

Spice

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Spice

by [eimeo](#)

Summary

It's a question of biology. Vulcan biology.

The problem with falling in love with a member of an insanely private species is that it just might take you the best part of a five year mission to work out that the feelings are required. And then you might discover that he's already decided that the two of you can never be together.

And what are you supposed to do if he won't tell you why?

Notes

Written as a response to T'Lara's ingenious challenge, which is noted when it shows up in-text. Huge thanks to my fantastic betas Frodolass, penguin_attie and miloowen for being, well, fantastic. Any mistakes that remain are all mine.

If you'd like to download a clean copy (minus the author notes, but including the translations from Vulcan), go to: <https://www.mediafire.com/?614jayre1jyais6>

Prologue

Amanda is humming a fragment of T'Vela's *Ki'Sarlah Nash-Veh* as she works, haloed by the rich summer sunlight that tumbles like thick cream through the window. Outside, bleached by the contrast of the room's cool shadows, the garden stretches and waves in a light breeze, the earthy scent of warm grass and early roses drifting through the open glass in a collision of sensory input that is almost soporific in its tranquil assault. Spock stands in the kitchen doorway and watches the methodical, rapid-fire movement of his mother's hands as she works the knife with practiced ease, peeling, and slicing in time with the complex polymetric *farr-dath* of the central aria. Contentment washes over him like a gentle caress. In this quiet moment, with no-one to see but Amanda, he makes no effort to suppress it.

"You move like a cat, Spock," says his mother without looking around. "Come and help me here a moment, will you?"

He crosses silently to where she stands in front of a heavy wooden butcher's table, surrounded by the raw materials of today's project. Pickling jars glimmer lazily in the sunlight, stacked two deep on the work surface. Arranged into careful piles in front of them are bundles of spices from her garden: long, curling chili peppers, gnarled ginger roots, bulbous garlic, pale horseradish. On the central island, suspended in brackish fluid, several flasks of skinned and glistening shallots testify to the morning's efforts, and a pot bubbles sharp-smelling liquid on the stove.

She nods to a glass bowl sitting out of the sunlight a little way further down the worktop. "Bring that over here and hold it for me, please," she says. The Ambassador's residence comes with a modest compliment of staff, of course, but both Spock and his father have long since ceded this ground to Amanda. The garden is hers, she says, and she will manage its produce herself. It gives her pleasure, she says, and if her husband has reconciled himself to perpetual confusion in the face of his wife's illogical proclivities, her son might secretly believe that he understands, at least a little.

He holds the bowl as she's asked and she scoops the thin, translucent slices into her hand and carefully decants them inside. A cloud of pungent ginger-fumes explodes into the air between them as the oils are disturbed, and it cascades out of the canister, coloring the streaming sunlight and twisting against the sensitive olfactory receptors in his nose. She inhales deeply and pleasure lights her eyes, drawing them closed for a moment of unreserved satisfaction. Spock watches her agile face and its patina of emotion, carelessly broadcast for anyone to read. She is as changeable as the clouds that sweep the lazy azure sky beyond the window, a daughter of this planet of abundance where nothing is fixed.

Amanda breathes deeply and sets the jar to one side. "Are you busy, Spock?" she asks.

“I am currently occupied in...”

“Aside from helping me put chopped ginger into a bowl,” she adds with equanimity borne of long association with Vulcans.

“Negative. I have completed my studies for today.”

She sets a wide-bladed knife on a chopping board beside her, where red and green chili peppers lie, warmed by their hours in front of the window. “Then let’s keep you out of trouble,” she says.

He sets to the task without comment. Human idiom is like a second language to him - his mind switches effortlessly between Vulcan and Terran Standard, but the patterns of his mother’s speech occasionally require a little thought. As he carefully splits the waxy skin and pulls apart the damp, piquant flesh it conceals, the thought comes to him that her words and their unlikely implication may be her way of acknowledging that she understands him well enough to know that there is nowhere else he would rather be right now than slicing peppers by her side.

The morning sun is warm on his robes, settling into the fabric like tepid water and heating them to a narcotic whisper against his skin. Relaxed, the parental bond thrums peaceably between them, the way it always does when Amanda forgets to concentrate on it, and it’s like a lullaby in the centre of his brain. His hands work without conscious instruction, slicing and mincing Terran delicacies that, despite his mother’s patient exertions, refuse to thrive on his homeworld, and he feels himself settle into the first level of a meditative trance. Perhaps this is why, when she sucks in a tiny gasp and clutches her sleeve to her face, he moves without thinking.

“Oh!” she cries, digging the ball of her wrist against her eye socket. “Something’s in my eye...”

Thoughtlessly, carelessly, his hand reaches towards her face the way hers reaches instinctively for him, closing around her wrist. “Allow me to help, Mother,” he begins, but her free hand slaps his away.

“Spock - no!” she hisses, and turns her shoulder towards him, blocking him with her body.

He stiffens, realizing what he’s done, and shame floods his belly like ice water. “Forgive me, Mother,” he says quickly. “I have committed an unpardonable breach of decorum...”

“Spock!” she says, and he can hear the smile in her voice even though his gaze is fixed on the wall behind her head and her face is obscured by the wrist pressed into her aggrieved eye socket. “Spock, my sweet, beautiful boy. It’s not that, it’s only... Soak a corner of that tea cloth and pass it to me - soak it well, please. That’s it.” She takes the dripping cloth from his hand and swipes it over the crease where her eyelid flutters against her cheek. “You’ve been slicing peppers, Spock. The oils are on your hands, and they are very irritating to sensitive Human skin. They burn mercilessly.” She touches her hand to his face. “Don’t look so stricken, dear. You weren’t to know. These are things you must learn. In some ways, you’re my son. In other ways, you are Sarek’s. And I’m thankful for both halves.”

Spock is nine Terran years old. In less than a month, his father’s household will return to Vulcan, where Spock will be an oddity and an outcast, sectioned by the subtle, fundamental differences that his pale complexion and pointed ears camouflage on Earth. He belongs nowhere, but least of all where he ought to fit in and doesn’t. He touches a steady, perfumed finger to his eyeball and feels nothing but the press of skin on skin, nothing but the token protest of the sensitive mucus membrane at an unwarranted invasion. Amanda smiles, but another piece of him calcifies. Not Vulcan, and now a little bit less Human too.

Chapter 2

Kirk's hand is tingling.

It's something of a surprise to find that he's aware of this small fact, buried as it is beneath the strata of chaos that have layered over the general maelstrom of his daily life. But it's dark now and he's alone with far too many thoughts clamoring for attention inside his aching skull, and one of them - a particularly vociferous and insistent one; the Admiral Komack of thoughts, if you will - is demanding that he pay attention to the network of nerves that stretch beneath the skin of his right hand. Because they are alive with remembered touch.

The ship is as silent as a ship at warp can ever be, which is to say that the engines thrum on the limits of hearing, vibrating through the fabric of the hull and into the bulkheads and across the air that touches them. The hint of voices carry imperfectly through the walls as assorted crew pass along the corridors outside. Things that are supposed to reassure their Human masters that they're working efficiently periodically go beep, the air filtration system rumbles obstreperously, the replicator sighs, water sings in buried pipes, and beneath it all, outside the range of Human hearing, but available to a man who knows his ship like a father or a lover, is the hum of life living itself, minute by minute.

It's usually comforting. Tonight, it tap-dances along the fine line between *oppressively silent* and *shut the hell up*.

His hand is tingling.

A portion of his rational mind insists that the gesture could not have been intentional. It must have been a reflex action, automatically applied and then impossible to unobtrusively correct. There is just no way that Spock deliberately reached for his Captain's hand. Even if he was distracted by the fact that Kirk was temporarily inhabiting the body of Janice Lester, there is still no way that Spock intentionally wrapped his fingers around the wrist of an unknown woman in full view of Dr. McCoy, three security officers and someone who looked like the Captain. It just didn't happen. It must have been an instinctive reaction, born of the fact that Kirk was trapped in a body without physical strength and four men were bearing down on them, one of whom had already demonstrated his ample capacity for violence. They're a logical race now, but Vulcan society is founded on the principle of the warrior caste. Buried beneath that rational exterior, there must be a remnant of the inherent drive to protect the vulnerable. It was a visceral, throwback reaction - like the thousand times the First Officer has illogically thrown himself into harm's way to protect the Captain - and there can't be any significance to it.

So why didn't the hand stay fixed around his lower arm? Why did it snake downwards from its initial encircling grip to close around his fingers? Why did it stay there for almost *half a goddamn minute*? Why didn't it spring away from his at the first press of flesh on flesh as though Kirk's skin burned?

Why won't his hand stop remembering the touch of the long, cool fingers brushing against his?

He should be angrier about the whole insane day, but all he feels is heavy, sad, and confused. He should be swinging between horror and fury at what nearly happened, but instead he's almost swamped by a rushing swell of pride when he remembers what his senior crew was prepared to do. His mind is full of *should*, and in fact the only really important *should* just now is the one that ends with *be asleep*, but his eyes roam restlessly over the shadowed bulkheads and he knows there's no point in even pretending to himself that this is likely. A more realistic *should* involves getting

started on his report to HQ, in the hope that he can sedate himself with paperwork. It's a *should* with an outside chance of success. He swings his legs out of bed and calls for the lights.

It's been in the back of his mind for weeks now – twenty-three weeks and four days, in fact - that the remainder of the mission can now be measured in months. He scarcely bothers to convert the stardate back to the Gregorian calendar anymore because every date that passes is a reminder that the next time it comes around it will find him altered: grounded at Fleet HQ, perhaps, or spirited away to another ship. Maybe he'll still be on the *Enterprise*, but she won't be his *Enterprise*. The faces will change, the command crew will disperse to the promotions they are long overdue, the pulse of the bridge will be different. Uhura is much too talented to waste any more time behind a communications console, Chekov needs to flex his intellectual muscles, Sulu is itching for command. Scotty is practically welded to the bulkheads, but Bones hasn't got the heart of an explorer and he's ready to take a planetside assignment, maybe start mending some fences with his daughter before she gets any older. And Spock...

Spock.

Kirk remembers the exact moment he realized he had fallen in love with his First Officer. It's not the stuff of Brontean romance; it would barely make it past the first draft of a substandard romantic comedy. But it's been his limited experience that all of the truly meaningful attachments of his life have had their genesis in similarly stupid circumstances. He asked Ruth to marry him on impulse in the moments after a ground car careened through a curbside puddle of infinite proportions as they passed on the sidewalk, because when she looked up at him, San Francisco winter street-water straggling her elegant blond hair and trailing caterpillars of mascara down her face, instead of the expected fury she burst into fits of uncontrollable laughter, and he decided that three months' courtship was enough to know that he wanted to be with her forever. He met Carol and impregnated her with their son after a poetry reading they were both attending during a shore leave on Earth turned out to be so spectacularly dull that the only way to enjoy it was to make better use of the complimentary wine than was necessarily advisable. Gary, he kissed on a dare, before he'd even admitted to himself that gender wasn't particularly important to him as far as attraction went. If Spock is different, it's because it's the first time in his life that Kirk has allowed an infatuation to simmer after he's acknowledged it, and this not because his feelings are ambiguous. They were a long time establishing themselves, but they are nothing if not decisive. There was a day, a quiet day between missions when no-one was shooting at them, no-one was trying to invade the ship and no-one was in any imminent danger of death, when they were sitting in the officers' mess after an ordinary dinner, and Spock suddenly sneezed. That was all it took: one single autonomic function that wordlessly and effortlessly crumbled the wall of imperious Vulcan detachment, and something incandescent ignited in Kirk's belly. In retrospect, the embers had been smoldering for many, many months, but by the time his First Officer looked up to find the Captain's eyes fixed on him and shining, the blaze had gone nuclear.

