod, and then somehow widen his mouth around both cocks. Spock could see the veins in the cocks through Kirk's taut cheeks — this man had four men on him, was handling them like a champion of any arena — and he was in control. This whole time. Everything Spock watched Kirk do was invited by Kirk. And Kirk was checking in on him. This Human was doing everything. 'It's true what they say about Humans — they can be verily multi-dimensional,' Spock thought, as he watched Rhinoceros Horn explode and Banana and the Left-Favorer make their way towards his ass, taking turns sliding their cocks in and out of the glistening hole…

Spock was going nuts. He wasn't sure how much longer he could watch his lover's hole get fucked so deeply before diving in for a taste of it himself. It was true, everything they say about Vulcan cocks — that they self-lubricate, that they have two ridges on the glans, that Vulcans have no refractory period — and Spock had noticed a growing crowd of curious men, jerking their own cocks and sitting all around him, eager to experience an alien sexuality.

"Is he yours?" one of them asked, catching Spock's eye as he jerked his own cock nonchalantly. "He is my lover," Spock responded. "But he is free to roam."

He looked back at Kirk, drawing his attention to a new development — another man had approached, this one muscular and tanned, with long black braided hair and a pearlescent mauve shining cock, curving down. The two men fucking Kirk had managed to find a way to do it together, hip to hip, and the man below who had been sucking him was now under him, supported by a stump-cushion and rubbing his ass up and down the shaft of Kirk's cock. With the assistance of another man's hands, Kirk's cock was sheathed in no time.

Spock's head was spinning. This was the first time he'd seen Kirk like this — sure, they'd had threesomes and occasional foursomes, and they even had a few friends they played with regularly on the ship, but these were the most people he had seen Kirk engaged with sexually,

ever. It was forcefully stimulating. His cock was burning, throbbing, aching, and hungry wolf eyes were all around him, eyeing this exotic Vulcan treat pleasuring himself amongst them…

Spock stood and strode forth into the arena, tearing his robe from him as he approached the tangle of arms, legs, and cocks around Kirk. He pulled the men away from Kirk's ass as if wiping a table clean, and lifted Kirk's torso like he was a bag of laundry, to lay him on his back. Kirk looked up at all the men around him, stroking their cocks, and then at Spock, with grateful, receptive eyes. Spock drew Kirk's legs up to his shoulders, looking down at his face, and smiling and winking twice — 'it's safe'.

He pressed his electric, throbbing, relentless erection into Kirk's completely unresistant asshole, vibrating with electricity itself. His prostate was humming with pleasure, and the feel of Spock's cock sliding freely within him after all that preparation from others was enough — Spock reached down and stroked him, as the men drew closer around them, pumping their own cocks, some popping their cocks in Kirk's mouth from time to time, some dragging their cocks along Kirk's face and torso, leaving shining slug-trails of precome, all the while Kirk and Spock's eyes are locked, their bodies humping, throbbing, fucking, pounding, grinding…

Friction led to clasping led to release. Spock was overflowing as if drawn into the vacuum of Kirk, as Kirk's cock wept his own release. This may have been Spock's first orgy, 'but it certainly wasn't his first rodeo,' Kirk thought, again in awe of his lover's control over his orgasm.

"Spock—" Kirk leaned up on his forearms, his own come and some from others glistening on his stomach. "Spock, that was beautiful," he said, pulling his man's neck down to kiss his lips.

The silence of their kiss was broken by the hushed, awed whisperings of the men around them — "Did you see that?" "The off-worlders are lovers!" "I want him to do me next!" "No, me, me, I'm ready!" "He's not leaving till he does me! "Hey, I heard Vulcans have no refractory period!"

Kirk broke his kiss with Spock, and Spock pulled out from him gracefully, coming to sit next to him on the sawhorse.

"Where did you guys come from?" the man with the banana cock asked, his arm around Left-Favorer's shoulders — the two men appeared to be inseparable.

"We are from the Federation starship *USS Enterprise*," Kirk responded, breathlessly.

"Are you all sticking around for a while?" the man with the luxurious belly asked, hopefully.

"Only until we locate a potential missing crew mate," Kirk responded. "We received a transmission from her—"

"Oh yeah," Rhinoceros Horn piped in from the edge of the seating, wiping himself off with a towel, "Atmah has 'em sending out those radio broadcasts all the time. Our guess is she's trying to recruit!"

"Recruit?" Kirk responded. "For Security?"

"No, for Cunting-Coxbury and the rest of the planet. She can never get enough!"

"Isn't the population stable?" Kirk asked.

“Well, sort of. It’s a big planet, though, and we get called upon by all sorts of off-worlders. Sometimes they collaborate with the heteros in Outland to try and invade … but we always catch them. And Goddess forbid, if we fail, Atmah and her people are all well trained. But she dreams of armies, legions of queers to defend their bodies and our ways of living,” Rhinoceros Horn responded, walking up to them. “Say,” he continued, “Your Vulcan friend doesn’t have any plans tonight, does he?”

Kirk looked amusedly at Spock. “I think you might be Mister Popular around here,” he laughed, smiling down at his lover’s still-thick cock and holding his hand. Spock raised an eyebrow extravagantly and sighed.

“Ooooh! Is it true what they say about Vulcans?” a dewey trans girl asked, as she sidled up to Spock with two of her admirers trailing her.

“I find us to be a fairly fascinating species,” Spock responded gallantly, “but the seed of the universe lies in its myriad of lifeforms. Have you ever been visited by Vulcans?”

“Not that we know of!” responded Left-Favorer, leaning over the edge of the sawhorse suggestively.

“And that’s something we’d remember!” Banana added, sidling up towards the sawhorse.

“Welp, I’m spent. Four nuts requires rest and sustenance where I come from,” Kirk announced. “Mister Spock … your services appear to be in demand here…”

“Indeed, I have noticed this,” Spock responded, eyeing the growing throng of polite yet erect figures around him. “Esteemed citizens of Lesbos,” he addressed the group, “please allow me what Humans call a ‘rain check’.”

//Atmah has indicated that we have completed Orientation and are to proceed to the guest quarters in Security Tower 12, at our leisure. We will meet a Mister Boudain there — he is to be our guide until the upcoming Men’s Day. Our communicators and phasers, as well as uniforms, await us there.//

//Well, that’s some good news. Atmah’s got quite a line on you! Did she just send you this information?//

//Yes, my *t’hy’la* … as I mentioned before, she has been both energetically and visually monitoring this entire foray.//

Kirk smiled a strange smile which made the edges of his lips turn slightly down in grim amusement. //To Tower 12, I suppose.//

//To Tower 12.//

Spock’s thoughts paused, as the two men found another door across the small stadium of fucking from their point of entry at the showers. The door opened to a long hallway, with more showers on either side. About a dozen men (and the occasional transwoman) were lazily washing themselves and each other, idly tugging their flaccid cocks and smiling, laughing. Kirk and Spock briefly exchanged glances, choosing an unoccupied shower to their left in the dim, long, torchlit room, and carefully cleaned the remains of their evening off themselves and each

other. Much kissing, much relaxed rubbing of bodies together, under the warm water, slick and playful with soap. Few words were exchanged as warm thoughts spanned between them. They dried and robed themselves, and then headed towards a door at the opposite end of the long room. It opened onto yet another torchlit, hall-like, long room, again paneled with large, dark slabs of something that looked like wood. In each meter-wide panel, again, to their left, there were oval-shaped holes cut, sanded, and sealed with oil, time, and use. There were about six men, leaning on a low, padded table that ran the length of the room, their asses pressed into the holes in the wall. The words “LAST CHANCE” were carved into a wooden panel just below the vaulted ceiling.

“You need any more?” Kirk laughed, as he read the sign in the flickering torchlight.

“Perhaps from you, but for now, I feel sated,” Spock responded. “Do you?”

Kirk stood for a moment, gazing at the relaxed, smiling men, lolling against the low table, grinning into the wood, pressing their asses back, enjoying their fill for the evening…

“Perhaps from you, but for now, I feel,” he paused, smiling up to Spock, “also sated. Besides, it’s been what, like, five hours? We should tell Bones to return to the ship … and see if anyone up there is interested in doing their ‘Orientation’. Sort of a shore leave? A working shore leave.”

“But very pleasant work, so far,” Spock responded. “It has been five point three hours. I am sure Doctor McCoy will be eager to hear from us.”

Kirk and Spock crossed the room to another door, which opened to a large staircase cut from a dark lapis-blue stone. They ascended, stepping out into a newly fallen night. They stood outside, encircled by the great ring of the wall, the towers dotting along their peripheral vision. The sky was a stunning array of swirls and tiny pecks and smears of white, orange, piercing blue, yellow, red — the night sky was very unusual here. They were in a very remote part of the galaxy from Earth and other familiar territory, and this sector opened onto an entire myriad of outer stars and other worlds in the beyond. And that beyond lay before them, painting the sky in iridescent hues and designs so unlike the worlds either being knew best.

Kirk looked at Spock in the swirling starshadows. He was glowing with fresh energy in the dim light, covered with a thin robe, long, lean, stylized. He looked at himself, also shining and clear, his strong, sturdy legs glistening in the starlight below his short, thin robe. “We’re a sight.”

Spock gazed back at him over his shoulder, silently answering his statement. //A sight in the starlight.//

24. Spock’s Report

“You wouldn’t believe those men!” Doctor McCoy railed to his small but engaged audience on the bridge of Scotty, Sulu, Lieutenant M’ress, and Ensign ‘Oumuamua. “Going after the shuttle with clubs and bones like it’s goddamned ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’! Everything seems real hi-tech inside those domes and that tower wall, but once you get outta that wall, it’s like the Manson family — minus all the women, of course.”

“We did see some women, though,” Sulu cut in. “Not many, but every now and then you’d see a wild-looking female face amongst the small packs of men dotting the terrain.”

“Aye, but dinna she look happy t’ be there?” Scotty asked.

“Hard to say,” McCoy answered. “They all had sort of a feral quality, but they were existing. Meaning, they didn’t look malnourished, ashamed, or diseased. Same as the men.”

“Fascinating,” purred Lieutenant M’Ress. “How long did you have to keep them stunned?”

“Just the one time. We left before they came to, to explore the area with the shuttle a bit more — that’s when we saw the other groups of them, with the wild women. Before any of the other groups could get to us though, we had heard from the captain. Seems like he and Spock had to pass some sort of Orientation before they could get back their phasers and communicators,” Sulu responded.

“Orientation? What sort of Orientation?” Ensign ‘Oumuamua asked.

“The captain said he’ll beam a message to the ship in an hour. I think he’s still in the negotiation process,” McCoy replied. “That being said … he sounded exhausted. Whatever that Orientation was that he and Spock went through — it whupped him.”

All of a sudden, Kirk’s voice boomed down from the PA, “Kirk to *Enterprise*, Kirk to *Enterprise*. *Enterprise*, do you read me?”

“*Enterprise* here,” M’Ress purred.

“Patch to ship PA, Lieutenant M’Ress.”

“Patching to ship PA,” she purred again.

“*Enterprise*, this is your captain. We have made contact with the people of Lesbos and are granted a six day shore leave with its citizens under certain conditions. The conditions are as follows. Cisgendered male-identifying persons may not enter the planet under any circumstances unless they have passed the Orientation. Mr Spock and I have experienced, and passed, this Orientation, and … I will say … for a certain kind of man, it’s quite pleasant. If you are interested in learning more, Spock has uploaded a brief report of what Orientation entails, as well as its stated purposes, to the ship’s server.

“Those interested ONLY AFTER HEARING THIS REPORT are instructed to beam down at their soonest convenience. For all other gender identities, you were covered in Lieutenant Uhura’s earlier transmission, but to repeat: All non-cisgender male-identifying crew members and passengers have the option to beam down to the domed city of Cunting-Coxbury for six days maximum shore leave. This is an intentional queer sex-positive colony, two hundred Earth years deep in their culture. If you cannot respect the boundaries of its citizens, the inhabitants of Cunting-Coxbury will eject you to the ship immediately, and ban your return beam. The same stipulation goes for the men, who can join Commander Spock and I for four days working shore leave with the Lesbos Security force, pending Orientation. After four days of assisting Security, you may join us in entering the domes of Cunting-Coxbury on Men’s Day, for two nights. An interesting few days await. Enjoy your leave. Kirk out.”

With that, the captain's voice silenced, and the denizens of the bridge looked around at each other. Scotty's eyes were wide. "Well, I suppose we'll have to read that report. I, fer one, wouldna mind a week to give this wee lass's propulsion drives a thorough cleaning."

"Whereas I, for one," purred Lieutenant M'Ress, "wouldn't mind a week to give my wee lass's propulsion drive a thorough cleaning." She chirped to herself loudly, the fur on her back bristling up with excitement.

When the laughter in the bridge died down, Sulu called out, "Computer! Read Spock's report over the bridge PA."

As always, a deeply unsexual, nasally voice ensued. "Working … working … Commander Spock's Report on Initial Findings on Lesbos."

At this point, the much less nasal and much more velvety deep baritone of Spock's voice issued forth over the bridge PA:

"Commander Spock here, reporting findings, re: Lesbos Orientation for Men and Cisgender Male-Identifying Persons, as conducted by Lesbos Security:

"To enter the domed city of Cunting-Coxbury, you must identify as a non cisgender male-identifying being (hence known as NCMI).

"If you are a cisgender male-identifying (CMI) being, you must pass Lesbos' Orientation to gain access to Cunting-Coxbury. Upon completion of Orientation, CMI access is only granted on Men's Days and holidays.

"The nearest Men's Day is in four point five days.

"No phasers or communicators are allowed in Orientation. They will be returned to you after completion, or beamed back to the ship with you if you fail to complete Orientation.

"NCMI persons spend most of their time working in the domes, but also enjoy the vast countryside within the wall.

"CMI persons spend most of their time in the towers and wall, and patrolling the landscape within it. There is some integration of NCMI and properly oriented CMI beings in the natural space between the domes and the wall.

"The area outside the wall is undeveloped and populated sparsely by the outcasts of the greater Lesbos colony of Cunting-Coxbury. They are predominantly heterosexual CMI persons, though not exclusively. Citizens of Cunting-Coxbury rarely go outside the wall, unless heavily armed and possibly escorted.

"The Orientation per entry to the domes of Cunting-Coxbury entails homosexual sex. That is not a rigid constant—"

By now, the loose titters of amusement that quietly percolated on the bridge every time Spock said "Cunting-Coxbury" had blossomed into uproarious peels of laughter at the words "rigid constant." Lieutenant M'Ress paused the recording until the bridge had quieted down and moisture was wiped from edges of eyes on figures with gently convulsing shoulders.

"—but a fair definition of what exactly happens in Orientation. If you consider yourself CMI and do not enjoy homosexual sex in any — not all, but any — form, you will not enjoy Orientation. That being said, those who identify as transsexual also have special accommodation:

"Transsexual women and transsexual men enjoy complete freedom of motion in both the domes and Security. The same goes for nonbinary beings. All other NCMI persons are free to roam as well, but we have learned that most of their world and culture rests within the domes and surrounding landscape, so typically, they remain there.

"The purpose of these decrees is manifold — as expressed to us by our spokesperson for Cunting-Coxbury, Atmah, the original colonists of Lesbos came from a highly patriarchal Earth culture some two hundred Earth years ago, and enacted these decrees to avoid a return to patriarchy. Because so many off-worlders still maintain patriarchal viewpoints and behaviors, visitation to the colony is highly restricted — something the denizens of Cunting-Coxbury and their Security force do not take lightly. As stated before, those who cannot abide by the aforementioned policies and regulations will be immediately ejected from the colony.

"In summary, to visit Cunting-Coxbury, if you are an CMI person, you must pass Orientation and wait four days here, working with Security, or shipside. And, to reiterate, Orientation involves consensual homosexual sex."

The way Spock enunciated the last three words was too much for the bridge, everyone now howling with laughter. McCoy slapped Sulu on the back as Sulu braced himself against his own convulsions at the conn.

When the laughter faded, Sulu announced to his companions, "I dunno about you all, but that Orientation kinda sounds like a good time — I mean, Spock never said it was unpleasant."

"You've got a point, but you already like guys. Me," McCoy mused, wistfully, "Me, I like the smoothness of a woman's soft flesh against my own. There's really nothing like it. If she has a cock, that's fine, but men … they're just not my thing. Something about the smell. That being said … I wonder if giving and receiving blowjobs counts as gay sex? I mean, when you're straight."

"I dinnae, tha' sounds pretty bloody gay to me," Scotty laughed. The doctor seemed to light up at that remark.

"So, maybe I have a chance after all!" McCoy cackled, rubbing his hands together. "Who's gonna beam down with me?"

"Oh, I'm there," Sulu said, smiling. "We're on working shore leave — that means we can put the ship on remote mode. We'll have to have someone here though, at all times, to man the bridge while we're in Orientation and without our communicators."

"I kin stick aroond," Scotty responded. "Aye'll prolly bring someone up from Engineering — if anyone sticks aroond — to beam doon for Men's Day, though."

"Yeah, I guess as a trans guy you don't have to bother with Orientation," Sulu said.

"Alsoo, as I said earlier — this baby's due for a good flush o' them drives. I'm looking forward t' blasting her clean."

McCoy patted him on the back as he, M'Ress, and Sulu ascended towards the turbolift.

"Scotty, if you were any other man, I'd say your love of machines is obscene. But I know you well enough to know you'd take it as a compliment."

"N' you'd be roight!"

25. With Security

(Content Warning: rape of goats)

"So, how often d'you guys get to go outside of the wall?"

"To Outland?" Kincaid, the luxurious-bellied man from Orientation, answered Kirk. "Oh, every now and then — anytime we find trouble brewing. But it doesn't happen much. Those men out there, many of them are recluses; hermits, content to live their lives out there away from it all. Some of the guys here romanticize it — the rugged terrain, the stark beauty of Outlandish Lesbian nature — but whenever Boudain and I go out there, it just makes us hornier for each other, and for the comforts of Security. I mean, there are just some days where you won't be satisfied until you're had a seat at LAST CHANCE. Or a poke at FIRST CHANCE, for that matter," he laughed to his off-world companion and fellow Security men in the flitter.

"So the men out there, do they have lovers? Do women come out there to live with them?" Kirk asked, probing further.

"Sometimes. It's the subject of much of the underground romance fiction in the domes," Boudain answered from the driver's seat, in his velvety Catalan lisp. "But no, there aren't a lot of women out there, cis, trans, or otherwise."

Kincaid glanced at Boudain, and then resolutely turned back to Kirk. "We have heard reports from the other guys that the heterosexual men of Outland do have a very special relationship with their goats."

Kirk winced a little, but knew inwardly that this was someone else's culture, and that it should be respected. No yucking of others' yum. "Does it seem … according to those reports … consensual?"

"Oh, no, they just grab them and fuck them," Boudain answered matter-of-factly. "Sometimes they kill them afterwards and eat them — especially if the goat kicks a lot."

Ok, fuck respecting alien cultures. These guys were Human, and Humans can be the absolute worst sometimes. Kirk knew it, Spock knew it — though he was always hesitant to show any species bias — and pretty much everyone else on the ship knew it. The crew of the *Enterprise* had seen Human space colonies thrive and fail; no one was immune to the Human thirst for power and control. The Earth was always on the brink of becoming an overcrowded, trash-mounded wasteland of packed dirt, burnt to a crisp by Kirk's species' follies. Human greed was a constant of the universe; as was Human love, a point Spock was always quick to remind Kirk

when they got into their world-famous, post-chess, post winner-gets-a-blowjob discussions of species-hood and being-ness.

Still … raping, killing, and eating their local fauna? Kirk felt no need to visit these men unless they were posing a serious threat to life within the seemingly less chaotic colony of Cunting-Coxbury.

And so, the four days planetside passed leisurely for the men of the *Enterprise* shadowing Security. There was work — routine wall maintenance for those inclined towards manual labor, kitchen duty for the culinarily-gifted, and patrol assistance for those looking for adventure.

Workdays were ten-hour shifts, with ten hours for rest and ten hours for play. Of course, "work" and "play" were relative terms, as fraternization during non-crisis work hours — especially for those on patrol — was highly encouraged. The basic idea was that if you were always prepared, you could even snap to deadly attention in the middle of a sex act — and they even had training drills for those interested in honing their "mid-fucking master" skills.

Kirk spent most of his days shadowing shifts with Boudain, his assigned host, and Kincaid, Boudain's most-regular partner in both sex and work. The two men were almost always on duty together, which meant lots of spontaneous threesomes, foursomes when Spock was not at another worksite, and moresomes if they happened upon a friendly band of fellow Security in their patrol — which was often. Possibly due to the high oxygen content in the planet's atmosphere, Kirk wasn't surprised when he'd stumble back into his and Spock's quarters after a long workday and three or four orgasms out of his system, just to rest and cuddle with his love, trade stories, get turned on again, fuck about it, shower, and then maybe go out to the Lounge for a night's recreation. Besides the stadium room from their Orientation, the Lounge also opened out onto smaller rooms, some for private connections, others for performative gatherings, plus a hot spring grotto in the back for bathing and other pleasures.

"A man could get used to this," Kirk said to Spock, on the third evening, in their nightly post-orgasmic cuddle.

"I understand. Those men in the kitchen are delightful. And their work ethic for manual labor is really fascinating. They take 'orgasm breaks' the way Terrans take coffee breaks," Spock responded, wrapping his arms tightly around his love. Tomorrow was their last day with Security before Men's Day, and Spock had cherished all this planetside time with Kirk. He had accompanied him on patrol the first day, and ventured out on his own to wall maintenance the second day, his labor only broken by an impromptu orgy with Kirk and his companions on patrol when they "accidentally" bumped into each other en route to the wall in need of mending. On the third day, Kirk accompanied him at the wall because he needed the exercise — or so he said. Spock sensed he just wished to see Spock jackhammer a few guys in the arid afternoon heat under the shade of an acacia tree, only to later be jackhammered himself by his number one Human, and captain.

On the fourth and last day before Men's Day, Spock worked in the kitchen and Kirk toured the towers with Kincaid and Boudain. The Ring Wall, as Security called the perimeter wall dotted with fifty lookout towers always manned by at least two men, climbed over the similarly-named

Ring Mountain Range in the area east of the domes, almost directly opposite from the point in the wall at which Kirk and Spock had first entered. Natural springs of varying temperatures dotted the Ring Mountains, and at this particular section, Security had built a large municipal pool in a vast lava tube at the foot of these volcanic mountains, for swimming, training, bathing, and playing. The water was an average 36° Celsius, so it was warm enough to bathe in, and many springs fed the mammoth pool, so it was deep. Parts of the pool were warmer, parts were colder, but they all blended together at 36° C.

Swimming up to a guardrail, Kirk glanced back at his companions — there was Spock, fresh from his shift in the kitchen, swimming laps like a fish and gliding smoothly underwater from one end of the pool to the other. Behind him was Kincaid, relaxing in a smaller pool by the source of one of the hotter tributary springs. He waved and smiled at Kirk, and Kirk smiled back and left the large pool to join him.

“How many of you Security guards are there, anyways?” Kirk asked, as he slowly lowered himself into the steaming water.

“At least three hundred and twenty, give or take. But that’s just Security. We also have young men still in training, as well as our transfeminine allies that either join on as Security, or administrators, moderators, mediators, and facilitators,” Kincaid responded.

“So that explains why I saw some women in Orientation,” Kirk said.

“Yes, it’s their choice as transwomen. They can live in the domes, or out here, or both. A lot of them choose both.”

“What about nonbinary people?”

“Same, but they seem to keep to the domes more. Though we have some here in Security as well.”

Spock swam towards the two chatting men, wiping his face dry as he ascended a ramp up to the edge of the water. He met Kirk by the edge of the hot pool, tapped his first two fingers with his own, and nuzzled the top of his curly, wet head.

Kirk looked up to him. “Refreshed?”

“Indeed. This is a fascinating structure,” Spock remarked to Kincaid, and Boudain, who had just emerged out of a cool bath behind an outcropping of rocks in the lava tube. Spock looked up towards the rock ceiling above him, dotted with holes that looked out to a darkening amethyst evening sky. “Lava tubes at the foot of mountains riddled with springs. The geothermal activity of this planet is quite vigorous.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Boudain responded. “This is the only planet I’ve ever been to.”

“Don’t you all have a way to get off the planet?” Kirk asked, as he sunk deeper into the steaming water, his nose almost level with the surface.

“We do, and there’s even a security detail in a satellite off-planet — though it’s much smaller, only about ten men, and it’s a line family. Most of us stick around. There’s so much to know here that we don’t usually feel the need to leave. Every now and then one of us joins a passing

friendly ship, if they'll have us … but frankly, most of our visitors are not to be trusted. We have so many natural resources here."

"What is a 'line family'?" Spock asked, drifting in the warm pool to sit close to Kirk. Initially he had been slow to be affectionate publicly with Kirk on this strange planet, but after Orientation he began to embrace these displays — it was a rare opportunity to relax his guard.

"A line family is a modality of relationship in which an older group of lovers, be it two or more, takes on younger lovers, who progressively take on younger lovers, so the knowledge, abundance, and bounty of the family stays consolidated and achieves maximum growth potential. It's really a much more beautiful and organic concept that I'm making it sound, by the way," Kincaid explained, apologetically.