"Bless you," said Kirk, and received a quirked eyebrow for his concern.

"Well, I'll be damned," said McCoy, leaning back in his seat with an expression of enraptured delight. "How come nobody told me Vulcans sneeze?"

And that was it. The bickering started, predictable as atomic decay, and Scotty turned up to watch for a while, and afterwards everyone went about their business as if nothing had changed. And nothing *did* change, because what are you supposed to do? No-one has ever been so manifestly, self-evidently unattainable as his Vulcan First. It's not only that he's never given the Captain any reason to think that his feelings are returned, it's that he's actively given him reason to think that they are not. In the year and a bit since The Sneeze, there have been two women in his First Officer's life - one of them unabashedly courted in the Captain's presence - which is an increase of

100% over all the preceding years of the mission, and those are terrible odds.

It's not the end of the world. It's not even the first time he's had to dial his needs down to friendship when his instinct pushes for more. He is certain that he can be content with this, as long as Spock is in his life. And this is guaranteed, barring accidents and general mayhem, for as long as the mission continues.

Kirk has come close to asking several times. They talk together so easily now that it's difficult to remember the awkward, hostile silences of his first months of command, when his every effort was met with a blank wall of antipathy. These days they find an excuse to spend time together most evenings - chess in the rec rooms or their quarters; drinks with Bones or Scotty or just the two of them, settled either side of the Captain's desk with Kirk's stocking feet propped on the table and a poorly-concealed mask of offended sensibilities pretending to manifest itself on Spock's face; long, Sisyphean workouts in the gym where the Captain tries to preserve some modicum of pride on behalf of the Human race and fails repeatedly; nights spent doubling as a lab assistant - to the horror of the junior members of the science team, who scatter like startled pigeons when the Captain appears - when something is particularly urgent or significant, or simply when his friend is excited about something and wants to share. Many times, companionable silence has settled around them like a comfortable coat and into the lull, Kirk has wanted to ask, *so - have you given any thought to what you might want to do after the mission is over?* And every time he has caught the words before they can leave his lips. It isn't just that he knows - he knows - that Spock will answer, very logically, that he will have very little say over his next posting and that he'll go where Starfleet puts him. It's that he's afraid that he *won't* say this, and that Kirk will have to hear that Spock has plans for his career that don't involve his Captain.

He's still sitting on the edge of the bed, and he realizes that his eyes have fallen upon the bathroom door and stayed there. He sighs. It's not the first time this has happened, and he's very, very glad that nobody knows this but him. He can just imagine Bones' face if he knew that sometimes Kirk lies in bed at night and watches the door to the head as if it's the portal to a magical land where dreams come true. He knows what he's going to do but he pretends that he doesn't for a little while, even as he stands up and walks across the room. Right up to the point where his feet have to carry him one way to his desk or another way to the smallest room, he pretends that he's going to settle into stultifying duty, and he is, it's just that he's going to go and stand in the bathroom for a while first.

By mutual consent, they've agreed on a median temperature halfway between Vulcan and Terran standard, which means that both of them have spent the past four years being politely uncomfortable and, to the Human nose, the head has the distinctive odor of drains in a hot country no matter what maintenance try to do. Heated air hisses into the damp cool of his bedroom as the door opens, and Kirk crosses to the john for a justificatory pee. Pride will not allow him to glance up at the second door, where a single Starfleet-issue towel is the only evidence of the room's other occupant, but he can feel it lurking in the corners of his peripheral vision. On the other side, the temperature climbs precipitously towards a simple, single bunk, mirror of the Captain's, on which sleeps an undreaming figure, undoubtedly in a logical manner. No declarative sound escapes the cocoon of desert warmth, though the bulkheads are narrow here and admit the noises of daily life: no rustling of bedcovers, no somnolent mutterings, no ragged in-drawn breath. It could only possibly be a Vulcan on the other side of the walls, and this is really not helpful to the Captain's current state of mind.

A *Vulcan* curled his fingers over Kirk's.

He finishes his ablutions before his little mind can make any connections between fingers and the organ they currently grip - or else he really *won't* get any sleep tonight - and crosses to the small

vanity to wash his hands. His eyes fall on his reflection, underneath the condensation that has gathered in the unnatural heat, and the relief in his eyes is momentarily unsettling. Presumably this too will pass, this sense of minor panic every time he approaches a reflective surface, in case the face that stares back at him has somehow morphed back into Lester's. In the morning, Dr. McCoy will give him the once-over for Starfleet records, to certify that he's fit for duty, but if *Janice* can pass the standard test used to measure psychological stability then Kirk is pretty sure he has nothing to worry about - which is actually kind of worrying, come to think of it. He runs his fingers across his chin, now reassuringly prickling with stubble, and exits the head before he can do something really humiliating like rest a wistful hand against Spock's bedroom door.

He has spent four years carefully observing all manner of proprieties and social codes, none of which come easily to a Human, and especially not a Human with a propensity to communicate through touch. He didn't even *try* to shake hands on their first meeting - not that it earned him any points or went any way towards dispersing the manifest air of *you are not Christopher Pike* that hovered around his First Officer like a cloud of angry wasps for at least the first six weeks of the mission. He has caught himself in the act of delivering a friendly backslap or slinging an arm around his friend's shoulders more times than he's slipped up, he's certain, and he has absolutely, positively never reached for Spock's hand. He thinks. No, he's pretty sure about this. He'd definitely remember. And anyway, if he has, it's been a fleeting touch, an indiscriminate brush of skin that's vanished before either one of them has noticed. Nothing invasive, and certainly not a twenty-five second grip that deliberately closed all five fingers around their counterparts and pressed tightly into his flesh. He knows what it would mean to Spock. It *must* have been instinct.

Maybe he should mention it.

But he dismisses the idea before it's even formed. For a start, what would he say? More than that, what would it even achieve? Either Spock is aware of what's happened or he's not, and either way he isn't going to be exactly jumping up and down with gratitude if Kirk brings it up. The Captain has seen that elegant face lock down too many times in the face of an accidental blunder to knowingly bring on a full-scale Vulcan freeze. No-one, *no-one* in the galaxy does *pissy* like an irritated Vulcan, mostly because *pissy* is virtually unassailable when you deny that it exists.

Which leaves him... nowhere. Nowhere different, anyway. Exactly where he was this time yesterday, thank every beneficent deity, inhabiting a body he knows what to do with, in command of his ship and his faculties, and with plenty to occupy his restless mind. He barks a soft command to the terminal in the semi-darkness of his office area and the shadows light up as the screen comes to life in a stream of messages. Three of them are from Spock, sent earlier in the evening when Kirk was presumably in conference with Admiral Fitzpatrick, one of which bears the unpromising title, *Concerns relating to the sub-optimum efficiency of the gravimetric field displacement manifold*. None of them look as though they carry even a passing reference to hand-holding. The Captain lowers himself into his chair with half a sigh and issues a dictate command. Softly, although he knows that his voice will not carry as far as his friend's sleeping quarters, and it would scarcely wake him if it did, he begins his report.

“Stardate 5928.5. Having arrived at the archaeological settlement on Camus II, the Captain was accosted by one Dr. Janice Lester, a woman of his earlier acquaintance, who had familiarized herself with the operations of the starship Enterprise. Further research is required into the nature of the technology employed to effect the life-entity transfer employed by Dr. Lester; orders to pursue said research issued to Commander Spock, First Officer and head of Sciences aboard the Enterprise...”

He stops, rubs his eyes, glances at the chronometer, immediately wishes he hadn't.

His hand tingles.

Chapter 3

“Jim, you’re fine,” says Bones, handing a towel to his sweating Captain as he swings his legs off the biobed and sits up. It’s the second time in two days that Kirk’s had a run-in with the wall exerciser, and, if his brain doesn’t remember the last time, his body certainly does. He’d swear the Doctor was enjoying himself. “I didn’t know better, I’d say Dr. Lester took better care of your body than you do yourself.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” says Kirk wryly. He slings the towel around his neck and lowers himself to the ground. “Imagine the wonders she could have worked if she’d had access to it for longer than seven and a half hours,” he adds pointedly.

“Yeah, well, don’t forget I haven’t signed your certification papers yet, Captain,” says the Doctor.

“Blackmail, Bones?”

“You work with what you’ve got in this line of business.”

He scrolls through a PADD as Kirk wriggles his damp arms into his command tunic. Bones is his usual irascible self but there are lines of strain around his eyes and furrowing his brow and Kirk suspects his CMO slept about as well as the Captain did last night. He tries to remember the last time they sat down together and watched a game or a movie, or even just shared a decent bottle of bourbon and talked about something other than ship’s business. Shore leave is definitely overdue.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance you’ll sign them now and let me get back to the bridge?” he says now, without expectation.

Bones laughs his Machiavellian laugh, the one he reserves for sickbay, where his autocracy is unchallenged. “Sit down, Captain,” he says.

But Kirk has learned a thing or two about psychological warfare and the application thereof in the thwarting of Bones’ plans. “After you, Doctor,” he says.

The Doctor lowers himself into the chair behind his desk, with the air of one who knows very well that the upper hand is his. He says, “Sit down, Jim, I’m not going to bite. I just want to know how you’re doing, is all.”

“Is that Dr. McCoy asking, or Bones?”

“Personal or professional interest, you mean?” He leans back in his chair and folds his arms. “Both, I guess. Call it professional interest, off the record.”

Kirk raises an eyebrow. The significance of the gesture is not lost on him and he hides a laugh in an ironic smile as he lowers himself into the chair opposite. “Off *and* on the record, Bones - I’m fine. A little shaken up, disoriented maybe, but no lingering urge to bring you and all my closest friends with me every trip to the bathroom, if that’s what you mean.”

Bones quirks his lips but his stare is relentless. It’s a really *good* stare. “Have you talked to Spock?”

“Spock?” Kirk’s pulse spikes but he keeps his face steady. “A little, yesterday. On the bridge. Why?”

“Jim,” says McCoy, and the concern in his voice is surprising. He’s seen the wall drop once or twice, mostly when Spock is injured or otherwise incapacitated and it falls to the Doctor to work out some way to hang onto him in the face of immovable Vulcan reticence. Bones has known Spock longer than Kirk has, and the Captain has never once doubted that the bickering and antagonism masks a genuine respect and grudging affection, but he’s never heard him use that tone when their First has been in no immediate danger of death. “Jim, he was prepared to stand in front of a firing squad.” A beat. “For you.”

As if he needs to be reminded of *that*. He slept restlessly last night when was able to sleep at all, and his dreams were full of phaser fire. But his voice is even when he says, “So were you, Doctor, if I recall. You and Mr. Scott.”