"What he means," Boudain said, "is basically that those guys up on the satellite are a family of lovers that formed here on Lesbos long before they were assigned to their post. Line families aren't so unusual here — what made that group ideal is that none of them have any kids yet so they don't need to be planetside that often. They take rotations to come back down a few times a year, so we don't see too much of them. Actually, a couple of them are good friends of mine."

"Interesting," Kirk responded. "Do the people in Security often have kids?"

"Actually, yes," Kincaid responded, drawing Boudain over to him in the water for a bear hug. "I have three, myself, and Boudain has two daughters. I see my kids on Men's Days and holidays, and every now and then they come out camping with us on the plains if Boudain and I can schedule off for a few days at a time."

"Do you have a relationship with their mother?" Spock asked.

"Mothers," Kincaid responded. "I'm just a donor — I prefer male lovers. So going into the domes for me is just about playing with my little ones. They're all under ten, and loads of fun. One boy, one enby, and a little girl, the youngest, that absolutely steals my heart and gets away with everything. Her mothers let me spoil the hell outta her. I'm friends with them — we all grew up together, so we go way back."

"I, on the other hand," Boudain interjected, "do have relations with my kids' mother. She's one of my closest friends, and we communicate almost daily. She and her partners have raised our two daughters well — one is grown and works in the domes as a communications correspondent, making sure our networks are running smoothly and everything's going ok on the satellite, and the other is fifteen and still figuring out how she wants to spend her time as she grows up. She transitioned back when she was just a little thing, so she threatens to join me in Security when she grows older, but I'll be proud of her whatever she decides to do with her life. She's a good kid, full of spirit."

"But if she comes to work in Security, wouldn't that, ah, complicate things…?" Kirk asked carefully.

Boudain and Kincaid looked at their wet companion in the pool for a moment, uncomprehendingly.

"You know, with the Lounge and Orientation and all?" Kirk followed up awkwardly.

“Oh, you mean, if she saw her father having sex?” Kincaid said with a smile, chuckling to himself. “Believe me, we’ve got that one all figured out, too. Were you guys checked in by Ronald Roland back before Orientation?

“The one with the mustache and eyelashes?” Kirk asked.

“The very same. Ron-Rol’s our scheduling guru. He makes sure no one’s in the Lounge at the same time as their family members. Plus, kids under eighteen aren’t allowed in there anyway. Kids on Lesbos mess around throughout puberty just like anywhere else, but they aren’t allowed to go to any of the sanctioned orgies, play parties, and the like, until they’re of age.”

“I see,” Kirk said. “What about this Men’s Day tomorrow? What’s that like? Do most of the guys from Security take advantage of the opportunity and go to the domes?”

“A lot of us do,” Boudain answered. “Sexuality’s pretty fluid here, as you’ve probably noticed. Though a lot of us seem completely gay — and we are — many of us still enjoy the company of the dome citizens. Plus a lot of us have kids in there — that’s where all the schooling happens, in the youth pods, before the age of eighteen. We like to keep track of our offspring.”

“A lot of us guys really love Men’s Day — there are play parties and public orgies, as well as just plain old parties and dances and picnics and the like. Atmah and her squad in the domes just love to host, love to show off their legendary Lesbian hospitality.” Kincaid added. “You’ll have a blast. And if you two like sex with women … well, you’ll probably have a pretty unforgettable time. True, most of the people in there are queer — but that’s the same as here, in Security. Men’s Days are fun for everyone, but especially for the bi and pan people.”

“I like sex with women,” Kirk proclaimed somewhat awkwardly, considering the current surroundings and company. He had simply never been in the company of men so candid about sex, sexuality, and gender identity. There was no sense of competition, no one-upping, no tinges of jealousy … he glanced at Spock, scanning his love’s face for any signs of discomfort. Spock’s eyes were closed and he was leaning back against a flat stone jutting out of the pool, breathing slowly, his chest subtly rising and falling every few seconds. He looked so still and calm that Kirk wondered if he was meditating.

Kirk decided to continue. He wasn’t saying anything Spock didn’t know, he reasoned with himself. “As you know, we’re here on a reconnaissance mission. One of our crew members lives in the domes. I’d like to find her and brief her on how and why she came here, and see if she wishes to return to her post. I have a feeling I’ll have to discharge her, but that’s just a formality. As you guys already know, our superiors at the Federation sent us out here to explore this part of the galaxy a little more, and gather information about your planet as well as Gor and other planets in the vicinity. If she doesn’t want to come back with us, it’s not really a wasted trip.” He paused, glanced at the barely-moving, closed-eyed Vulcan again. “But, in all honesty, I am looking forward to reconnecting with her. There were unspoken emotions we shared, and frankly, I’d like to explore that.”

“Does he care if you do?” Kincaid hooked a thumb towards Spock, assuming he was asleep.

“Not at all,” Spock responded, his eyes still closed. “Jim and I have never been monogamous. He and Janice were connected energetically before he and I became lovers. I would like him to follow that path in fullness.”

“Aww, I always love to hear off-worlders talk about free love and compersion. So rare in this galaxy,” Boudain said wistfully, nestling back into Kincaid’s chest and smiling.

“It is only logical,” Spock replied from his repose. “If I were to try and restrict Jim’s experiences with others, that would not be love. Vulcans have an odd — and in my opinion, unearned — reputation as jealous, domineering lovers, but I find that to be an illogical estimation of our species. The probability of resentment growing as the result of a controlling lover is ninety-eight point three six seven percent, with a margin of error of one point three five percent. It appears that essentially, no being, Vulcan, or otherwise, likes to be controlled.”

“Ohhhhh. I get it,” Kincaid said. “And because Vulcans value logic so much, anything illogical — like trying to control the actions of another — is a no-no.”

“Essentially, yes,” Spock replied. “When I met Jim, I immediately understood his sexual magnetism. He is a being that expands through sexual expression. Vulcans are not typically so sexually expressive — but we are expansive beings, in other ways, such as through meditation and physical practices, not to mention cultivation of extra-sensory ability. I am drawn to that expansive, growing energy. No being is truly static, after all, even if resistance to change is culturally enforced. In my experience of space travel and connecting with alien cultures, I have learned that change is the universal constant. Jim grows and changes through his experiences with others—”

“—And with you!” Kirk interjected. “He’s not hardly doing himself justice. I have been more free to grow with Spock than with any other lover I’ve ever met. He has taught me a lot about acceptance of myself, and others. He’s really the only one, the one who has always accepted me, who’s always encouraged me to be the freak I am to full capacity, while somehow always being by my side.”

Kincaid beamed from one man to the other and hugged Boudain tighter. Boudain smiled gently and nodded, saying nothing. And for a long while, the four men rested in the bath in silence, enjoying the quietude of the falling night before their last visit to the Lounge.

26. The Note

Janice palmed the lock to her door, waited as the hexagonal panel faded and permitted entry, and stepped into her home, shrugging off her heavy pack. It had been a long week with Security, assisting Harriet in teaching the new survival techniques she’d learned from her recent subspace communications from the beta quadrant. The boys were eager to learn, but they also were eager, as always, to fraternize with each other, so there was a lot of corralling, and she even had to separate a few of the guys when they got into a passionate tangle of five

whilst doing the practice routines. It really didn't bother her to break up their little orgy — she knew, for them, another was just around the corner in the Lounge when shift ended anyways.

The week of camping in the wilderness with Harriet was unforgettable, as always — even with a squad of randy Security boys in tow. How did she ever have a thing for men, she wondered?

Harriet had everything she needed: she was strong, powerful, calm and balanced; the picture of efficiency in work, play, or love. Harriet was older than her, and post-menopausal — so, in addition to her natural sense of groundedness, she also had considerable knowledge of the ways a woman's body worked, in all of life's stages. Janice saw Harriet as more than a lover — she was a well-spring of information, support, and wisdom. 'What would I do without her?' she thought, as she absent-mindedly began unpacking her backpack.

Her hand brushed a note on the table, sealed in an envelope and unnoticed until now. 'That's odd,' she thought. 'A real note, not a digital message on the network, or a communication card. I remember…'

She thought back to an older life, a previous version of herself, a time that felt long ago, but not too long ago … six years back…

'A note! He used to leave them for his lovers, before they left the ship. I remember delivering these! It can't be…'

She opened the envelope, her pulse quickening, her breath shortening, her heart bashing into her chest…

She unfolded the note, read its short message: "Would you like to return?" No signature.

'He's here! He heard my transmission!' The realization shot through her veins like fire down a short, lit fuse: 'He's found me!'

And then, a second later, catching her breath in a choked sigh: "He looked for me."

27. Men's Day

Uhura and Tanghi stood flanking Atmah just outside of the main entry to the largest dome. The rest of the citizenry of Cunting-Coxbury were still inside, readying themselves and their spaces for visitors as all the emissaries from the *Enterprise* watched in excited anticipation. It was easy to get caught up in the celebratory spirit of the day — it was finally Men's Day, a semi-regular event that the citizens of the domes always seemed to anticipate with pleasure. Some citizens looked forward to reuniting with lovers, some with life-long friends from their youth pod days, some with co-parents or donors who had fathered their children. And some citizens just looked forward to a party.

Far in the distance, Uhura saw a great shining and feathered snake approaching them, gleaming and waving as it wound along the river towards the domes. The men were traveling by foot, some in uniforms, some in stylized, Corinthian-like helmets glinting in the sun. They traveled the six kilometers from the Ring Wall by foot, as was their tradition — it allowed them

time for walking contemplation along their journey, as they approached the gleaming golden pink domes.

“How many are there?” Uhura asked her companions.

“Looks like about a hundred-fifty to a hundred-eighty today,” Tanghi responded, gazing through a set of binoculars.

“Some must always stay behind, on lookout. The most we can accommodate is around two hundred, so if more than two hundred men wish to come to a certain Men’s Day, they must enter a lottery — if they are childless,” Atmah added. “If they have kids, they’re always welcome.”

“Even on non-Men’s Days?” Uhura asked.

“Sure, with appropriate permissions granted,” Tanghi answered.

“Do they always walk here on Men’s Day? Do any of them ever take shuttles or beam in?” Uhura asked, as the snake slowly grew larger in the distance.

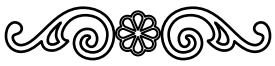
“Occasionally the leaders of Security will beam in or take a flitter over here if there’s something very unusual going on we need to know about, but usually they just communicate with us over the network,” Atmah responded.

“Yeah, today’s a Men’s Day, so the visit is strictly for enjoyment,” Tanghi added. “They enjoy the walk over here. Personally, I think they like to build anticipation by fluffing each other on the trek.”

“Tanghi!” Atmah laughed. “You think we can’t accommodate them enough?”

“Oh, hardly, Atmah — here, look through my binoculars. That guy, second group on the left, front row, third from the right. He’s totally giving his neighbor a helping hand.”

Atmah took the proffered binoculars from her cohort’s hand. “So they do … that explains why some of them look so engorged by the time they arrive. I always thought the rigorous walk and anticipation is why so many of them arrived half-hard. I should have known better!” she chuckled. Smiling broadly, she gave the binoculars back to Tanghi. “Looks like we still have another half-hour until they arrive … anyone for some damiana tea?”



Though they were resolutely walking, not marching, the members of the *Enterprise* who approached the domes amongst the men of Security found themselves moving in a steady, meditative cadence. They had been instructed by Townsend, one of the Security leaders leading the men to the domes, to try a breath ratio exercise. It was easy to fall into the rhythm: inhaling for six steps, retaining the breath for three, exhaling for six, and holding it out for three. Repeat.

The river babbled and flowed beside them as rounded, low, pinkish gold mountains steadily rose in the distance. In the row ahead of him, Kirk watched the men stroll along, every now

and then a lower, diagonal line cutting through the block of vertical figures to caress the center of another figure…

“These men are inexhaustible “ Doctor McCoy spoke in a hushed whisper to Kirk, on his left. “I guess this is the result of excess oxygen in the atmosphere for most Humans — our blood gets pumping, and we get horny.”

Before Kirk had a chance to respond, Spock cut in from his left side: “Correlation is not causation, my good doctor.”

“Spock, for the love of gawd, you’ve seen the evidence and you’ve done the research. Wouldn’t you say this is a worthy estimate?” The doctor failed to stifle a quiet explosion as he strolled along with his friends. He and Spock were always close enough to play the dozens — as he called it. To take the piss out of each other, to engage in a bout of friendly one-upmanship — particularly around Jim — but only because it was his and Spock’s tacit understanding that this is how they could collectively razz their beloved captain. Because razzing the captain, everyone knew, was one of the finer spices of life.

“An estimate, perhaps, but not a conclusion. A hypothesis, at the very least.”

The three men walked along together in silence, flanked by other members of the *Enterprise*, and rows upon rows of quasi-uniformed, helmeted men … the men of Security. They were a fine bunch, Kirk mused, as he admired their physiques before him. Diverse in complexion, stature, weight, size, mobility, but uniform in fine posture, a shape of the musculature, a flow and ripple of energy beneath their varied skins.

It was their training; yes, the practices. Kirk had learned a lot of their training practices in his five days with Security. The practices were varied, from many different traditions of Earth as well as some extra-Terran traditions of physical and energetic cultivation. His favorite were the joint-rotational exercises called *charana* — a set of rotational movements to lubricate every moving part of the body, to allow flow. He felt like he was twisting the oxidation off a control knob on his chair’s arm panel on the bridge every time he did it; twisting, twisting, twisting the cobwebs away.

The domes loomed ahead of them, suddenly filling the landscape around the men. They found themselves entering a forest, following a broad, now-winding road. The road separated from the main river and followed a branch of it through an increasingly wooded high-desert landscape. To their left and to their right, they would occasionally see little domes tucked into the forest, down narrow trails and paths — some with little bridges crossing the stream that ran alongside the main path, now like an avenue. The avenue became a boulevard, with more and more signs of cultivation and use — landscaped trees sporting unobtrusive lighting structures, smooth and flawless stone paving, drainage to the stream … and soon after a sharp left turn, the boulevard opened up to a large, marble paved patio at the base of the largest dome.

“Is this the front door or something?” McCoy mumbled to his crew mates.

“Actually, Doctor, according to Townsend, this is the back door,” Spock politely informed him.

“I shoulda known!” Doctor McCoy smiled. He had enjoyed his few days with Security, seeing his friends in their element and getting a taste of the gay life. Sure, he still identified as straight, but he better understood his omnisexual tendencies now. A blowjob is a blowjob is a blowjob. And a transwoman is a woman. Yep, he had plenty there to keep him occupied, even as a man who prefers the company of women.

For one thing, the doctor really got to explore his love of costuming. He spent most of his three days with Security at the clothiers. ‘Clothier’ was a loose designation for this costume shop, for it had every costume available for any type of occasion, besides general, utilitarian clothing for work and protection. He worked closely with the designers, experimenting with ideas on ball gowns, active wear, sexy work clothing, sexy swimwear, sexy uniforms, sexy play wear … in between blowjob sessions with the other interns and visitors. Occasionally a designer would take a break and join in on the fun — which usually resulted in everyone focusing their oral skills on said designer. But McCoy was a man of reciprocity and loved to suck a good cock as much as he loved to fuck a wanting mouth. So, between the ballgowns and the blow-jobs, the doctor had enjoyed a good few days.

The legion of men spread out in uniform groupings around the terrace and waited casually in sudden silence. One hundred and eighty-seven of men’s eyes gazed towards a block of fading panels breaking the wall of pinkish-gold hexagons that stood before them. The door shimmered to transparency and a point of women emerged with Atmah in the front, carrying a large, spiraling horn. She was followed by Uhura and Tanghi, who were followed by three more people, followed by five, followed by seven, by eleven, by thirteen … the figures flooded from the domes, the arrow of their bodies as seen from above penetrating the womb of men encircling the edges of the terrace.

Atmah stopped, not far from the center of the men, and blew the spiraling horn loudly. The men took a moment to arrange themselves in lines, standing in open-hearted attention, their palms turned out, their chins parallel to the ground. She walked over to Townsend and addressed him. “You came here to fuck?”

He replied with the traditional response.

“I’d rather be naked.”

McCoy raised an eyebrow in disbelief and looked at his companions in his group. Sulu stifled a laugh, Spock’s brows were also uplifted, and Kirk smiled broadly. Scotty, who had joined them only hours before they left on their pilgrimage, having fully flushed the pipes of his baby in orbit, said quietly, “Concise culture, this one?”

“Indeed,” Spock responded.

After a long, scanning gaze across every face arrayed before her on the patio spanning out from the dome, Atmah returned her eyes to Townsend’s. She held his gaze for a long time, and then suddenly said. “You may enter. Joyous Men’s Day!”

Smiling, Atmah lifted the curling horn to her mouth and blew it vigorously. The figures around her broke from their formation, cheering and hurrying up to their men, finding their loves both

new and old and leading them back to the crowd funneling through the door. Some led their men away from the dome into the surrounding forest, some wandered towards the gardens, and some stood right where they were, catching up with their men on the patio.

Atmah went right up to a group of four men, including Townsend, and led them into the dome with her. Tanghi found her two loves holding hands and walked into the forest with them. Uhura immediately ran to the men of the *Enterprise*, her co-workers and friends.

“Reporting for duty, Captain,” she said, as she strode up to Kirk.

“At ease, Lieutenant. You’re still the one in charge here,” Kirk responded, smiling.

She returned his smile with one of her own, and beamed around to the men assembled in front of her.

“Welcome to Cunting-Coxbury, everyone. This is a truly unusual, marvelous place. Their only request is that we respect their culture and the unprecedented nature of this visit — very rarely do male off-worlders pass the Orientation. But because you all did, and because it’s Men’s Day until noon on the day after tomorrow, everyone is free to roam around the domes now,” she said. The men began to relax and scatter, making new connections with the eager and hospitable citizens of the domes.

Uhura turned to Kirk and Scotty. Sulu had left earlier with a young man and an older woman. Spock and McCoy were bickering about something amongst themselves.

“At least, that’s the permission as I heard it from Atmah. Also, she showed me where Janice’s quarters are. I think Janice just got back from the wilderness herself,” Uhura said.

“Great,” Kirk responded. “I sent Janice a message through Security — apparently her partner is a liaison there, so hopefully it made its way to her.” He paused, surveying the landscape around them. Scotty was wandering off, wistfully saying something about how he had to “inspect the stroocture” of the domes.

Kirk continued. “As much as I hate to leave this place, a seven day shore leave is a bit excessive I suppose…” He started playing with that thought in his head. Was it really excessive? Or did his crew deserve it? Something had shifted slightly within him during those five days with Security. He now had a new appreciation for the power of a shared dream.

He broke his reverie. “Anyway, duty calls. We have been requested by Starfleet to explore deeper into the delta quadrant, beyond this place, since we’re already out here. Might as well find Janice, and then hop to it.”

“Captain…” Uhura paused for a beat. “What if she doesn’t want to come back with us?”

“I’ve thought a lot about that one … we have to be prepared for any outcome of this mission. Besides, there are benefits to her staying here, as well.” Kirk responded.

Spock had drifted away to take tricorder readings of the dome, the block of panels still open and inviting. McCoy was already standing inside, waiting impatiently on his crew mates. Scotty had disappeared — a few of the dome engineers had caught him feeling up the dome on surveillance, and were excited to delve into more detail with him on the structural properties of

its walls. The rest of the remaining crew had paired and grouped off with sporadic citizens of the domes, everyone excitedly looking for new friends.

“Well, Lieutenant Uhura … you know the way to Janice. Lead on,” Kirk said, bringing them back to their mission.

“Of course, Captain. Come with me.”

28. Reconnaissance

As Uhura led Kirk, Spock, and McCoy into the domes, their eyes widened, but not with surprise — rather, to take everything in. Couples and thruples, foursomes and moresomes, were pulling each other up the stairs, into rooms, or not making it there and collapsing in frenzied ecstasies in the hallways. The giant atrium in the center of the main dome was writhing with figures, concentrated sporadically in open patios cascaded with pillows. Men’s Day was an orgy: everyone fucking everyone — a break from work for almost two Lesbian days. Yet no one seemed unoccupied.

“How do you know she’s not out here in one of these knots of people?” Kirk asked, keenly aware that Doctor McCoy had peeled off to join three beckoning buxom figures. Spock still calmly strode along with them.

Uhura answered him. “She just got back from a week in the wilderness. I’ve been in touch with her partner, Harriet, who said she’d be around unpacking and bathing for the next few hours.”

‘*Partner*? I wonder if they’re exclusive,’ Kirk thought. A gentle reminder that almost no one was exclusive here floated back into his head, in a velvety low tone. He glanced at Spock, who had a vaguely verdant flush across his cheekbones.

//Are you OK?// He also asked it with his eyes.

//Yes.//

//Would you like to accompany me when I talk to Janice?//

//No. This is for you two alone.//

Uhura noticed the strange, stifled silence between her walking companions. She stopped, and pointed to a small, glowing dome in the distance.

“That’s Janice, in that one. The light’s on — looks like she’s home. I’ll leave this to you two, if that’s OK, Captain.”

“Certainly, Lieutenant Uhura, thank you. Have an enjoyable Men’s Day.” Kirk smiled and nodded, and actively held his right eyelid up to keep from winking … Nyota was so, so hot. He had always felt this way. It was a constant of the Universe, for Goddess’ sake. He and Spock even had held lengthy conversations listing her more charming attributes — the type of discourse neither man would ever readily engage in with anyone but each other. They knew

she had worked hard to get where she was … and besides, Kirk had learned to wait for a woman to come to him.

This last thought gave him pause, as he realized the irony of the situation. ‘But I’m coming to Janice.’

//But I’m coming to Janice// he let this thought expand out into the atmosphere beyond the confines of his skull, like a decaying echo, for Spock, for anyone who could hear it to hear it.

//I am coming to Janice, this is a humbling thing. Spock … what if I want you with me? What if she wants you with me?//

//Jim … my *t’hy’la* … this is for you and Janice alone// and then, aloud, the Vulcan continued. “I am going to take more tricorder readings of the walls of the dome to test a theory I have about why this place is so … stimulating. It is more than just a matter of oxygen, though that is a factor. I want you to remember that when you are in pleasure, I am in pleasure. And because I love you and I love when you are in pleasure, I wish you to seek your pleasure.” Spock’s face was stony as ever, but his eyes were like pools of molten cocoa. Kirk found himself very touched, his heart softening.

They embraced, holding each other and kissing briefly, and then Spock turned away to his task. Kirk watched as his lover disappeared into the inner-dome forest around Janice’s home and neighborhood within the dome, and found himself alone. He turned back towards the warm, golden glow of her small dome in the dim evening light, filtering through the trees, and slowly walked up to the door.

‘What if she is not happy to see me?’ he wondered. He steeled himself. ‘I am here on a Starfleet reconnaissance mission, not to get my dick wet. Even though that’s what I’ve been doing for the past five days — but that’s part of this culture and beside the point. James T. Kirk, you are here to see if a lost crew mate wants to come back or be discharged. That’s it. Don’t let it get you hard. Stop getting hard. Stop it! Fuck!’

He pushed his palms down his hips, pretending his hands were a scanner of professionalism and composure. It didn’t work. He was tenting his pants, whether he liked it or not.

‘This is like being in high school,’ he thought, wishing he had a textbook to press his erection down like in those days. He laughed sardonically at himself, smoothed his breathing, thought about some of his more odious commanding officers, and pressed the ringer on a panel of her dome.

The panel faded away and revealed a woman in a pink caftan and slippers, with sweet, full cheeks, a pert nose, smiling eyes, and short, tufty and freshly-washed mousey-brown hair. A pixie cut — her natural color suited her, Kirk thought, as one of his hundred-watt smiles spread across his face. “Janice.”

She looked up at him, returning his smile, and stood in silence looking at him for a moment.

Eventually, she spoke: “Captain Kirk. Please come in.” He stepped into the dome, his mind half-filled with the stern expressions of his superiors, half-wondering if his smile was making

any difference. And if she could tell. And if she was going to come back with them. And if she'd still want to fuck. And and and…

29. Spock's Discovery

After he parted ways with Kirk, Spock set his mind on his objective and nothing but his objective — find the nearest dome wall and study it thoroughly. Study its composition, its components, the effect those components had upon each other … he had a theory. And like a true scientist, he could train his mind on nothing else but getting to the bottom of this theory. It was a nagging question in his mind, a burning hypothesis he had either to prove or disprove.

The tricorder read that the nearest part of the large dome wall was 0.43 km to the southeast, and Spock wandered through the dense forest in that direction, occasionally passing small, tent-like domes, one-room domes scattered throughout the forest, glowing with light and emanating sounds of pleasure. Occasionally he'd pass another Human in the darkness, some of them beckoning him with their eyes to join in the festivities of the day. He was hard, he had noticed — and perhaps others had sensed — but his sexual needs were presently sated.

He was stiff, but not uncomfortable. Spock's sexuality was unique: although he possessed the Vulcan lack of refractory period, he also cultivated the Vulcan sense of logic that could often take an upper hand to his bodily needs. He was known on occasion, especially during *pon farr*, to be an insatiable animal, and he had a Human's sense of love, service, and generosity, but he also trusted there would always be more pleasure in this world. Especially if Jim was a part of it. It was a faith built in their time together, in their relationship. Jim fed him a steady stream of love since day one. So really, his erection was partially in the memory of this sexy lover, partly a product of this space, these people, this energy … and he was determined to find the truth behind this unusual, if not pleasurable, reality.