“That’s different, Jim.” And if the gaze hardens just a little, if the set of the jaw tightens almost imperceptibly, it’s only because Kirk knows him so well that he sees it at all. “We didn’t know what we were getting into, Jim. Spock did. He stood up in front of the senior officers on a charge of mutiny. *Mutiny*, Jim. You know how Vulcans are, their code of honor. You know what’d have happened next and so does Spock, and he stood up there and did it anyway.”

The Captain of the *Enterprise* carries out an illegal death penalty on the son of the Vulcan Ambassador to Earth, on trumped-up charges that Vulcan pride cannot ignore. Yes, Kirk knows what would have happened next. It wasn’t just his life Spock risked, once Lester’s plans became

clear - it was political chaos, potentially the end of the Federation, somewhere down a long and dangerous path of recrimination and counter-recrimination. Half of Kirk's conversation with Admiral Fitzpatrick last night was dedicated to making sure that Spock knew not to tell his dad what nearly came to pass.

He spreads his hands. "What do you want me to say, Bones? He won't thank me for mentioning it. He won't thank me for *thanking* him. And he certainly won't thank me for asking if he's all right."

"Just..." Bones waves an irritable hand. "Just keep an eye on him, Jim. And yourself. Lord knows, between the two of you I've got more gray hair on my head than I did twenty-four hours ago. I tell you, Jim, if I make it to the end of this mission, I'm gonna hole myself up in private practice in a town so small it don't even appear on the map. I'm gonna spend my days pulling buttons out of kids' noses and thank the Lord I don't live in interesting times anymore."

It's a little too close to Kirk's wandering thoughts from the night before and he drops his eyes, before he realizes that Bones has his gaze fixed on him and will absolutely not miss the gesture. He covers it with a smile and says, "I'd better promote you before you can escape, then."

"Don't you dare, Captain."

"Don't worry, Bones." He glances up. "I'm sure you've offended enough of the admiralty that they'd refuse to ratify it anyway."

"Well, the life entity transfer hasn't cured your questionable sense of humor, I see," says the Doctor, with a long-suffering sigh. "I'll sign your papers, Captain. Now, get yourself back up onto the bridge before the hobgoblin frets."

"I'd like to see you say that to his face," says Kirk cheerfully.

"I'll have to, you hang around here much longer," says Bones.

Kirk stands, tucks his chair back under the desk and rests his hands on it for a moment. He says, "Have you spoken to Dr. Coleman this morning?"

Bones nods. "Sure. First thing."

“How’s Janice?”

“Sedated. Told him he’ll keep her that way, long as they’re on this ship.”

A flare of resentment bubbles in Kirk’s chest but he presses down hard upon it and says, “Is that really necessary?”

“I’d say so, Jim. We don’t have the resources to deal with a Janice Lester on the *Enterprise*. It’s for her good as much as anything else.”

“She wasn’t always so... full of anger.”

“Nope. I’d say she wasn’t. Shame of it is, I don’t even disagree with most of what she’s saying. But no-one’s gonna listen to her now.”

“No.” Kirk drums a tattoo with his fingers on the back of the chair.

“Something on your mind, Captain?”

“Plenty, Doctor.” He looks up and flashes a grin. “But I believe I’ll keep it to myself. At least until you sign off on my psych-eval.”

Bones heaves a sigh and reaches for his PADD and stylus. “Well, there goes my leverage,” he mutters as he scrawls a signature. “Now get, Captain.”

The Captain gets, but at the door he pauses and turns over his shoulder. “Bones,” he says. “Thanks. For... what nearly happened.”

It’s not enough. It’s not nearly enough, but the words haven’t been invented to describe that sort of gratitude and, in the absence of suitable hyperbole, Kirk has usually found that simple works best.

McCoy inclines his head, purses his lips. “Any time, Jim,” he says. “Make sure you thank Spock, too. And I’ll deny everything if you tell him I said so.” On cue, the ship’s whistle sings and the Doctor rolls his eyes. “Speak of the pointy-eared devil...”

He waves a dismissive hand at the Captain as Spock’s voice sounds over the comm.

“Spock to sickbay...”

“Yes, Mr. Spock, he’s just leaving,” says the Doctor with what he probably imagines is an air of infinite patience. As the doors close behind him, Kirk just catches a muttered, “What am I, a doctor or a chaperone?”

~*~

Kirk diverts to his quarters for a shower and sends his Yeoman up to the bridge with the news, which is cowardly, but he hasn’t spoken to his First yet this morning and he just cannot imagine how he’s going to make *those* their first words of the day and not blush scarlet, not after the night he’s just had. Alone, he strips off his sweat-soaked tunic and pants and throws them in the cyclor, crossing naked to the head, which still smells faintly of Spock’s morning toilette. Kirk has no clear picture of Vulcan daily cleansing rituals, other than that the shower cubicle is never wet and the sonics are always set a few decibels too low for his taste, and the air is gently scented with ginger and lavender and pine when he’s done. His towel is neatly pegged to the door and darkened in patches where it has clearly been used to soak water off his skin, but there are no splashes around the sink, no fingermarks left on the highly-polished sheen of the vanity, no watery residue in the basin. There is absolutely *nobody* in the galaxy like a Vulcan to make a reasonably well house-trained Human male feel slovenly.

Reasoning that housekeeping will be in before Spock returns at the end of alpha shift, he opts for a water shower and steps inside, letting the jets pummel his skin just on the wrong side of too hot. As he scrubs, his head runs over the agenda for the day: conversations and conference calls, revised rendezvous arrangements with the *Potemkin*, negotiations with Starbase 2 to receive a secure medical transfer from their sickbay, and at some point he’ll have to make time to meet with Spock. No matter what McCoy says, Kirk does not plan to thank his First, for exactly the reasons he gave. He might have done, once, but this is too big for thanks, and it’s not quite that they’re not expected and not quite that they’re not necessary, but rather somewhere in between. There came a point, indefinable now, where it became obvious that this is just what they *do*: one of them gets into trouble and the other one fixes it. Explicit thanks imply that there was ever a chance that their recipient would have acted differently. They are simply understood.

If only he could stop thinking about the goddamn hand, though.

They used to flirt continuously, shamelessly even. On the bridge, at chess, in the mess room, on away missions, in sickbay, in the gym, on shore leave - it was like there was an invisible score board that followed them around and awarded randomly-calculated points for outrageous boundary-pushing. It was *fun*. Kirk flirts as easily as talking or breathing; he catches himself doing it sometimes right in the middle of a seduction he didn't know he was planning, and sometimes it leads somewhere but most often it doesn't. It's not precisely about sexuality, not really; it's more that he is attractive and he is charming, and these two things lead people to have certain expectations of him. And he's learned how to use that.

Good looks are an accident of birth, just like intelligence. The only thing anyone can control is the way they use what they've got. It's worked against him almost as often as it's worked for him: all the tutors and the superior officers who saw only the face and not the brain beneath, all the times he's lost the sympathy of a colleague or CO who decided that he's got where he's got on charisma alone. Admiral Komack's antipathy is almost certainly based, at least in part, on the fact that Kirk is younger and better looking than he is, because Kirk is certain that - up until the Vulcan incident, anyway - he did nothing else to deserve it.

So he's learned to use it, as a shield or as a weapon, according to circumstance. He flirts because it's expected of him, because, mostly, people get offended if he doesn't. It leads to sex far less often than anyone might think, usually because it can't. That's the intelligence kicking in. There are far more people in the galaxy with whom it would be a political nightmare to knock boots than an advantage, but flirtation is usually harmless. Often it's useful; more often than that it's enjoyable. The people who think he's an empty face find him predictable and lewd and, while they're busily confirming their opinions of him, he's finding out what he needs to know. And the people who understand the game dance around him in a courtly two-step that demands his reciprocation.

He started flirting with Spock mostly just to annoy him.

He's worked with difficult subordinates before, but *difficult* just doesn't even begin to cover an intransigent Vulcan XO. Everything was scrupulously correct, regulations observed to the subsection and clause, and delivered with such a tangible sense of disapproval that the Captain often wondered how the air didn't just freeze when his First Officer looked at him. He knows that Chris Pike didn't want the promotion that took him off the *Enterprise*, and he knows as well that the promotion was offered almost entirely on the basis that it freed up the flagship of the fleet for the publicity-heavy advancement of a photogenic new Captain with the sort of bio that looks good on the front page of the Sunday papers. Neither of them had any say in the matter, so he's not sure how logical it would have been to have immolated himself on an altar of professional integrity, but he's long since discovered that logic comes a poor second to loyalty in the Vulcan psyche. If they'd only admit that, he suspects a lot of misunderstandings would be avoided.

There's very little you can do when your First Officer is engaged in a campaign of meticulous-ing

you into insanity. It's not as though you can ask him to stop being right all the time. And it's not as if any functional Human with the social skills to exist outside of an institution with padded walls is *ever* going to be able to match the encyclopedic knowledge of a race with a built-in eidetic memory, so it was a given that the new Captain was going to fail the Vulcan test of regulatory observance. In the absence of a strategic alternative, and provoked to an impotent, bone-crushing rage by the delivery of one too many implacable eyebrow-raises, Kirk defaulted into a charm offensive that had the dual advantage of being both immeasurably satisfying and equally impossible to counter. It's not the first time he's used sexual manipulation as a tool, but it's the first time he's ever used it on a Vulcan. At first, all it did was make everyone uncomfortable, but that was happening anyway every time Spock or the Captain opened their mouths, and gradually - so gradually that he didn't notice it happening until it had more or less happened - it stopped being about retaliation and started being about fun.

Kirk steps out of the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist before the water can puddle on the narrow floor, and crosses to his quarters. He flirts with Bones because they both enjoy it, and because Bones flirts right back and then pretends to be horrified. They've been doing it so long now that it's hard to imagine how they'd interact without it, and there's never been any kind of undercurrent of sexual tension or desire between them, so why the hell not? And that ended up being why he flirted with Spock, too: because there came a day when he realized that he couldn't remember the last time his First had quoted some sententious little micro-codicil to explain why the Captain wasn't allowed to cross his right leg over his left, and hot on the heels of that revelation came the sudden realization that the kind of compression thing he did with his eyes sometimes, the thing that seemed to light up his face from within, that was a *smile*, and it was directed at Kirk. And when the retaliatory imperative was gone, it turned out that a behavior born in antagonism was kind of exciting on its own - because it was Spock, because it transgressed every xenosociological norm in the extraordinarily detailed Starfleet book of etiquette, and because it meant that they were friends, and *friends* was so completely unexpected when three months earlier he would have settled for *somebody I don't spend seventeen hours of every day wanting to kill*.

And then there was The Sneeze and the flirting... it didn't stop, exactly, but it wasn't innocent anymore. And while *innocent* has never been a prerequisite for *fun* in the act of flirting, this is clearly not that simple. There's flirtatious banter, and there's flirting with intent, and the decision to move from the former to the latter cannot be taken unilaterally. He's not sure which of them decided to scale things back, only that they don't really seem to do it anymore, and Kirk really, really hopes that the shift came from him. The alternative is too humiliating to contemplate.

He pulls on a fresh uniform, straightens his hair, steps into his boots. Friendship is good. It's not the whisky-drinking, quasi-fraternal relationship that he has with Bones, or the low-maintenance, sexually-charged connection he had with Gary, and even after all these years he's not absolutely certain he has a handle on what it *is*, but it's good. It doesn't need to be anything else. It's good.

No, it's good. Better than good.

Kirk heads to the bridge.

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Spock is in the command chair and rises in one swift, fluid movement when the turbolift doors discharge the Captain. “Course plotted for the Beta Aurigae system, Captain,” he says formally. “Estimated arrival in sixty-two hours.” His eyes are fixed on an unremarkable spot above the engineering console and do not waver to Kirk’s.

The Captain represses a sigh. *This* again.

On the other hand, it does invoke some interesting precedents.

“Thank you, Mr. Spock,” he says. “Anything else I should know about?” He moves to the side of the chair but instead of sitting he deliberately places himself inside his First Officer’s personal space and smiles up into his face.

“Captain?” says Spock.

This *again*.

“Anomalies, incidents, extraordinary events, Mr. Spock,” says Kirk, and cannot resist adding, “Anecdotes.”

Nothing. Not so much as a quirked eyebrow. “Nothing to report, Captain,” says Spock, drilling a hole into a quotidian section of bulkhead with his unaltered stare.

Kirk gives in.

“Fine, thank you, Mr. Spock,” he says. He slides into his chair and takes a moment to enjoy the sensation of familiar contours pressed tightly against his skin. It’s a pleasure that has never entirely receded with familiarity, and twenty-four hours ago he wasn’t sure he’d ever know it again. When

he looks up, it's to see that Spock hasn't moved from his position, although he has dropped his eyes.

"Something on your mind, Spock?" says Kirk.

Now it's the floor that's caught his interest. He says, "I merely wished to express my satisfaction at your return to the bridge, Captain."

Kirk feels the smile spread like melted butter across his face. "Thank you, Mr. Spock," he says. "I believe I share that sentiment." Maybe it's the warmth in his voice and maybe it's the words, but something earns him belated eye-contact and the hard edges of the angular face soften into a clandestine smile.

The moment shines brightly, before being abruptly swallowed by the demands of the bridge. Kirk glances at the viewscreen, uniform black flecked with the occasional uninspiring pinprick flash of white, and says, "I'll need you at some stage today, when you can spare a few moments." He glances back at his First. "Admiral Fitzpatrick has some concerns he wants me to share with you."

Spock inclines his head, and manages to convey with one utilitarian gesture that he has anticipated both the request and its contents, and is a tiny bit offended that the admiralty think he needs to be reminded not to start a Cold War between the two largest powers of the Federation. "I am at your disposal, Captain," he says. "However, I had hoped to spend the remainder of alpha shift in the laboratories in preparation for our rendezvous with the *Potemkin*."

"I thought Lieutenant Afaeaki had everything in hand?"

"I have asked Lieutenant Afaeaki to head the team beginning analysis on the data collected on Camus II. Given that we have limited resources from which to work..."

"Yes, all right," says Kirk, with less irritation than he feels. There is no good or pressing reason to keep Spock on the bridge, apart from the fact that he clearly wants to leave and Kirk's not sure he should get to run away like that. This happens *every single time*. "Very well, Mr. Spock. With any luck, we're in for an uneventful journey. But keep your communicator on you, will you?"

"Captain?" says Spock, and Kirk resists the urge to close his eyes and sigh heavily. If he's progressed to pretending not to understand idiom *already*, then there could be *days* of this ahead.

“Just - go on, Mr. Spock,” he says. “But keep some time aside for our meeting, please. I assume the labs can spare you for fifteen minutes at some stage?”

The sarcasm is heavily implied, but Spock has the upper hand, since all he has to do is start talking about the implications of the coefficient of pi on the delta-emissions of neutron radiation and the Captain will not be able to offer a rejoinder. He says, “In fact, I anticipate that the remodeling of the duotronic inhibitor circuits to the sensitivity required to separate the gravitational matrices of the binary system will require at least eight hours to complete. However,” he adds before Kirk can snap an irritable reply to the effect that he damn well better *make* some time in that case, “if the matter is not sufficiently urgent, perhaps we might arrange to discuss it after the conclusion of alpha shift?”

Kirk opens his mouth to speak and even gets as far as drawing in the first breath, but then Spock’s words catch up with his brain and he stops. His First Officer is standing calmly in front of him, waiting for the words that will allow him to run away and hide in his labs for the next few days, and the Captain *could* order him to delegate the jobs to someone else - Fipe Afaeaki could re-route the duotronic inhibitors with her eyes closed, which means Spock could do it in his *sleep*, from another starship on the other side of the galaxy and with both arms and legs immobilized - but he’d be pulling rank without much in the way of justification and they both know it.

But the thing is, the fact that he’s engaged at all in a battle of wills over a proposed emotional withdrawal means that the hand-holding incident has left an impression on Spock as well, because this is what always happens. Everything will be fine, warmth flowing easily between them, half-smiles traded across the bridge, finishing each other’s thoughts, and then suddenly something will happen, something *more*, and Kirk will wonder if maybe, possibly, conceivably there’s something else there. And Spock will disappear - into a shell of taciturn Vulcan correctness, into duty and regulation or, occasionally, physically into another part of the ship. If there was some way to be sure, some guarantee that it’s not all in Kirk’s unrequited mind, then he’d corner his friend and demand an answer. But nothing that’s happened to date is tangible enough to pin down and say, *this. This is what I mean.* Nothing has happened that can’t be spun into something perfectly innocent, and he won’t risk the friendship or his pride on smoke and mirrors.

Still, he’s pretty certain that, in the face of a full-scale Vulcan retreat, he’s just been handed largess. “Very well, Mr. Spock,” says Kirk. “I’ll be in my quarters after eight o’clock. I assume that’s suitable?”

Spock offers a patrician nod. “I appreciate the accommodation,” he says.

“Fine, fine,” says the Captain, waving a hand, but he can’t keep the smile from coursing back across his face again. “Have fun with the inhibitor circuits, Mr. Spock. I’ll see you at eight.”

Spock doesn't raise an eyebrow, but neither does he feign confusion. In a complicated battle for terrain he doesn't know, Kirk is not prepared to count it a victory, but it's not a complete defeat either. He accepts a PADD from a Yeoman and when he looks up again, Spock is gone.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hover the cursor over Vulcan words for a pop-up translation.

It has often been Spock's habit, when his mind is unsettled, to anesthetize his thoughts with a series of complex and detailed projects, and it is unfortunate that his prior efficiency has made it impossible on this occasion. The Camusian analysis might have offered some respite, but for the fact that Camus II and everything connected with their brief stay on the planet is the root cause of his current agitation, and this has left him with either the sensor alignment or the bridge.

The long-range sensor array lab is buried in the forward hull of the engineering deck, not far from the observation rooms where he often cloisters himself in meditation. The sight of the infinite depths beyond the small windows is immeasurably soothing to his scientist's soul, stretching as it does into the incalculable distance where numbers begin to coil and dance in a way that has always twisted a tiny thrill of satisfaction in his belly, like the lazy brush of a high-summer sun through the shade of an *in-du-ka* in full leaf. There is also the fact that very few crewmembers have any reason to spend much time in this part of the ship, which has a lot to do with his decision to remodel today.

It's not that they *couldn't* have taken the required measurements with a high degree of precision using the current system, he reflects as he unrolls his tool case and sets to removing the access paneling. The *Enterprise* and the *Potemkin* are similarly equipped and it's just a question of pooling resources for optimum efficiency, but Spock is Spock and the prospect of being set loose on a binary system - and a possible source of Berthold radiation - is the sort of thing that finds him pulling eight-day marathons in the lab before someone points out that he probably ought to sleep now. Or eat. Or at least sit down for a while. There is a part of him that he can't help but acknowledge - but to which he'll never openly admit - that has been looking forward to this mission since the orders came through a little over six days ago. It's the same part that allows him to justify his absence from the bridge, but made sure he stayed long enough to see for himself that the Captain was all right.

Self-deception is illogical. What is left to him, therefore, is damage control.

There is no way to accurately determine when the change occurred. Some time between the second and third years of the mission, he believes, but it's speculation, and speculation makes him uncomfortable. At some point, despite everything he knows and everything he's seen, partiality crept up on him. Perhaps it was a mistake to lower his guard enough to allow their friendship to take root and grow, or perhaps nothing could have halted this explosion of emotion; either way, it's proved remarkably impervious to exorcism and he's had to learn to live with it. *Kaiidth*; there is

nothing to be gained from regret. All he can control is what he does next.

He opens the paneling and sets it gently to one side. The cave of relay circuitry blinks and glimmers in the shadowy darkness as he eases himself into the heart of the sensory system and runs questing fingers across arcane banks of wires and readout dials, gently inspecting, surveying, cataloging. It will not take him eight hours, he decides, but he knows already that he won't return to the bridge when he's done – he'll sequester himself away in one of the labs that *isn't* working on Camusian hieroglyphs and find some other perfectly reasonable way to occupy himself until eight o'clock.

At some point, he really is going to have to spend some time meditating on what happened yesterday.

He knows Kirk didn't sleep well last night because Spock spent most of the night crouched cross-legged on his mat in front of the *asenoï* trying to reach the preliminary stages of *kohl-tor*, and he heard his Captain shuffling and moving about in his quarters until well into the small hours of the morning. In the end, he gave up pretending he was going to get anywhere with meditation and simply listened to the sounds of Kirk's proximity, settling into a warm glow of satisfaction in the knowledge that the Captain was back where he belonged. The flavor of Kirk's mind danced in his psi-center, brushing up against the memories of the day and sending little jolts of panic thrilling through his belly at the sound of his remembered voice inside Spock's head.

The Captain was diminished and alone inside that unfamiliar consciousness, hollering his First Officer's name, and hot on the heels of the first, breathless rush of horror was a rage that almost crippled Spock's capacity for coherent thought. It was *kae'at k'lasa*, perhaps not in the Vulcan definition, but a violation of the sanctity of the mind nonetheless. He knows that his controls did not completely disintegrate, by virtue of the fact that the men who tried to stop him from removing his Captain from captivity are still alive, but he remembers the fires of anger boiling in his veins and a scream of fury echoing in his skull: *you shall not touch him*. He remembers the overwhelming need to reach out for Kirk's hand and reassure himself that he was there, that he was solid and alive, and to feel the buzz of the Captain's *self* beneath the surface of that alien skin. With the objectivity of hindsight, Spock can catalog every action and reaction and its emotional imperative. This is not the problem. The problem is that he gave in to it.

He passes the morning in solitude. Close to the midday meal break, as he has been vaguely expecting, his communicator chirps and the Captain's voice fills the electronic grotto. In another colleague, this would be irritating. In the Captain, it's too predictable to cause any flare of annoyance.

"How's the work coming along, Mr. Spock?" he wants to know.

“Adequately, Captain,” he says. As an answer, it has the advantage of being so non-specific as to be true at virtually any stage of the process, while offering absolutely nothing in the way of actual information. He has possibly an hour’s work ahead of him before the modifications are complete, but if Kirk finds out he’ll expect them to eat lunch together and Spock hasn’t finished collecting his thoughts yet.