He approached the wall — it was laced with vines and foliage, but still held strong, the dim light of one of the setting suns barely illuminating the rocky karst he could see vaguely through the luminescent pinkish-gold wall. He cleared away some of the leaves and vines so a patch of the dome wall the size of a dinner plate was exposed, and took a tricorder reading.

Could it be? He looked down at his tricorder and interpreted the readings … clear rose neodymium, an organic nitrogen-based keratinous substance — possibly wool, translucent steel wool, more keratinous substance, more steel wool, more keratinous substance, et cetera, et cetera, capped with a layer of silicate glass. Each layer of substance was paper-thin, and the whole dome wall read as being only .219 meters thick. Not all the hexagonal panels of the dome were of this substance — some of them read as just silicate glass. The layers of what appeared to read as wool were of a very translucent tan color, which, paired with the clear rose neodymium, gave this place its pinkish-gold glow, while still allowing the entry of softened sunlight.

Spock's cock strained against the inside of his trousers, giving him a smooth, flushed glow as he glided to the edge of the panel. He brushed away more vines, revealing a brightly glowing band of metal at the junction of three of the panels. Gold. Yes, gold was claimed to be abundant here — so abundant that it could be used for diverting electricity. Or for channeling electricity, he pondered, smiling inwardly to himself.

But Wilhelm Reich died in jail, condemned by the USFDA as a fraud … and the concept of orgone energy was never scientifically proved…

Spock felt his cock throbbing, heated and swollen with blood; objectively noting his sensory perceptions and filing them away for later recall. This feeling … oh, the things he could do with this feeling. He could return to it anytime, this warm flush, this buzz of personal polarity, his personal reserve of electric vitality, anytime he required warmth and strength. And, contrary to the stereotype of the cold, logical Vulcan, Vulcans needed to know how to cultivate warmth. Vulcan is a hot, arid world. Catch an off-world Vulcan in the chill of space, and you will find a Vulcan cultivating warmth.

And these walls, Spock marveled. Earth scientists could never come to an agreement about the validity of this theory, about this energy. The energy cultivated within these domes … perhaps, perhaps. Perhaps Wilhelm Reich was onto something after all. That energy could be due to the techniques of the dome's construction — or it could just be from the extremely sex-positive culture, amplified by the energetic echo tunnel of colony life.

His cock began weeping precome as he stood by the wall, musing, and there was a feeling in his mind of Jim, knocking at the door of his subtle awareness. At the castle gates, Spock smiled to himself sardonically. The Vulcan sense of boundary in psychic bonding was so very cultured. Many rules, honed through centuries, about when and how to psychically approach your bondmate; subtle cues following specific contingencies and situational parameters … and there was his Human lover, Jim: respectful, humble, hard at the door to his mind. He let him in, and sensed warmth, bubbling warmth, boiling warmth, spilling over and shooting through the electric channels of his own body…

He closed his eyes, turned his back to the wall, squatting down to sit for a minute — no, lay down, lay down, and just feel the energy of this very rare, very special experimental environment, lovingly cultivated and energetically curated. He began rolling his hips, as he lay down at the thick moss leading up to the walls of the dome. He felt the power of the walls, of the giant energetic accumulator, and he felt the call of Jim, rolling his hips, bringing waves of pleasure into the domes, onto the planet, and into the galaxy. Into the universe. And, of course, into Spock. 'I am but a ship in a sea of Jim's pleasure — but I am also the sea, the well of pleasure that has no bottom, the deepest trench on the oceanic world. I gather all the pleasure he sends me, he sends the entire universe — and here, under these unique walls, I can magnify it and send it further.' He rolled his hips up and back, into the foamy, lush moss, his cock rubbing itself against the inside of his trousers.

Spock was in a trance, as if in a pleasant dream, his hips getting wet with his fluid, his life seed threatening to spill … he let the power of the walls overtake him, taking Jim's orgasmic

experience and magnifying it, sending it through the refining prism of his own sexuality, and piercing the dome, the sky, the atmosphere, all of space with it, like a spotlight to the stars. His pants were a lost cause — completely soaked. He felt a great looping energy ripple its way down his torso, sending a shivering feeling through every pore on his body. He lay back on the moss, stilling his hips, saving his tricorder readings, assembling a short report of his findings in his head as the feeling of Jim's presence faded. The loosening of the bond did not bother him — it would be reformed very soon, as it always was.

He got up and brushed off his trousers, silently thanking the inventors of quick-dri xenylon — then mentally chiding himself for such an illogical thought, as this was hardly a planet that would be ashamed of a man with soaked trousers.

30. Reunion

Spock caught up with Kirk at a park bench in the forest next to Janice's pod. The captain had only been waiting a few minutes after calling his first officer on the communicator.

Kirk watched the statuesque Vulcan as he approached, his alien features showing no emotion whatsoever. He smiled, his face softening, and just held Spock's gaze — those bottomless dark eyes holding more warmth than his own. He glanced down towards the wet spot at Spock's hips, and his smile widened.

"Captain, I have made some very interesting discoveries about the composition of these domes."

Kirk looked up at him as he approached, still beaming, and taking his cue. "You don't say, Mister Spock. Let's us walk together and you can tell me what you've found. I have a few findings to report, myself."

"Yes … I am quite … intrigued … to hear about your findings, Jim." Spock looked down at his smiling captain, and held a hand out to him, his two smallest fingers gently curled towards his palm, his middle and index finger slightly extended in this offering gesture. Kirk rested his first and middle fingers on Spock's for a moment, and then took his whole hand into his, letting Spock pull him to his feet. He slid his arm up Spock's, resting it in the crook of his elbow as they turned to walk, arm in arm, through the forest. Kirk placed his other hand over the hook of their arms.

"So, what did you discover?" Kirk asked, as they strode through the dark, quiet forest, glowing street lamps along the trail lighting their way roughly every hundred meters.

"After you, Jim." Spock smiled down to him. He knew Kirk needed a good Vulcan smile every now and then.

"Well, understandably, Janice is not leaving this planet—"

"—I should be glad to hear it!" Kirk's report was stopped short by a clear, low voice, coming out of the darkness behind them. The voice continued, as a figure emerged from the forest into the

dim light of the trail. It paused a couple meters from the men, watching them for a moment in silence, eventually continuing, “She is so good with Security, and they just love her so much. They listen to her better than they listen to Harriet. Harriet — they see her as one of the boys. But Janice, she is something else.” The figure paused again, and took down its hood. “Quite a treasure,” Atmah finished.

She stepped closer to them, her features coming into focus. It was the end of her day, and a lot of her gold powder had sifted off throughout the day’s festivities and activities, making her face a deep and subtle mask of glinting cheekbones and gold-dusted hollows. Her eyes flashed in the moonlight as she continued.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything private here, boys.”

Kirk turned towards her, imperceptibly brushing his hand against Spock’s crotch as he pivoted to address her with a soft, wry smile. Yes, Spock was still thickening, too.

“Atmah! An auspicious pleasure to see you. But where is your entourage?”

“Oh, I’ve had plenty of time with my boys tonight. But you two … you’re what we call fresh blood!” She laughed, throwing her head back into the night, her teeth gleaming up towards the stars.

//Anything this person wants to do with us, Spock…//

//Wherever you lead, I will follow.//

//Spock, anywhere at all this person wants to take us…//

//I will remain by your side.//

//And I by yours. Let’s see where Atmah wants to go.//

//Affirmative.//

Glancing from Kirk to Spock and then back to Kirk again, Atmah led them away into the depths of the forest without any more conversation.

31. Spooning Leads to Forking

“I want you to fuck for me.”

It was a request that felt like a demand, but somehow it also felt like the natural and right thing to do. ‘Because here we are,’ thought Kirk, ‘in this beautiful well-fucked, seemingly peaceful, and stable society, even as a space colony. This was a colony that had somehow thrived. And look what they were doing with their energy? Fucking was priority! Orgasm was priority — women’s orgasm!’

As an Earth native, Kirk well understood the dangers of a purely patriarchal society — particularly a society that feared women’s sexual freedom. That was Earth’s Human history. But these Humans had been here long enough to make a new history, all their own. So, for some reason he couldn’t rightly explain, fucking in front of Atmah seemed like a good idea.

Seemed like a great idea. Maybe he was just getting into the spirit of cultural exchange? He asked Spock, mentally, if she was serious, and if this was a good idea.

//I have considered the same thing, my *t'hy'la* … and I have concluded that fucking in front of Atmah is a highly logical choice of action. For sex is the rule of this society, and if we are to create a sense of bonding, following their rituals and cultural mores — at their invitation, naturally — is prudent.//

//May I take that as consent?//

//Affirmative.//

Kirk always fancied himself the top with Spock, even though both knew inside that he would be under the Vulcan's thumb in minutes. It was a more subtle thing than top/bottom dynamics with them, at any rate. Kirk was the firestarter, and Spock was the fuel that kept the fire burning. And then Kirk became the fuel, and then Spock…

So, this time, he followed a familiar approach with his lover, wrapping his arms around Spock and pulling his head down into a kiss. Spock responded in kind, palming Kirk's glutes as he pulled his warm small Human close to him. Shirts were pushed up, pants were pulled down, and eager cocks were soon throbbing into each other, rubbing against each other, any chafing soon being lubricated from the fluids of Spock's cock and Kirk's precome. Hands reached between cheeks, and Atmah tossed a jar towards them from her perch of blankets laid across a gigantic mossy stump. She lay back in the darkness as she watched them, her legs spread, the slickness of her labia glistening in the crackling light of a fire in the municipal fire pit around which they had gathered.

Spock, ever the scientist, paused in his massage of Kirk's ass and torso, to bend over and deftly run the tricorder over the contents of the jar. "*Cocos nucifera*," he read.

"Coconut oil," Kirk mumbled into his neck, biting softly as he ground his hips into his Vulcan lover's upper thigh, one hand palming a weighty cock, the other massaging a strong gluteal muscle.

Spock opened the jar, scooping a generous portion into Kirk's hand between his own cheeks — and suddenly, the forest was filled with a low growl of pleasure from the previously silent Vulcan. Atmah laughed quietly to herself, her breath beginning to shorten and become slightly audible. Kirk was the only one who had been vocal for the entire encounter, sighing and moaning with almost every exhalation.

Spock lubricated his own, long fingers, his nails short and smoothly filed. He rubbed his hand in the cleft of Kirk's ass, feeling the central pucker kiss up and down towards his fingers — whilst he felt his own ass probed by excited Human digits, carefully manicured, and lubricated as well.

"You first?" Kirk asked his mate.

"If you stroke it," was the response.

The two muscular figures shifted in the firelight to stack their bodies together, gliding together in line towards a tree near the clearing. Spock leaned his chest against the tree, offering an

easy target to his warm lover, who was now sliding his hardened sex up and down Spock's crack, pressing and probing tantalizingly at his target more ardently on each pass. Still testing the waters.

Atmah shifted for a better view in the firelight. "Go on … you know he's ready," she purred encouragingly.

"He *is* ready," Kirk responded, "but that doesn't mean I don't have time to tease…"

With that, Spock bucked his hips back towards Kirk's cock, swallowing its head as it passed. He was not simply being penetrated — he was engulfing, and rippling his powerful anal muscles inwards, drawing his love in to his balls.

Atmah let out a yelp of pleasure, joined in unison by Kirk's incessant, pleasured groans, as well as a guttural sigh from Spock. Kirk leaned over Spock, hugging his chest to Spock's heaving back, as he wrapped one hand around his hips and gently began stroking Spock's cock with each thrust. It was as if he was jerking himself, just through someone else. His dearest Someone Else — this was not a new technique, but a practiced and perfected motion of pleasure, efficient and honed with time.

Atmah was clearly enjoying the show, her legs spread, her pussy glinting in the firelight like a shining target. Occasionally Kirk would look up from the current object of his passion, Spock, and watch her, looking into her eyes, looking all along and up her long, splayed legs, looking at the slick of her vulva that shone darkly in the firelight. Spock, as he clutched the tree, ass-out, had his face turned to unabashedly watch Atmah. He was the one getting his ass pounded, at any rate — to him, it only seemed logical that he could gaze upon whomever he chose.

Spock read Atmah's energy as he watched her — though Spock was a touch telepath, currently flooded with the familiar sensation of Kirk's feelings and perceptions mingling with his own, he still was half-Human. Although many different species claim Humans to be psi-null, Spock had lived amongst them and studied them long enough to understand that all Humans were telepathic in other ways — including by the visual reading of another's energy through gesture, posture, and facial expression. As a meditator, for years Spock had been practicing the compartmentalization of perception whilst still being able to absorb the "big picture"—the wholeness of all these separate energies around him. There was Kirk's energy, washing through him and combining in any and every way with his own, fully-uninhibited-with-Jim energy — and then there was this other being, Atmah, with her own energy for him to interpret.