“I’m just about to meet Bones in the officer’s mess,” says Kirk. “He’s insisting that you join us.”

Spock twists a dial three quarters of a degree clockwise. “Regretfully, I must decline,” he says.

There is a small pause. It’s possible that the Doctor is listening in. “Come on, Spock. You need to eat.”

“The Vulcan metabolism...”

“Don’t give me ‘Vulcan metabolism’, you green-blooded computer!” Well, *that* was predictable. “Stop hiding out in the ship’s circuitry and come and have lunch with us.”

“As I told the Captain, Doctor, the nature of this work is extremely delicate,” says Spock. “It requires my full attention.”

“Bones, leave him alone,” says Kirk. “I told you he was busy.”

“We can all be busy when we want to be,” mutters the Doctor. Spock considers analyzing that and then decides against it.

“I’ll see you later, Spock.” Kirk again. “Don’t work too hard.”

There are two possible replies to that. The first involves a token protest about the relative difficulty of the task in hand, and will certainly elicit some form of invective from McCoy. Spock opts for the second. “Negative, Captain,” he says. Like *adequately*, it is conveniently vague. “Spock out.”

The exchange has lasted less than three minutes, but for the devastation it has wreaked on his patchwork controls, he might as well have stayed on the bridge all morning. It is typical of his

responses in the hours after he has allowed his barriers to slip. If he had known – if it had ever occurred to him to ask – he might have been able to pinch down hard upon the flowering affection before it was able to blossom into something so manifestly ungovernable, but he has spent his life striving towards the Vulcan disciplines, to the point where he'd begun to believe that his body would always follow the biological patterns of his father's people. Even if he'd had the words to ask his mother, he'd never had any cause to think that his Human side would rear up to announce itself so violently and so unexpectedly, and this is how it came to take him so completely unawares.

He remembers the day of his pre-bonding ceremony and the sudden, probing invasion of another mind in his. He remembers recoiling, the tightness of his father's hands on his shoulders, his eyes flickering upwards to meet T'Pring's, and the look on her face that mirrored the turmoil inside his skull. There should be a sense of presence when a connection is made. There should be a manifest difference between *before* and *after*. It ought to be possible to look back and remember with crystal clarity the moment that his life became joined to another's. If he had any inclination to imagine the Human conception of erotic love, it must have hovered vaguely around the notion of a collision of minds, of feeling the pricklings of another consciousness gently brushing up against his. No wonder Standard is so reprehensibly vague when it comes to a definition of the Human bond – there is no way to catalog it or refine it into a single fragment of time. It simply *is*. There must be a moment when *I* becomes *we*, but it's lost to the vagaries of emotion and it wasn't until it had insinuated itself irrevocably into his sense of himself that Spock was even aware that he had fallen in love. The Human way.

It's a disaster.

~*~

He spends fifteen minutes trying to decide whether he should turn up for his appointment with Kirk dressed still in his uniform, or if he ought to change into his off-duty robes, and then another five being seriously unimpressed with himself for even wondering in the first place. In the end, the internal debate conveniently eats up the last minutes before the meeting and the decision is made for him, and he realizes, as he waits outside the Captain's quarters for admittance, that it's the right one anyway. Uniform keeps this business. He's not sure he's ready yet to resume their camaraderie.

“Come,” calls Kirk's voice from inside, and the door slides open.

The Captain has taken his boots off and loosened the collar of his tunic, and he sits back in his chair with his stocking feet propped up on his desk. He looks tired but at ease, as Spock has often found him in the evenings after their shift when they've found time to spend in easy conversation and unexpected companionship. He smiles up at his First as he enters, and Spock schools his expression into indifference and stares at the wall behind Kirk's head.

“First Officer reporting as requested, Captain,” he says. A light in Kirk’s eyes fades and the smile wilts but does not collapse. He lifts his feet down from the desk and indicates the spare chair with a wave of his hand.

“Have a seat, Spock,” he says as he stands – slowly, a little stiffly, perhaps – and crosses to the synthesizer. “Thanks for coming. I’m ready for a drink, how about you?”

It would be so easy to accept, to loosen his rigid shoulders and let his tightly-leashed affection shine from his eyes. To sit quietly and listen to his Captain tell tales about an uneventful day on the bridge, and infuse them with all the passion, all the humor, all the love of a man who has found his rightful place in the universe. Spock’s spine aches where he forces it to resist the urge to lower himself into the chair and, clasped behind his back, his hands would tremble if he didn’t hold them so tightly. He makes himself say, “Thank you, Captain, but I must decline.”

Kirk raises an eyebrow. These are the things that make it so difficult to hold onto his resolve. The Captain says, “You’re not going back to the lab tonight?”

Spock could probably find *something* to do, but it wouldn’t be nearly enough to keep his mind occupied. He says, “Negative, Captain, but I must spend some time in meditation tonight.”

“And a glass of pineapple juice is going to stop you meditating?” The words are light, but Kirk is not looking at him and there is a tension in his shoulders as he speaks. He bends to retrieve a decanter from his liquor cabinet and pours a generous measure into an ornate glass. The sharp odor of alcohol infuses the air. “Come on, Spock. Sit down and have a drink with me. I won’t keep you long.”

There is something about the way that James Kirk makes a request that is not quite an order and not quite a suggestion, but is simply loaded with the assumption that the world will just fall into place the way he expects it to. It is one of the many, many reasons that Spock found him close to intolerable in the first weeks of his command, and has become one of the many, many reasons for his regard. He sits. Kirk takes this as acquiescence and punches a code into the synthesizer, which responds with a tall glass of pale yellow liquid. Spock accepts it with a perfunctory nod and the Captain slides into his chair on the opposite side of the desk. His eyes do not seek Spock’s.

“Thanks for coming,” he says again. Spock inclines his head and the movement causes the hazel eyes, belatedly, to dart up. “Did you make much headway with the sensor arrays?”

“The system has been fully remodeled,” says Spock. The glass is cold in his hand and he sets it on the desk. A thin vein of condensation tracks towards the surface and he catches it with an outstretched finger, aware that the Captain is watching. “Efficiency ratings should improve by approximately thirty-eight percent.”

“Approximately?” says Kirk, and a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth.

Another evening, Spock would cheerfully join in the game, but tonight it’s as much as he can do to hold the fragments of his barriers together, so he allows a single beat to declare his disinterest and says, “37.87 percent, to be precise.”

The smile fades. “Excellent,” says Kirk without conviction. “It never hurts to show ‘fleet what we’ve got.’” Spock says nothing and Kirk takes a savage gulp of his drink and leans forwards. Ice clinks against the sides of his glass. He says, “So, I won’t keep you from your busy evening, Spock.” The words bruise, as they are intended to do, but there’s nothing can be done about that. “The admiralty are in a panic about the political implications of yesterday’s events and they want to make sure we’re all singing from the same hymn sheet. Don’t even bother, Spock,” he adds as his First opens his mouth to speak. “I know you understand and I’m not sure why you’re pretending not to.”

Caught in an outright prevarication, but before he’s had the opportunity to condemn himself, Spock goes for the defensive. “I was merely preparing to state my apprehension of the situation,” he says.

Kirk fixes him with a relentless stare that telegraphs his skepticism and holds it for a moment too long. “Good,” he says at last. “Then I don’t need to tell you that there are certain aspects of yesterday’s court martial that are going to be struck from the official record.”

“I had anticipated as much.”

“And you’ve got *nothing* to say about that?”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “It would be illogical to protest when the necessity is clear.”

“Spock!” Kirk’s moods are mercurial and anger is rarely sustained. His eyes furrow in concern. “They ought to give you a goddamn medal for what you did yesterday! And I can’t even put a commendation in your records! They’re going to pretend it didn’t happen.”

Silence hangs heavily between them. “Yes, Captain,” says Spock at last.

Kirk sits back heavily and raises an exasperated hand. It hangs in the air between them. “I can’t...” he begins to say, and shakes his head. “Never mind. Just... Go. Meditate. Be Vulcan. Do what you need to do.” The hand drops abruptly, like an injured bird. “Bones wants to talk to you, but I’d avoid that if I were you.”

“I have found that to be a sensible strategy when faced with the Doctor’s ministrations,” says Spock. Kirk peers up from beneath a hooded brow.

“I’ll expect you on the bridge tomorrow then.” It’s not quite a statement and not quite a question. Spock is aware that the Captain will not make it an order, not at this stage.

He says, “There are currently no projects in the laboratories that require my attention.” It’s not quite an answer either.

The evaluative gaze continues, and is abruptly concluded with a huge intake of breath. “Good,” says Kirk. “I’ll let you get on with your evening then. Lord knows, I have enough to do myself.”

He scrubs his hands over his face as Spock stands, and the action leaves his hair mussed at the front. For a terrible moment, it’s as much as Spock can do not to reach a hand across the desk to straighten it. The Captain looks exhausted – more than when Spock arrived. But there’s nothing he can do about that.

“Thank you, Captain,” he says.

“Get some rest, Mr. Spock,” says Kirk. He is already reaching for his terminal and does not look up as he speaks. It’s a clear dismissal and Spock is aware that he deserves it.

“Captain,” says Spock. He crosses to the door and pauses by the control pad. What he ought to do is walk out and across the few feet of corridor that lead to his door, and sequester himself inside until he finds either meditation or unconsciousness; some way, at least, to allow his yammering mind to sort through the emotional detritus of the past days. But the Captain is tired and bruised, and some of that is Spock’s fault. He turns back to the room.

“Jim,” he says. Kirk looks up, startled confusion plastered across his face. “You are fatigued. You

should also rest.”

Kirk’s eyes are wide. He says, “I will, Spock. I have some reports to finish first.”

“Perhaps,” says Spock, “I could assist you tomorrow. If our schedules are free.”

The Captain’s face slowly unfolds into his sunshine smile, the one that seems to illuminate him from within. It eases the lines of strain from around his eyes and warms the room around him. He says, “I’d appreciate that, Spock. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” says Spock. It’s a *Jim* moment, but he’s already given more than he’s equal to, and he leaves it at that.

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Chapter 5

Had the offer come from anyone else, Kirk might have questioned its sincerity. After all, it's one of those things you often just say: *you look tired, can I help with anything?* But Vulcans don't do politesse and they don't make empty promises. Sure enough, he's barely set foot on the bridge before his First has approached him with a list of potential spaces in their joint schedule, and they settle on a working lunch in Kirk's quarters. And it's a good thing too, because the Captain's body mutinied last night and sent him to an early bed despite the protests of his hyperactive brain. He might be well-rested today – if a little groggy – but the reports aren't going to finish themselves.

It's a small moment of satisfaction, and moments of satisfaction are likely to be in short supply this shift. He holds onto it.

They reach Starbase 2 mid-morning. Kirk stays on the bridge long enough to exchange the diplomatic necessities, then hands over the con to Sulu for final docking procedures, and strides, quickly and silently, to the turbolift. Spock joins him there without a word, except to offer their destination as the door slides shut. The Captain half-expected as much and he nods a tight little smile as they glide through the decks, and Spock returns the nod, but it's pointed towards the doors as though his head is frozen on its axis. Still, he's here. He doesn't need to be, but he's here. Maybe he just wants to make sure Janice Lester is off the ship.

Silence isn't unusual between them and it's often difficult to determine its quality where Spock is concerned. Silence, in fact, may well be one of the arcane Vulcan arts for all Kirk knows, and as far as he can tell it can mean anything from *there is no need to talk at the moment* to *I am considering the moral rectitude of irritation as motive for murder*. He has long since stopped feeling uncomfortable in these periods of stillness, ever since he worked out that it was about Spock and not about his company, and there are times when Kirk will actively seek out his First Officer in the knowledge that conversation will not be expected. This morning is a case in point. The Captain has too much going on inside his head to be interested in making small talk, and Spock's silent presence is a kind of tacit approval, a small indication that at least one person in the turbolift is sure Kirk is doing the right thing. Because whatever else has happened, he did love Janice once, and that part of him thinks he's a bastard this morning.

They leave the lift outside the transporter room to the sound of voices drifting through the open doors and into the corridor. One of them belongs to Dr. McCoy, who wakes up cantankerous and has generally managed to spin it into full-scale dyspepsia by this point in the day, as he checks off a list of medications as though it has personally offended him. Kirk can also make out Jerry Freeman, speaking in the low tones of a man who is accustomed to being obeyed without question, and the plaintive voice of Dr. Coleman, whose interruptions Freeman is patiently ignoring. The crew snap to attention as the Captain and First Officer enter the room, and Kirk sees that Freeman has stationed another two security officers in the room. They stand silently against the near wall, hands on their phasers. Janice is strapped to a gurney, twilighted but not unconscious, and her eyes roll towards Kirk and fix on him. He holds her stare for as long as he can before he looks away.

Bones steps forward as they enter and places a hand on Kirk's arm, and the Captain allows himself to be led to one side. "Jim," says the Doctor quietly. "You don't need to be here for this."

"On the contrary," says Kirk, in a voice loud enough to carry across the room. It's a deliberate reproach, and Bones purses his lips as he acknowledges it. "We're docked for the next ninety minutes, Doctor. I'd be remiss if I didn't pay my courtesies to Commodore Ward. Besides," and he offers his patented smile, which *never* fools McCoy, *never*, "there's an old friend on the Starbase I'd like to say hello to."

Bones rolls his eyes, so at least he's playing along. "Isn't there always?" he says.

Kirk glances over at the gurney. "How's the patient this morning?"

"She's been unnecessarily sedated for over thirty-six hours now!" protests Dr. Coleman. "It's barbaric, Captain Kirk..."

"It's for her own good, Doctor," says Bones. He flashes half a sideways glance at Kirk, who is carefully keeping his eyes trained away from the cot. "Dr. Lester was showing signs of severe agitation..."

"Of course she was agitated!"

"Ship's security is the top priority, Dr. Coleman," says Freeman. He rarely raises his voice and he carries himself with all the quiet restraint of a stalking predator, and both of these qualities go a long way towards heading off trouble before it starts. He'll be a Captain some day. "If that doesn't make you happy, well, I'm not sure I particularly care. She threatened the Captain and the senior officers of this ship."

"Thank you, Commander," says Kirk quickly. To Coleman he adds, "Until such times as Dr. Lester reaches more suitable accommodation, there are just some things you'll have to put up with, I'm afraid. In the meantime, I'm going to defer to my CMO and my Head of Security in these matters, Doctor."

He glances up at the operations console, to which Spock has absented himself during the brief exchange, and from which he watches with hooded eyes and an unreadable expression. Kirk scans his face for a moment in search of some clue as to what he's thinking, but there's nothing there. It's

like lead in the pit of his stomach and he suddenly just wants to get out of the transporter room with its cacophony of guilt and recrimination, and to set the process in motion that will get this constant sense of castigation off his ship. He steps quickly up onto the transporter pad and Spock falls in beside him without a word.

“Commander Freeman, Dr. McCoy – I’ll leave the transfer arrangements with you,” says the Captain. “Mr. Spock and I will beam down initially and signal when the Starbase is ready to receive our medical party. Energize, Mr. Kyle.”

As the beam takes hold, Kirk notices that Dr. Coleman’s hands are bound in front of him, and something painful twists in his gut. He lifts his eyes and stares at the wall as it dissolves in front of him.

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“Captain Kirk!” says a familiar voice as the whine in his ears recedes and the familiar sense of weightlessness inverted marks the reconstitution of his atoms.

The transporter room on Starbase 2 is four times the size of the one he’s just left, with a section cordoned off to the left for the transport of heavy freight up to the size and weight of about half a shuttle. The air crackles with leashed energy and the lighting is low by the console where the welcoming party waits. The CO steps forward, smiling widely with her hands outstretched, and Kirk fixes an answering grin across his face and steps forward to meet her.

“Commander Sun,” he says, taking the hands in his and leaning in to kiss her cheek.

“You remembered,” she says cheerfully. “I was sure I’d have to remind you it wasn’t *Lieutenant* anymore.”

“Long overdue,” he says. He extricates himself from one half of the embrace to gesture back towards the transporter pad, where Spock has found something fascinating to stare at on the ceiling. “My First Officer, Commander Spock,” says Kirk, and the dark eyes shift from the shadowed heights to focus on their Captain and his new friend. He steps forward. “Spock, this is Commander Mee-Kyong Sun, First Officer of Starbase 2. She and I were at the Academy together.”

“Commander Spock,” she says and releases Kirk’s other hand to make the *ta’al*. Spock

acknowledges it with a terse nod and mirrors the gesture. “It’s a pleasure to meet you in the flesh. Your reputation precedes you.” She grins at Kirk. “Like Jim’s, of course.”

That earns her another nod and a stone-faced mask of purest Vulcan implacability. But she recovers well.

“The Commodore sends his apologies,” she says. “There was a last minute conference call from HQ – he’ll join us as soon as he can. We’re expecting a merchant party from Columbus VI in four days’ time and the admiralty are anxious we make sure they know how profitable they’d find life in the Federation.”

Kirk laughs. “I can’t say I’m sorry to miss *that* party.”

“Jim Kirk, you’d have them eating out of your hand in thirty seconds flat!” she scolds. Valiantly, she nods over to Spock. “I’m sure you’ve had plenty of opportunity to witness the Kirk charm in action, Commander,” she says. “James Kirk could sell snow to the Andorians!”

Spock inclines his head. “The Captain is an accomplished diplomat.”

If her smile falters for just a second, she covers it quickly, and Kirk plasters a smooth grin across his face to distract from the ice monster to his left. He says, “It’s a shame we can’t stay longer, though. It’s been too long.”

“And yet you haven’t changed a bit,” she says fondly. There’s a pause, and her shifting expression clearly broadcasts what’s coming next. “Jim,” she says. Kirk braces himself. “I’m sorry to hear about all this. It’s... it must be very hard for you.”

His smile tightens despite himself, but he says, “It’s a relief to know that she’ll be getting the treatment she needs.”

“I’d heard...” She stops, and then visibly realizes that she’s committed herself and plows on. “I heard Janice had a breakdown a few years back. She was never – I mean it was a shock, but she was always...”

“Yes,” says Kirk.

There's a pause and he can see the emotions play out across her face. Mee-Kyong and Janice were briefly friends, in that vaguely hostile way that he'll never completely understand, but towards the end of the relationship, Mee-Kyong's presence in Kirk's life was just one more source of their constant battles. She wasn't the only friend advising him to leave, but she's one of the very few women he knows who was consistently kind about Janice in the aftermath. She says, "She'll be in good hands, Jim."

"Yes," he says again, and, because it clearly requires a little more input this time, he adds, "Thank you." He glances towards the rest of the party. "If your team are ready, I'll signal the ship to begin beam down."

A middle-aged Saurian in science blues steps forward. "I am Commander Kozu," he says. "Chief Medical Officer aboard the Starbase. I will be supervising Dr. Lester's transfer to Elba. We are ready to receive the patient."

"Thank you," says Kirk. He glances up at Spock and sees that he is already reaching for his communicator. Gratitude floods the Captain's chest.

"Spock to *Enterprise*," says his friend, and, though he doesn't meet Kirk's eyes, his voice is gentle. "Prepare to initiate patient transfer."

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The Captain strides rapidly towards the door as soon as the beam releases him, and his parting words are a brusque injunction to Spock to take the con and report to him in his quarters for their lunchtime appointment. Spock briefly glances at Dr. McCoy, whose eyes are fixed on the figure disappearing down the corridor.

"Damn it," says the Doctor softly. His gaze meets Spock's. "How long til your lunch, Spock?"

"Fifty-seven minutes," says Spock.

"Think you can be early?"

The idea had occurred to Spock even before they beamed back up from the Starbase, but he dismissed it uneasily. Even if he had the words, he doubts they would be welcome. Sometimes Kirk just needs to be alone.

He says, "I would counsel against any intrusion into the Captain's privacy at present, Doctor."

He expects an explosion of Georgian acrimony and has partially shielded against it, and so the soft puff of air comes as something of a surprise.

"Yup," says McCoy slowly. "Never thought I'd see the day, but looks like I agree with you, Spock." He steps down from the transporter pad, hands folded behind his back, and glares up at Lieutenant Kyle. "And you just remember who gives you your yearly physical before you go telling anyone I said that, Mister."

It's a problem, of course. How much of a problem it was became clear when he glanced up at the Captain as he was leaving the bridge this morning and realized how much the past few days have cost him. It's a problem because Spock needs to keep his distance for a while in order to repair the damage done by a moment's lapse outside Janice Lester's room, but one look at Kirk's tight, locked-in face was enough to cast serious doubts on the logistics of that strategy. Following Kirk into danger or adversity isn't even a conscious decision anymore; it's just something his body does automatically unless it's specifically commanded otherwise, and, if they hadn't specifically discussed Spock joining the away party, they hadn't specifically discussed him staying on the bridge either. There was time in the turbolift for the Captain to send him back but he didn't and, standing beside him, Spock was alarmed by the heavy waves of distress that singed the air between them. It doesn't take a telepath to read the Captain's thoughts at the moment, and there is simply no way he can abandon his friend to that kind of darkness. He might be uniquely ill-fitted amongst the ship's crew to offer consolation or support, but that doesn't erase the need for it, and the Captain's need cannot be ignored. Even in the face of some very shaky controls.

The command chair is largely decorative this morning, and there is nothing to be gained from telling Sulu or Chekov their jobs during routine maneuvers. Spock occupies himself with a series of mundane tasks of the niggling variety: sifting through command communiqués about nothing urgent or important, reviewing maintenance reports, updating duty rosters for the coming weeks, and none of it is remotely sufficient to keep his mind from wandering back to the moment of rematerialization in the Starbase transporter room when a high, clear voice cut through the darkness in evident delight.

Vulcan and Human standards of aesthetic attraction are not identical, but they are similar enough to call Commander Sun beautiful. Her slender body was slight but powerful, her dark hair glinted in the low light, and her pale skin seemed to glow from within. Her smile stretched from one high cheekbone to another and the teeth it revealed were white and straight. None of these things alone is enough to mark a being as attractive, but they converge on a face that defines an ideal of

feminine allure to which, experience tells him, the Captain is highly susceptible. And the answering joy on Kirk's face when she offered her greeting was enough to gnaw a hollow pit of resignation in his First Officer's belly.