As she was the instigator, and she was expressing signs of great enjoyment, Spock sensed consent and pleasure from Atmah — which put him at ease. He wasn't always enthusiastic about being watched — there had to be a sense of energetic reciprocity, for as a biological anomaly — half-Human/half-Vulcan — he was too used to being fetishized for his uniqueness. So, he felt no awkwardness or discomfort in watching her in return. And as there was no strict top/bottom dynamic to their sexual relationship, from this place of assertively watching Atmah while having his ass pounded by Kirk, Spock unwrapped one long arm from the tree and joined his hand to Kirk's. Gripping his cock with Kirk, Spock slicked his hand with his own copious

pre-ejaculate, and reached behind him to find Kirk's hips. 'Body-size differential creates many advantages,' he mused. 'Another example of IDIC.'

The roaming fingers of a grasping Vulcan wrapped themselves around one of Kirk's cheeks, massaging and pressing its way towards the source. Kirk's groans increased as he slowed his thrusting, letting Spock massage his cock with his ass. Spock slowed the roll of his hips, honoring his Human's stamina — perhaps he could come seventeen times in a row, but that was normal for Vulcans … when necessary. This one was a Human inside him, though, and he knew penetration would feel better for Kirk before he reached his refractory period, mind-meld, or no. He pushed away from the tree, pulling his body off Kirk, his hard, wet cock bobbing weightily in the firelight as he walked to a nearby stone slab covered in thick moss. He lay back upon it, chest heaving slowly up and down as he caught his breath. Kirk followed him, but was stopped by Atmah on his way to his lover.

"Clean yourself," she called to him, gesturing towards a nearby stone basin filled with water.

Kirk washed his cock at her suggestion. 'Perhaps she wants me clean because she's going to fuck me?' Kirk wondered hopefully, sensing his distracted and softening cock begin to feel the flush of renewed blood. He wandered off to Spock, who was basking on the smooth mossy stone by the fire like a lizard with a monumental erection. He climbed up on the rock, straddling Spock, his own fat, loose cock resting against Spock's stone-hard obelisk. The skin- to-skin connection was enough to send Spock's pleasure and stimulation coursing through his own veins, but regardless, Kirk leaned over him, bringing their faces close for a kiss and a meld. Of course. Why not meld now — she wants to watch everything, after all.

//And besides, it relaxes my asshole.//

//You're already relaxed.//

//And you're already in my mind.//

Spock curved the edges of his lips up into a slight smile, and brought a hand up to rest on Kirk's face. The gesture was casual — yet Atmah could see she was witnessing something very special between these two. She wriggled in pleasure as she sensed what was about to come, and reached into her bag, extracting a large vibrator. It made a purring noise as she activated it, the sound soon muffled by the night-black folds of her labia.

Kirk was lying on top of Spock, rubbing his full weight against his prone lover like two black snakes in a twisting frenzy of orgiastic passion. One of Spock's hands remained upon the touchpoints of their meld, the other reached around Kirk's back to continue massaging around and between his cheeks, pressing and prodding at the quickly loosening gateway at the center. The meld was glorious — a cyclone of expansive pleasure, scraping the hard edges off any thought it passed, making itself the prime object of both men's' attentions. And yes, those wild rotations included the voyeuristic Atmah, and her expressed pleasure — even if she wasn't part of the meld. Just a witness.

//She is watching us do it// thought Kirk.

//She loves watching us do it// Spock responded in turn.

//We love to do it as it is// Kirk reasoned with him.

//*Ashayam*, that is true// Spock acknowledged.

//But this is a light that shines and heals// Kirk asserted.

//And this light can dismantle// Spock explained.

//To build a new reality// Kirk projected.

//Of so many realities// Spock remembered.

//One of infinite// Kirk marveled.

//In infinite combinations// Spock reminded.

//And infinitely diverse// Kirk affirmed.

After a moment, Spock slowly drew his hand away from Kirk's face. The tornado was still within them, still wrapping them tightly together in mind and body — the meld was strong. Taking care not to break physical contact, Kirk pressed himself to sit up, and reached a hand down, taking his and Spock's cocks together in it as if clutching a bouquet. Spock reached each of his hands under Kirk's cheeks, and lifting him slightly, felt his own cock slide down the ridge of Kirk's, down the smooth, velvety skin of his balls, and then beneath them towards his target — a soft, puckered entry, now accepting of three, maybe four, lubricated fingers.

The point of entry was blisteringly sensational. Spock perceived the mental image of a night-black field punctuated by bursts of color like Earth flowers. Carnations, chrysanthemums, zinnias, dahlias of light, bursting into his mind's eye and fading into the next bright and gaudy display — this must have been a vision from Kirk. He teased a thread from the maelstrom and felt himself diving into an ancient spring, hidden deep in the rocky mountains of Vulcan, its cool, clear water descending to nadirs deeper than anyone could measure — this was a bit of his own mind in the meld. And then there was another vision, something from both — stars and nebulae flinging past them as they dove into the void-black field of space, plunging into the depths of the galaxy on the silver saddle of a warp drive.

//Doesn't matter where we go, really.//

//As long as I'm with you.//

Kirk pressed his forehead to Spock's as he rode him, closed-eyed and smiling pleasantly. It was easy to get past the pressure zone with Spock — melding with him invariably produced a wave of muscular relaxation within Kirk's body, like he was breathing fresh air again. //Should I invite her?// he sent his lover.

//Do you need to ask, *t'hy'la*?// was Spock's unspoken response.

Kirk opened his eyes briefly and grinned into Spock's deep chocolate-browns, dancing in the firelight, and then lifted himself off Spock's cock with a slick kissing sound. He turned around in his squat, facing away from Spock, and reached his left hand down between his legs to guide his lover inside his shining hole. His turgid cock flopped down as he leaned forward, sliding into position inch by glorious inch. Once Spock was nestled deep within him, Kirk leaned one

hand back on Spock's abdomen, and wrapped the other around his own cock, stroking it with spit as he looked, with finality, towards Atmah. He found her eyes watching him greedily.

'You know you want some of this,' he thought, as he watched her stroke herself, watching him stroke himself, as Spock rolled his hips relentlessly up towards his slowly bouncing ass.

//…//

Spock was in Kirk's mind, Kirk felt, but just as a presence, a witness, just watching Kirk work his magic. //Which, honestly,// Spock thought, //you don't really need to work that much. She already wants you, and me too. She wants everything … and she appears to get what she wants.//

//Oh, she's gonna get what she wants. She wants to feel the cock of a man whose hole hungers like a woman's. She wants a multidimensional being — a creature that penetrates and equally wants penetration. This place is very simple, Spock.//

And he was right in his assessment, for as Spock looked around Kirk's shoulder from beneath him, he saw Atmah beginning to stand and make her way over to his penetrated captain. She was caught in his irresistible tractor beam — the same one that caught Spock long ago, the one that catches so many others. //For who can resist a multidimensional being?//

//There's something for everyone!// Kirk laughed quietly to himself with this thought, as he reeled in his catch energetically — for all the world feeling like the fish. //Which is it, Spock?//

//Jim?//

//Am I the fisherman or the fish?//

//I believe this is one of those experiences in which the hunter is captured by the prey.//

With that thought, Spock felt the juicy weight on his hips increase as Atmah climbed onto Kirk like a spider capturing her kill. He slowed the roll of his hips, letting her find her natural rhythm as Kirk's moans deepened and slowed.

'Lucky Pierre,' Kirk thought to himself. 'It's been a moment since I've enjoyed this position, and even longer since I've enjoyed it with a woman. Lucky Pierre, indeed. Lucky Jim!'

//Lucky Jim, indeed. She is quite stimulated.//

// … quite…// the clarity of Kirk's thoughts wavered as he found himself reaching his edge, yanked from the realm of thought to the dominion of sensation. Indomitable sensation. Indomitable sensation, flowing from hip to hip to hip — Kirk felt like a tube, like an empty vessel of pleasure, there to receive and there to transmit, to focus, to magnify, to refine, to maximize…

Atmah's muscular abdomen began quivering. //…Spock…//

//…// a presence, a shining band of jade-tinged energy rippling through him in response—

It started as an almost-nervous chuckle, as Atmah rolled her hips on Kirk's, her hands on her shoulders, leaning back from him as she felt the strength of the two men below her. The chuckle became increasingly insistent, bursting through her in rips and spurts as she drew her brows together, suddenly pressing her eyes shut in the darkness, grinding, grinding — and

suddenly, releasing, an unencumbered flow of raucous, incredulous laughter *and* liquid pouring forth from Atmah. She lifted her hips a little to fully press the head of Kirk's cock into the walnut-shell-flesh of her g-spot, and sprayed his lower abdomen with ejaculate.

Spock's thrusts grew louder and wetter as her fluids dripped down Kirk's hips to their union, and she stepped back off Kirk, leaning forward to take his bouncing cock into her mouth. He lasted only seconds — by the time she had wrapped her hand around the wet base he was letting go, releasing himself in reams, as Spock, sensing an opportune moment for his own release, shuddered within him.

Atmah laughed again, this time voluntarily. "You two are too much!" she exclaimed with a wide smile in the dim firelight. "That was glorious. I'll see you both, with Lieutenant Uhura, at the Council meeting the day after tomorrow — Janice will be there, and we can discuss her options with her." And without any further ado, she swept up her belongings and disappeared into the night.

Kirk and Spock watched as she left, Spock's relaxing cock still snugly within Kirk, two chests heaving as they caught their breath.

"Brings a new meaning to fuck-and-run, eh, Spock?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing…" Kirk said, as he gently stood up from his lover's hips and sat down next to him on the mossy rock. "I am literally rode hard and put away wet."

"Indeed. There is a public bathhouse two hundred and thirty-eight point six meters towards the main dome — perhaps that could be of assistance?"

"I hope so. I have a hunch that today, at the very least, they might admit two dirty men."

Gathering their clothing, and again linking arms, they strode towards the light of the largest dome, glowing pinkish gold in the cool night sky.

32. Clean-Up, Up, Up, and Away

Uhura could swear she'd never seen the captain look so … well, pink. This wasn't an embarrassed blush she was seeing — it was more like a glow. Like the glow of a body that's been well-rested, well-fed, and well-fucked; had she ever seen Captain Kirk look all three at once?

Uhura reflected that Kirk often looked well-fucked — amongst other reasons, that was probably the result of having a first officer for a lover, as they were around each other all the time, she reflected.

Well-fed … well, Doctor McCoy would fuss with him if he looked too lean and had been forgetting to eat — but that didn't mean he didn't forget to eat all the time. She'd seen the captain hangry many a shift, so a well-fed captain was a bit of a rarity, depending on the intensity of the assignment.

But well-rested? That was the true anomaly. She doubted if he ever got more than six hours' sleep a night — perhaps another side-effect of having a Vulcan lover. Everyone knew Spock could function on four hours' sleep with no difficulty, and really didn't need more than seven hours' rest per day cycle — unless he was in a healing trance. What everyone didn't know, but she suspected, was that Kirk would try and keep Spock's hours. Was that Kirk's competitive streak? Or did he just get wound up when Spock was awake? Those two were connected in all sorts of funny ways — maybe he couldn't sleep as well alone? She was sure he'd never admit to that. She sighed. Conjecture was all she could make when piecing together the inner workings of those two. But nevertheless — the captain looked well-rested, well-fed, and well-fucked. Glory be.

She had been watching the subtle interplay between the captain, Spock, and Janice during the Council meeting around the great round table. Whenever Kirk looked at Janice, she shyly looked away from him, or smiled and looked down into her lap — like a schoolgirl. Spock looked stoic as usual through all this — but for some reason insisted on sitting next to Janice at the Council meeting, Harriet on her other side. Kirk was seated beside Spock with Atmah on his other side. Atmah, in turn, was flanked on her other side by Tanghi and other Council members, already in a heated debate about the sourcing of proper materials for wall repairs when the crew from the *Enterprise* arrived. At this point, though, they turned their attention to their guests.

A woman a few seats down from Atmah stood and brought the meeting to order. "All rise for acknowledgement of Session." Everyone stood, and the woman looked around the table at each of its twenty-odd occupants. She nodded resolutely.

"Council is now in Session. You may be seated."

Everyone took their seats, some sitting with audible groans.

"Must we always do all this sitting and standing each Session?" an older Council member lamented. "It wreaks havoc on my arthritis. I propose a motion to remain seated for the rest of the Session."

"Seconded," croaked another elderly Council member, as a few others around the table nodded.

Atmah broke her silence, murmuring to Tanghi, "They call it arthritis … but you know how enthusiastic everyone gets on Men's Day. I know my hips need a few days recovery." Tanghi winked in return and cleared her throat. "All those in favor of remaining seated for the duration of this meeting, raise hands," she announced in a clear voice.