It comes to this: the knowledge has always been there, however deeply buried, that their current situation is transitory. After an inauspicious start, the years of this mission have grown into the most contented and the most satisfactory period of Spock's life, and the only differential factor between this assignment and the eleven years that preceded it is the presence of James Kirk on the *Enterprise*. In a matter of months, that fact will most likely no longer be true – men of Kirk's caliber do not remain in low-level command for long – and, for all that Spock would gladly follow him wherever Starfleet decides he belongs, it remains the case that his Captain is a handsome, virile man approaching middle-age, and his marital status is something of an anomaly among his peers. One day, probably soon, he will make his choice and everything will change.

It's an unpleasant reality, but the fact is that neither of them can remain in stasis indefinitely. What are the chances, in any case, of Spock escaping another *pon farr* unattached? His Human heart will always be at war with his Vulcan body, and if he can decide, illogically, to resist the biological imperative for so long, at some point his conscious mind will cease to have any say in the matter and it's more than likely he'd find himself on the other side of *plak tow* with a wife at his side and no real memory of how she got there. Logically, he knows this is not the way he wants to proceed – it's just that it always seemed like there would be *time* before he had to face it. But Kirk is lonely and, when he decides to do something about that, there will be no shortage of opportunities for him. Commander Sun is simply the most immediate option right now.

Spock is habitually early for meetings anyway, so it's easy to justify his arrival at Kirk's door with ten minutes to spare. His buzz for entry is met with a reasonably cheerful, "That can only be you, Spock. Come in," and the door slides open on the Captain seated behind his desk with a stack of data tapes in front of him, his face lit by the reflected glow of the terminal screen. He smiles up at his First Officer as the door closes behind him and the sentiment makes a noble attempt to reach his eyes, but their customary spark is missing.

He gestures a hand towards the empty chair. "The food'll be another few minutes," he says. "Have a seat. I don't suppose there's much to report from the bridge?"

"Negative, Captain," says Spock, settling himself across the table from Kirk. "We are making adequate progress towards our rendezvous with the *Potemkin*, but there is no appreciable update to our ETA."

"Good," says Kirk, with another valiant effort at a convincing insouciance. "I think we've all had enough excitement for one week, don't you?"

“Agreed,” says Spock. The Captain’s eyes meet his briefly and he is aware that he is being examined carefully, aware that Kirk is testing the current boundaries of their friendship. Spock resists the urge to shy away from the scrutiny and meets the gaze, offering what silent reassurance he can in his unpracticed expression.

Presently, the Captain’s face softens and he says, “I appreciate you beaming down with me today. I was glad of a friendly face.”

Spock’s eyebrow quirks before he can stop it. It provokes a genuine laugh from the other side of the desk. “Mee-Kyong?” says Kirk. “Yes, that’s true enough. But you know what I mean.”

Spock is not entirely sure that he does, so he says, carefully, “I understand your reluctance to depart from the Starbase so quickly, Captain.”

Kirk waves a hand dismissively. “Diplomatic niceties. There are plenty of other places I’d rather spend a shore leave, but it doesn’t do to say as much.”

“Nevertheless.” Spock is feeling his way slowly through unfamiliar territory, and his words are guarded. “Perhaps you might have found it beneficial to have... spent some time in Commander Sun’s company.”

He realizes that he’s staring at the desk and forces himself to look up at his Captain. Kirk is watching him with a strange expression on his face, and a shrill whine of discomfort sets up on the edge of Spock’s hearing.

The Captain opens his mouth and then closes it again. Then he says, “Spock...” He stops, purses his lips, and tries again. “Spock,” he says slowly, “Mee-Kyong’s married.”

There are a host of possible responses to this. He could protest the lack of any visible commitment symbol on the Commander’s left hand, which he certainly would have noticed. He could pretend not to understand Kirk’s reference, in an effort to imply that he has misconstrued the nature of Spock’s enquiries. He could draw attention to their effusive greetings and the impression they are bound to create in the casual observer. But his recalcitrant eyebrow has already quirked itself once more, and this essentially limits him to an entirely too revealing, “I see.”

“Her wife’s just opened a restaurant on the commercial level of the Starbase,” continues the Captain. “She makes the most wonderful truffle and parmesan ravioli; I’ll take you there some

time if we ever get the chance.” A beat. “We’re old friends, Spock. That’s all.”

An apology is probably required, but he can’t imagine how he’s going to frame it in a way that won’t embarrass them both. He settles for, “It was not my intention to pry into your personal affairs, Captain.”

And that’s enough to trigger the sunshine smile. If it’s unexpected, it’s no less welcome. Kirk’s hand is lying on the desk between them, and it makes a tiny, abortive motion as though he’s tried to lift it and thought better of it. It twitches once more, and on the third movement it breaks free of its constraints and rises uncertainly to press against Spock’s lower arm where he has folded it on the table edge. Canted forward to reach his friend, Kirk smiles into his face and says warmly, “I appreciate the concern, Spock.”

Their faces are less than half a foot apart and Spock can just feel the gentle brush of the Captain’s breath on his skin. To pull apart now would be to destroy this fragile moment of calm and potentially to deliver an injury from which they cannot recover. And with every instant that passes, another piece of his control shatters.

It’s over in seconds. The Captain slides his hand away and settles back into his chair and the door buzzes to announce the arrival of a Yeoman with lunch. The ordinary business of an ordinary day rushes back into the room so suddenly and so quickly that the moment might never have been – but for the fact that Spock finally understands that he is lost.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Hover over the Vulcan words for a pop-up translation... in theory. If for any reason (browser incompatibility' Gremlins in the machine; Mondays) the pop-up doesn't work, then you can download a translation from MediaFire.

Word: <http://www.mediafire.com/?t3li2i3dipmab3y>

PDF: <http://www.mediafire.com/?hp30g828uvf7v3f>

All translations are from the VLD.

“Nekhau tuluk tu? Skilsu nash-veh.”

Kirk’s head is utterly immobilized by a skinny greenish arm with the consistency of tempered iron and approximately twice the strength. A bony knee is pressed delicately into the small of his back, pinning him to the gymnasium floor, and a hand splays casually between his shoulder blades as though it doesn’t have the potential to push the man beneath it several centimeters through the mat and into the deck below.

Kirk grins, although he knows he can’t be seen. Perhaps that has something to do with it, in fact.

“Worla,” he chokes through a constricted windpipe.

“Riolozhilkaik,” is his predictable answer. “Ri fakovau tu.”

“Dungau gla-tor etek.” Spots of black are beginning to appear before his eyes.

“Ri aitlu du dash-tor. Nekhau sanu.”

“Fa-wak shroi ri nash-veh nemut zhitlar,” says Kirk.

There is a sigh. “Mair-or’nai-ga tu, khart-lan,” says a voice that is just on the Vulcan side of *long-suffering*.

“Ri fai-tor nash-veh...” - it is getting progressively harder to think in Standard, let alone a language he only started to learn two years ago - “ish-zhit V’tosh na’*insubordination*.”

There is a momentary hesitation. The choke-hold releases fractionally.

“Ak’wikmun nash-veh,” says the dry voice of his First Officer. “Fai-tukh vu lo’uk se t’V’tosh.” Almost imperceptibly - except, perhaps, to one in direct receipt of the gesture - the hold tightens again. “Wi-heh, ri fai-tor tu ish-zhit na’nekhau, saudau ish-veh.”

If it were possible to draw air into his lungs past the minimum required for cardio-pulmonary function, Kirk might chuckle. The fact that it is not has not been lost on his amygdala, which is now controlling the show and forces his vocal chords to bypass that part of his brain that is vaguely aware that an audience of Ensigns and Lieutenants have paused in their workouts to watch their Captain get his ass handed to him. His survival instinct, if not his pride, says, “Nakhau nash-veh.”

There is a fractional hesitation, just long enough for Kirk to wonder if Spock is going to insist he intones the ritual surrender - which comprises a hendecasyllabic ode to the victor’s superior strength that borders on the histrionic, even by Human standards - and then the pressure on his throat is gently released and the hand that was formerly pinning him to the floor is offered to help him rise. Mindful of Vulcan etiquette even now, Kirk smiles his thanks and clambers to his feet unaided, dispersing the gathering crowd by virtue of acknowledging their presence. A dozen heads flick quickly away, suddenly intent on equipment, each other, or - if all else fails - the walls.

Kirk grins at his First. “It’s the *klachek-mal-nef*,” he says, brushing chalk-dust from his hands. “My *tehnokatlar-ash’ya* is never quick enough to counter you.”

“Indeed, Captain,” says Spock. “I would be happy to provide further instruction, should you so desire.”

Kirk’s skin is slick with sweat, his Starfleet-issue exercise tights arrowed with dark patches of perspiration at his groin and the back of his knees. Spock has barely a hair out of place and the thick, baggy tunic and pants that he habitually uses for exercise are still sharply creased and immaculate. The Captain’s eyes sparkle. “Certain you want to challenge your odds like that?” he says.

“My ratio of victory to defeat currently stands at ninety-nine point seven percent, Captain,” says Spock.

Kirk’s eyes narrow. “I don’t recall achieving point three of a victory,” he says.

“I refer to the occasion on Stardate 3717.4, when Ensign Cho slipped while making use of the treadmill and I was obliged to release you from the *meskaraya-shaht* before you had technically submitted, in order to render him assistance.”

“Ah,” says Kirk. His lips twist. “I should have known, Mr. Spock.”

Spock inclines his head gravely. Another man might have missed the little flicker of amusement glinting behind his carefully immutable expression, but Kirk is enjoying himself far too much to believe that Spock is not equally entertained. “If you will assume the *palikau-laman*,” says Spock, arranging himself into the traditional opening posture of *Suus-Mahna* combatants.

It has been three weeks since they left Starbase 2, which makes it just shy of three weeks that they’ve been holed up in the Beta Aurigae system taking pictures of gravity, and Spock is pretty much the only member of the 430-strong crew who is not conspicuously over the whole thing. But there’s a powerful fascination in watching him when he’s got his teeth into a captivating project. It’s as though part of the wall crumbles and he forgets to hold himself so stiffly or to make sure he doesn’t smile when something makes him happy – as though he moves inside his own personal bubble of light – and that simple joy is contagious. Spock spends his days and nights in the labs, playing with complicated equations and occasionally calling the Captain in to gesture animatedly at something onscreen that looks remarkably like the product of an unsupervised three year old with a keyboard and a hammer. He has managed to absent himself so comprehensively from normal life that this is the first opportunity they’ve had to spend time together since the evening before they rendezvoused with the *Potemkin*, barring official dinners. But there’s a palpable difference between Spock *disappearing* into science and Spock *hiding* in science, and only a CO with a heart of stone and the punctilious soul of a dyed-in-the-wool bureaucrat would begrudge that light in the First Officer’s eyes when nothing else on the ship particularly needs his undivided attention. Somehow or other, presumably during the periods when he should be sleeping or eating, the pedestrian tasks of daily crew maintenance are being completed, and Spock doesn’t look like he’s on the verge of collapse or breakdown – if anything, he’s positively *glowing* – so Kirk has decided to be pleased that someone on board is enjoying their assignment and leave it at that.