A score of hands shot into the air. "Nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen … looks like we have a majority. Thirteen ayes to seven nays. Council will remain seated for the duration of this Session."

McCoy nudged Uhura, seated next to him, and said under his breath, "If this is how they conduct their meetings, don't be surprised if we're here all day." He had enjoyed a startlingly

blissful Men's Day with seven bawdy elder ladies who had been charmed by his accent — all details gleefully reported to his cohorts from the *Enterprise* before the meeting.

"First order of business: Men's Day recap!" a different Council member called out to the room.

"You always want a Men's Day recap," grunted one of the elderly Council members. "We know you fucked twenty-six men — what do you have to prove, Margherita?"

Margherita responded with no small degree of indignation. "I have nothing to prove, Ryeleigh-Garbanzo. Men's Day recap is an integral part of the Session — how else are we going to plan the next Men's Day if we can't analyze how this previous one went?"

"Margherita has a point," Tanghi duly interjected. "All those in favor of a Men's Day recap, raise hands." Again, a dozen hands were raised, and Tanghi carefully took count. "Ok, twelve. Who wants to speak first?"

Margherita stood, received withering looks from some of her fellow Council members, and then hurriedly sat back down again. "Sorry," she said. "I forgot about the first motion." She cleared her throat with an air of authority. "From the reports of my friends and neighbors … Men's Day was, again, a success. I fucked twenty-six men." At this, she silenced and glowered at the other Council members seated around the table. A few rolled their eyes, and Ryeleigh-Garbanzo called out, "Anyone else wanna report?"

"I have something to report," an elder Council member called out. "Proceed, Gorley Morg," Ryeleigh-Garbanzo sighed.

"Men's Day was a smashing success as always. Families enjoyed time together, the weather was beautiful, and all I saw were smiling faces. We should have another one soon." She paused, eyeing the rest of the Council mischievously. "In addition … I fucked twenty-eight men."

Margherita wrinkled her brow in consternation, now ousted from her throne as most-prolific-Men's-Day-celebrant at the table.

An even more elderly Council member rapped her knobby, cinnamon-colored knuckles on the great round table. "I, too, have a report to offer," she said, in a feeble, wizened voice, as she pushed her hands down on the table to bring herself slowly to standing.

"Gardita Bonita, first motion states no need to stand!" Margherita called out.

"To hell with the first motion," Gardita Bonita replied in a gravelly voice, defiantly remaining standing. "As many of you know," she began, "Men's Day is a time-honored tradition that I have been participating in since I was a slip of a girl, just of-age. That was many, many cycles ago. I have seen families strengthened by this tradition, energetic bonds reinforced between Security and the citizens of Cunting-Coxbury" — she placed emphasis on the 'cox', drawn out, as 'caaaaahhhhks' — "and I have seen … rigid…" — again, said with emphasis, and a slight roll of the 'r' — "sensibilities willingly relax their concepts of self, and ego, in favor of a good time on Men's Day." She paused, still standing. Margherita opened her mouth to speak but was quickly silenced by a raised, bumpy-knuckled finger.

Gardita Bonita continued. "I propose that we continue this time-honored tradition—"

“She does this every post-Men’s Day Session,” Janice whispered with a snicker to Uhura, seated on the other side of Harriet.

“—for the next few hundred cycles.” She paused again, still standing, and looked triumphantly around the table. “And, in addition,” she announced loudly, “I fucked forty-two men.” With a broad grin and accompanied by a few gasps from her audience, Gardita Bonita seated herself with an arthritic flourish, and closed her eyes.

Margherita couldn’t restrain herself. “But Elder Councilwoman Gardita Bonita,” she cried out, “there are only so many hours in a Men’s Day!”

“My dear,” Gardita Bonita replied with a twinkle in her eye, “when you have experienced as many Men’s Days as I have, you too may find yourself, and your vagina, as physiologically accommodating as I am blessed to be.”

McCoy’s eyes grew wide. “I think I’m in love,” he murmured to Uhura, as she suppressed a laugh.

Tanghi surveyed the rest of the Council members and guests at the table. “Would any of our esteemed guests from the *Enterprise* care to report on their Men’s Day experiences?”

Atmah looked pointedly at Kirk and Spock, leaning back in her chair magnanimously. Kirk, in turn, looked around the table, eyes landing on Uhura. She looked back at him quizzically, so he cleared his throat. “As captain of the starship *Enterprise*, I thank you for this very stimulating, rare opportunity to participate in Men’s Day…” He looked, again, at Uhura and Lieutenant Masters, as well as Yeoman Zahra, Lieutenant Radha, and Lieutenant M’Ress, also seated at the table. “But I believe that question may best be answered by my crew,” he finished, looking pointedly at Uhura. She smiled back at him, nodded, and spoke.

“Speaking for myself and my planet-side cohorts who have reported to me, we are honored to have participated in your celebration, and we hope you will look to us for intergalactic friendship.” What else could she say? She hadn’t fucked any ridiculous number of men … just a lot of women and the odd transman or non-binary type, but that was over the duration of the past week, not just the past two days. The captain wouldn’t judge her for it — hell, he was the one being shy! And he was pretty sexually open-minded anyways, she figured.

Atmah spoke at last. “Well, Nyota, you and your people have demonstrated that you can respect our way of life here, and under my authority, albeit temporary, your ship is welcome to return.” She turned to look at Kirk, sitting next to her, and gestured to Spock and McCoy as she addressed him. “And you, my dear Captain Kirk, are certainly welcome to return, with your charming men as well. My boys in Security have been raving about the *Enterprise* men they’ve met. You all certainly make a good impression.” She paused, looking towards Janice and Harriet. Janice was looking down, and Harriet was looking out into the distance, an unreadable expression shielding her emotions from her cohorts in Council.

‘She’d be a damn fine poker player,’ McCoy thought, as he looked around the table and smiled pleasantly to its occupants.

Tanghi broke in with a quiet clearing of the throat. “This seems an opportune moment to move on to our next order-of-business,” she announced, “so I propose that we continue celebrating Men’s Days sporadically, the next one being … how would you all say, in a month? All in favor, raise hands.”

Eight hands shot up, and two more gently raised. One of the gentle raisers asked, “Could we have it sooner?”

“That brings us right back to the wall!” another Council member called out, and slight pandemonium ensured as about a half-dozen council members began shouting opinions.

“Order! Order!” the woman who opened the Council Session called out. “Order!”

Atmah called out, “Listen to Lyn! We can get back to the wall question. These are our guests, let’s not waste their time.”

The table quieted down, some of the Council members looking around at the others irritably. Atmah continued, “As elected HR chief of Cunting-Coxbury—”

“She’s not their leader?” McCoy asked Uhura, under his breath. Atmah heard him, and answered him.

“Yes, Doctor McCoy, I am an elected official in charge of Human Resources. That means I keep things running smoothly and make sure if we have any off-world guests, who can abide by our practices, that they are cared for properly — amongst other duties, such as dealing with logistics for Men’s Days and the like. My job is an ambassadorship of hospitality and maintenance of the flow of energy here. We have no leader, only this Council, and we’re all elected officials responsible for different duties in our periods of office. In fact, my term is to end in only a few months. I imagine Tanghi will succeed me, unless anyone wants to challenge her bid.”

Kirk nodded, and remained silent. McCoy looked enlightened and smiled at her. “Thank you for clarifying.”

“But of course,” she responded. “As you and your cohorts understand, Doctor McCoy, it is my job to both monitor and care for your crew that have been accepted planetside. But I do understand that you all have come here on a mission.” She turned to face Kirk again, looking into his eyes.

“You aren’t really going to try and take Janice from us?” she asked, laughing without humor.

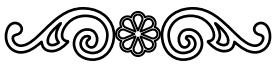
Kirk responded, looking at Janice, “We have discussed this matter fully, Janice and I, and we both agree it’s best for her to stay here, and act as a liaison to the Federation, should you all ever be in need of our services. For this, we are granting Janice an honorable discharge from Starfleet.”

At least three people around the table let out an exhale of relief — Janice, Harriet, and Atmah. Of course they couldn’t take Janice, Atmah reasoned — Security wouldn’t let them — but she was unsure if Janice wanted to return to her old reality, now that she had been found.

“Wonderful,” Atmah responded with a smile. “Now, we can get back to the matters at hand — scheduling of the next Men’s Day, and fixing the wall.” She turned to Kirk again and looked at the rest of the *Enterprise* crew. “You all may remain here for purely observational purposes if you wish; otherwise, you are free to leave the Session.”

“The wall is never going to get fixed if we bring the boys back here for another Men’s Day so soon!” called out one of the Council members.

Kirk stood, followed by the rest of his crew members present. “Atmah and the members of Council, we thank you for your favor.” With a slight bow, he turned away from the table and led his cohorts from the room.



As soon as they had left the council chamber, Kirk, Spock, Doctor McCoy, and Uhura separated from the other members of the *Enterprise*, to catch up as any set of old friends would.

“So Atmah is not the leader?” Kirk asked Uhura incredulously. “Why didn’t you let me know?”

“I just found out myself!” Uhura responded. “She showed me how every aspect of Cunting-Coxbury works this past week, but she was pointedly brief about their form of leadership here.”

“Did you ask her about how they’re governed?”

“I did, but she always replied that the Council was the governing force here. When I’d ask her for details, she’d tell me to wait until Session, as it’s seen as rude and uncustomary here to mix politics and pleasure. And I deduce,” she continued, “that as chief of HR here, her job is about cultivating pleasure.”

“Fascinating,” Spock responded. “This is a truly hedonistic society.”

“Just my kind,” Doctor McCoy smiled. “Jim, I tell ya — seven women! And they treated me like I was some kinda rare flower!” He chuckled, obviously still pleased with himself. “In Chinese medicine, the cultivation of vital energy, or jing, is of utmost importance. These folks have jing flowing from every pore! It’s remarkable. I can see why our Janice wanted to stay.”

“Doctor, again I say, you are truly a sensualist!” Spock chided.

“Aren’t we all, in a place like this?”

“To that, Doctor McCoy, I must concede. As they say on Earth, when in Rome…” Spock paused, collecting his thoughts. “Am I correct in remembering that the ancient Romans of Earth were famous for their orgiastic lifestyle?”

“You are,” Kirk responded. “But the ancient Romans and their lifestyles were outmoded by the more sexually conservative lifestyle of early Christianity. Let’s hope nothing so disappointing happens to the unusual little colony of Cunting-Coxbury of the planet Lesbos.” Kirk opened his communicator. “Kirk to *Enterprise*. *Enterprise*, do you read me?”

“Aye, Captain, loud ‘n’ clear,” Scotty’s chipper voice responded. Whether he had enjoyed his shore leave on Cunting-Coxbury, or was just thrilled about having an extended bout of caring for the ship was anyone’s guess — he was jubilant for some reason, regardless.

“Time to begin herding the crew. Four to beam up.”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n.”

33. Show and Tell

“So … are you gonna tell me how it was, or not?” Harriet turned away from the sink briefly to look at Janice, and then turned back to resume washing dishes.

Janice was bending over their small kitchen table, applying elbow grease to remove a fig juice stain with a wet cloth. She was scrubbing really intensely, Harriet thought.

“Babe? Lesbos to Janice? Do you read me, Janice?” Harriet glanced over her shoulder again.

Janice turned around and looked at Harriet, then smiled accommodatingly and sat down at the table, momentarily abandoning her labor.

“You know, Har, I’ve got something really special with you.”

“That bad, eh?” Harriet smiled to the sink.

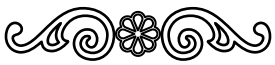
“No, not bad, he did all the right things, he knew what he was doing … it’s just, y’know … tastes change over the years.” Janice sighed.

“I get it, babe.” Harriet abandoned her task, dried her hands, and went to sit across the table from Janice.

“Did he make you come?” Harriet asked, after a moment of just sitting with Janice in relaxed silence.

“Yes … it was kinda a wimpy orgasm though. I really had to squeeze it out. No one really knows my body like you do.” Janice smiled, looking a little melancholy. “I guess I’m just not the girl I was when I came here so many years ago. The chemistry wasn’t like how I remembered.”

“Hell, babe, in six years, there ain’t a whole lot of stuff that’s like how I remembered,” Harriet replied with a smile.



“So … would you like me to tell you how it was?” Kirk nudged Spock, as the Vulcan sat quietly working at his desk.

Spock paused in his writing, and looked up at the Human source of the nudge. “Oh, yes. Excuse me, I had gotten caught up in my report on the composition of the domes as giant

orgone accumulators based upon the centuries-old scientific experiments of Earth psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich."

"Wait — what? Wilhelm Reich? The quack shrink who died in jail after he got in trouble with the FDA like three hundred years ago? I thought he was a proven fraud."

"So did the rest of Earth, for the past few centuries," Spock responded. "But the domes of Cunting-Coxbury are constructed from materials one could ostensibly use to build an orgone accumulator — a Faraday cage-like box Reich claimed used omnipresent so-called 'orgone' energy in the soil and air of Earth to cure cancer and other Human ailments."

"Yes, if I remember my history right, he thought orgone was the energy of Human sexuality … right?"

Spock nodded, and Kirk continued. "So those domes — they actually build and transmit … horniness?"

"Well," Spock responded, "remember, correlation is *not* causation. I am merely hypothesizing in my report. Further research is warranted, if the Council will allow it. I am grateful Janice is now our liaison there — perhaps she will be able to help us facilitate a more proper study."

"I wouldn't hold your breath, Spock. You see how slowly things get addressed in those Council meetings."

"Oh yes, I am well aware of this. I wouldn't consider it a priority anyway, especially in light of our pending assignment of exploring this area of the quadrant further." Spock rested his PADD on the desk before him, leaned back in his chair, stretching, and asked, "So … how was it?"

Kirk paused for a moment before answering, sitting on the edge of the desk to face his partner. "Well, Spock … let's just say … we've got a really good thing going on."

Afterword: Goodbye, Lesbos

After another ten hours of orbit while the rest of the crew leisurely beamed back to the ship, Kirk and Spock returned to the bridge for the first time in a week. Everything felt different — the crew looked rested and refreshed, as if they had truly milked every last drop out of their unconventional shore leave. Often the bridge felt like it was buzzing with frenetic energy — this time, the energy was even and relaxed, and orders were carried out with smooth efficiency.

Kirk took his seat at the captain's chair. "Ok, folks, this has been quite the week. As much as I don't want to say goodbye to Lesbos and Cunting-Coxbury, our orders await us. Sulu, let's break orbit and head deeper into the quadrant. Warp one."

"Aye, aye, Captain, warp one." Sulu turned and looked back from his console. "Warp one … where?"

"Oh, let's say, thirty-seven degrees, mark six. I hear there's a rogue Lesbian satellite that's drifted out in that direction. Might as well go check it out."

“Ok. Course laid in for thirty-seven mark six, warp one.”

The stars on the viewscreen slowly blurred to lines, the planet of Lesbos disappearing behind them. And then, not a moment later, the stars blurred back to points again.

The denizens of the bridge looked around at each other in surprise. Sulu’s stifled laugh broke the silence. Kirk called out to him, “Sulu! Report! What’s going on?”

Sulu took a long moment to answer, and then turned back to look at Kirk, his eyes suddenly completely dilated, as if he was tripping on LSD. He paused again before he spoke giggling slightly, “Oh, nothing sir. It … ah … appears we have stopped in some sort of … energy field.” His shoulders were shaking slightly. “Should we … check in … with Engineering?”

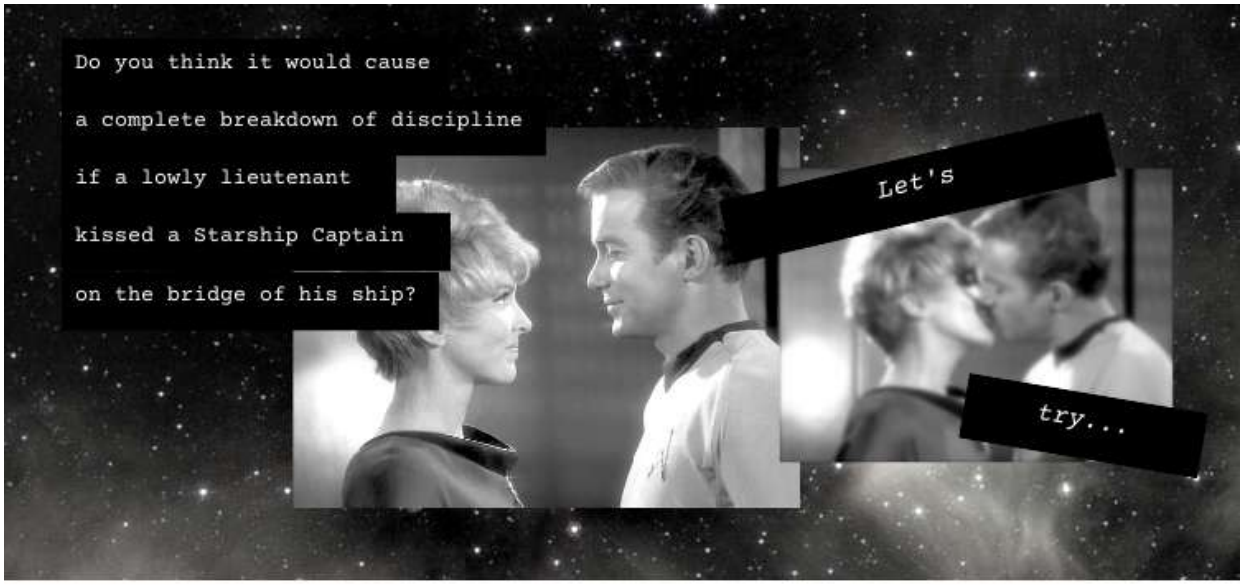
A hollow feeling opened out in the pit of Kirk’s stomach. It was always something. Always an energy field or an ion storm or something out there to drag them back to reality.

Always something, out there in the stars.

Better Luck Next Time
by cvrue

better
luck
next
time

by cvrue

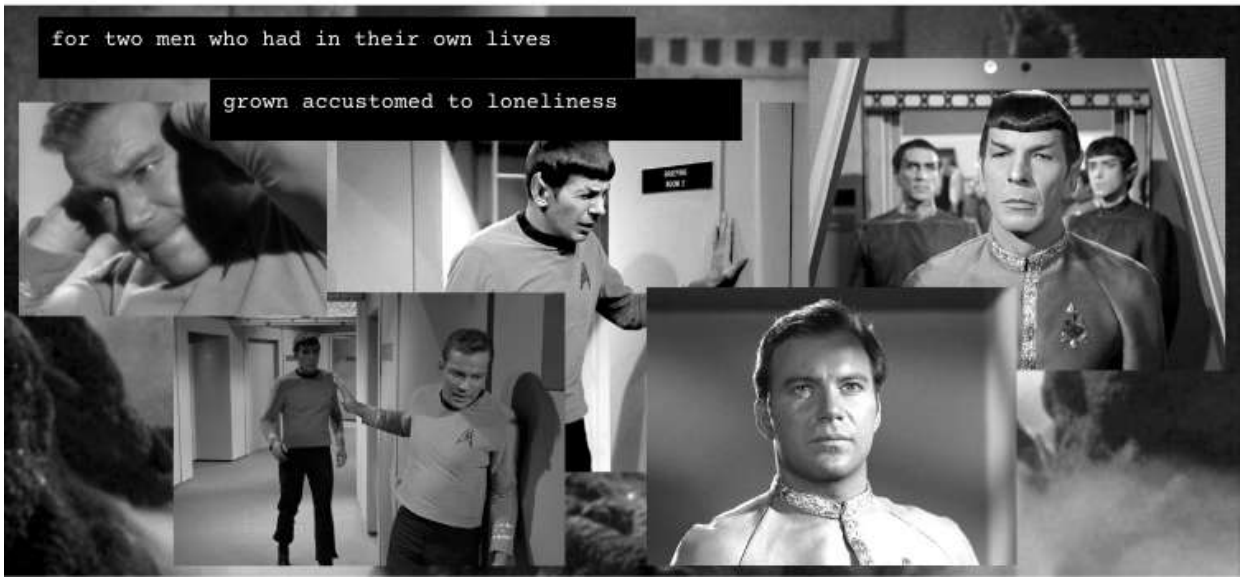

Do you think it would cause
a complete breakdown of discipline
if a lowly lieutenant
kissed a Starship Captain
on the bridge of his ship?
Let's
try...

See?
No change.
Discipline goes on.
The Starship Captain goes on.

James T. Kirk, Captain of the USS Enterprise
and his First Officer, Commander Spock

While exploring new worlds
they built trust, respect and friendship
the skills required for a successful command team

playing chess together
beaming down together
in turbolifts together
in ready rooms and bedrooms together
they forgot that being together was a choice


for two men who had in their own lives
grown accustomed to loneliness

they found in each other validation of their secret "I was so alone"s

and the indisputable proof that "I am no longer".

discipline

discipline

Are these the top ten skills of

a First Officer and his Captain

discipline

discipline

or had things changed

if things had changed
if he needed him
desired him
yearned for him
if he touched
if he kissed
if he burned
discipline
discipline
if things had changed, then

you

do

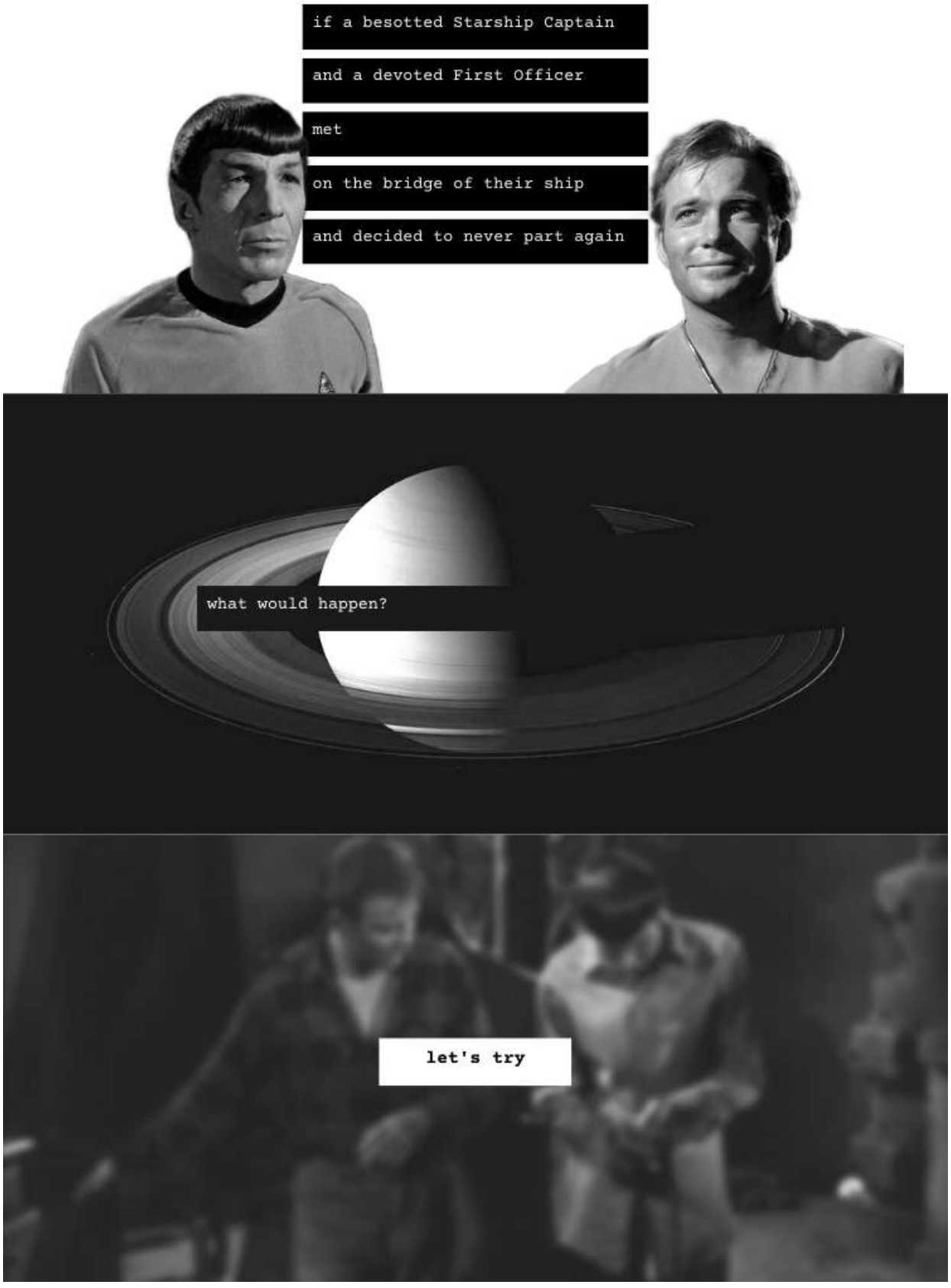
think

that

something

might

if he gathered his courage and confessed his love for him.


if a besotted Starship Captain
and a devoted First Officer
met
on the bridge of their ship
and decided to never part again
what would happen?
let's try

“The body is flesh to which the mind gives meaning
and into which the katra breathes life.”

Surak

KiScon 2022 (Online), November 4 — 6, 2022