It was a surprise to make his way out of the locker rooms with the vague idea of running a few laps to slake off the restless energy that has a tendency to accumulate in his muscles when there’s little else to do but paperwork, and find his First running through the first steps of the *shidorau* on the exercise mats in the far corner. It’s a Friday evening, which is their usual *Suus Mahna* night, but

Spock has missed the past two, and the assumption that martial arts were on hold until such times as the binary system gave up its secrets in the face of the dedicated application of Vulcan tenacity had allowed their arrangements to slip Kirk's mind entirely. He's out of practice and unprepared, but, truthfully, neither one of those facts was ever likely to make much difference to the overall outcome, which has predictably seen him face-down in the foam padding for much of the past thirty minutes.

He hasn't enjoyed himself so much in weeks.

Spock circles him speculatively and Kirk keeps pace, arms arranged in the arc of the *urokessor-shidik*, for all the good it's likely to do him.

"Laman vu rom se," says Spock. "Nes'quil vu pi'ashenau hi."

Kirk complies, and is rewarded with a lightning tackle that zeroes in on his newly-exposed belly, sucking the breath from his lungs before he can even remember the Vulcan word for *foul play*. His knees succumb to the inevitable and Spock rolls him as they hit the mat, tucking the Captain's right arm between his back and the considerable weight of a Vulcan chest, and crushing Kirk's ribs and face against the mat.

"Fa-wak shroi ri tu nemut vu zhitlar," says Spock in his ear, and Kirk almost punctures a lung trying to laugh before he remembers that he can't.

"Than kwul-tor savensu t'orensu?" mutters Kirk, or at least he tries to. There is a tiny shift above him, as of a miniscule Vulcan shrug.

"Kuv'ashenau orensu t'nes'quil," says Spock. "Nekhau tuluk tu?"

Kirk grins. "Worla," he says.

There is a heavy, exasperated sigh that brushes the fine hairs at the nape of his neck, and at that moment the ship's whistle sounds and Uhura's voice fills the tannoy, calling Kirk from the bridge. Unseen, the Captain smirks.

"Saved by the bell, Spock," says Kirk into the mat, and makes to rise.

The elbow in his spine shifts fractionally, the better to pin him down. “Nekhau tuluk tu?” says Spock again. There is a short pause. “It is a question of Vulcan honor, Captain.”

It damn well isn't – or, if it is, it's a question of one very *specific* Vulcan's honor – but it's hard to argue with a steel-corded tibia pressed firmly into one's shoulder blades. The whistle and Uhura sound again, and Kirk considers pulling rank, before realizing abruptly that he'll be pulling rank from face-down on the gymnasium floor in front of an audience of Ensigns, and the only thing worse than being repeatedly annihilated by your First in front of your crew is surely having your crew witness you abusing your status as superior officer in order to pull an underhanded victory out of the jaws of defeat.

Kirk sighs. Or at least he would if he had the lung capacity. “Nakhau nash-veh,” he says. Air rushes in to fill his chest as Spock climbs off his Captain's back and extends a hand to his prostrated CO. Kirk grins and allows himself to be roughly pulled to his feet. “Don't think I'll forget this, Mr. Spock,” he says.

“Indeed, Captain,” says Spock, but his eyes are shining.

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There is a comm port on the wall beside the locker room door. Kirk grabs his towel and holds it in front of him as he crosses the gym, because Starfleet-issue exercise tights are unforgiving and, unless one's member is completely quiescent, the options are *obvious erection* or *obvious attempt to hide an obvious erection*. He's been rolling around on the floor with Spock for half an hour now and the results are predictable.

He presses the button to activate the link. “This is Kirk,” he says. Sweat trickles down his back between his shoulder blades and he'd love to throw the towel around his neck, but Spock is watching from across the mat. It wouldn't be the first time that Kirk has sprung an inconvenient hard-on during exercise, but these circumstances are a little more compromising than he's comfortable with.

“Captain, we've received a communication from Starfleet HQ,” says Uhura's disembodied voice. “Encrypted for the Captain's eyes only. Shall I send it to your quarters or would you prefer to read it on the bridge?”

“I'll take it in my quarters,” says Kirk. “Thank you, Lieutenant. Kirk out.” He glances up at Spock

and nods a summons, then gives up and slings the towel around his neck anyway, because what the hell: it's not like Spock doesn't know what he's hiding beneath it. His First Officer crosses the floor in a maddeningly energetic stride, with his eyes trained carefully away from his Captain's crotch. The knowledge that Spock is actively trying not to look does not do anything to invert the blood flow from the area; if anything, the implied attention makes things worse.

"Is there a problem, Captain?" says Spock.

"Mr. Spock, it looks as though you're going to have to forgo the pleasure of humiliating your Captain any further tonight," says Kirk cheerfully. Spock looks neither chagrined nor offended but simply inclines his head with a supercilious glint to his eye. It is both a triumphant return to form, and at the same time indicative of less horror at the notion of humiliating the Captain than the Captain would necessarily prefer. "I may need you later. Will you be in the labs?"

"I think not," says Spock. Not a hair is ruffled, nor is there a crease to be found on the sweat-free fabric of his tunic. The only perceptible sign of exertion is the slightly heightened scent from his skin – sharp and vaguely piquant, like freshly-chopped chillis or ginger. "The latest gravitational simulations are running autonomously and are close to completion. I believe I will pass the evening by attending to a number of tasks that more immediately require my attention."

"Spock," says Kirk. "When was the last time you slept?"

"Three point seven ship's days ago, Captain," says Spock innocently. Kirk rolls his eyes and Spock predictably elaborates. "Vulcans do not require as much rest..."

"Yes, Mr. Spock," says Kirk, with an air of infinite patience that earns him an eyebrow.

They wander into the locker rooms and Kirk slings his soaked towel into the cyclor. If the message were urgent he would have been notified, and he's damned if he's going to stride through the corridors of his ship in skin-tight, sweat-stained tights and sporting an erection you could hang a flag off, not when he can shower himself decent and camouflage the worst of his arousal in a clean uniform. He turns to Spock. "I'll leave you to your work," he says. "It's probably nothing, but I'll let you know. And, Spock: try and get *some* rest, will you?"

"Captain," says Spock, which is not an answer. But he's too practiced at this to wait for a reply.

Kirk watches him leave for a moment, since the room is empty and there is no-one to bear witness

to a priapic Captain and the object of his gaze. His skin is tacky and chilled in the relative cool of the tiles and shadows, and where it has been pressed against his First Officer the lingering scent of him remains. Kirk breathes deeply and his nostrils fill with the warm Vulcan flavors, always stronger and more thickly layered after their *Suus Mahna*, perfumed and peppery like an exotic spice.

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Despite what he's told his Captain, Spock does not go directly to his quarters but makes a series of perfunctory stops in the gravitational metrics and computer labs on the way. It's as much of a denial as it is a reassurance because, as pressing as the urgency is, he needs to know that it can be subsumed, that it is still possible to exercise his will over his biological functions. For three weeks he has been so comprehensively submerged beneath a constant stream of discovery that he has barely noticed when he's been hungry or fatigued, let alone the secondary imperatives. And, if he considered it at all, he imagined that the distance from Kirk, both metaphorical and actual, was enough to restore some sort of equilibrium. They have dined together at formal parties held for the senior officers of both ships, and he has spent dutiful hours away from the labs in attendance at endless social gatherings and strategy meetings and brainstorming sessions where the Captain has approached him and they've talked easily, as friends do. As long as there has been a continuous stream of higher math churning through 50 percent of his brain, it has been possible to believe that this is all he feels. And then tonight the computer spat out the first in the series of logarithmic formulae that he initially predicted would start to map the binary gravitational matrix, and he suddenly realized that the project was approaching its conclusion. More than that: the need for sentient input is now essentially past, and it only remains for his team to supervise the processing of results.

From a cushioned bubble of parabolic segments and rotational axes, he has now found himself rather unceremoniously ejected into the prosaicness of a starship that is stationary in a non-hostile, unpopulated segment of charted space. Or to put it another way, he no longer has math to hide behind and there's basically nothing to do on the ship.

He knew that there was a chance, however minor, that Kirk would visit the gym this evening. The sudden burst of adrenalin at the thought of his Captain advised against the visit, and yet he knew despite all rational arguments to the contrary that he would go anyway. It was their customary hour for *Suus Mahna* practice, and though Spock knew that there was every chance Kirk would assume their sessions were indefinitely suspended, still his eyes swept the expanse of the gym from the locker room doors, from the suspended tracks to the recessed exercise booths, in an abortive effort to find him. Of course it was better that the Captain wasn't there, logically, since his absence allowed Spock to focus on the *shidorau* without constantly diverting a portion of his concentration to the maintenance of his controls.

That might have been a more convincing argument had logic played any part in his decision to attend the gym.

The sudden flash of pleasure that twisted his belly was mirrored on his friend's face when the Captain emerged from the locker rooms and their gazes locked across the floor, and it set in motion a process that *Suus Mahna*, with its series of grips and tackles and constant physical contact, was bound to exacerbate. The Captain's manifest arousal didn't exactly help matters either. Spock is not so disordered that he was unable to maintain his controls during their session, but there comes a point after which it is both impossible and illogical to ignore the needs of the body. The diversion through the science labs is as much for his own peace of mind as to actually check on anything, because this level of need disturbs him and he would like to know that it can be subsumed and contained by necessity. It makes him uneasy.

He steps into the comfortable heat of his quarters and strips off his bulky tunic, laying it carefully on the edge of his bunk as he lowers himself to the mattress. Kirk has spent so many hours in this cabin with him, curled casually into the guest chair by the desk, standing by Spock's side at the terminal, sitting cross-legged on the floor during a few weeks' earnest – if hopeless – effort to learn the basic techniques of Vulcan meditation. It is not difficult to conjure his image here – it can happen without Spock's conscious decision – but it feels like an invasion of Kirk's privacy and he won't do it until he has to, until his mind reaches automatically for what it needs in the final stages.

With his controls relaxed and his mind wandering, he is hard within seconds, and the first sensation is relief. The tension leaves his shoulders and his muscles sag, and for a moment he allows the undisciplined slouch, allows his mind to replay the sensation of Kirk's body beneath his, the scent of his skin, the warmth and the sweat and the taut, pliant muscles beneath his hands. In that instant, when he can feel the lithe figure pinned below him, he slips his hand inside his pants and firmly grips his erection around the base.

The feel of his hand around the sensitive flesh explodes little flash-bombs of pleasure along his spine and into his brain, and already his fingers are slick and dripping with transferred lubricant. With his free hand he eases his pants off his body, shuffling awkwardly so as not to break contact with his swollen cock, and kicks them free. He sits for a moment breathing heavily as the urgency builds. Spock clears his mind until there is nothing there but a high whine of arousal, a screaming need, and a steady throb of lust. Slowly, he strips his hand from the base of his cock to its head, trailing thick stripes of his natural lube, and a grunt escapes him. The pleasure is too intense now to restrain and he pumps his hand against the slippery shaft, eyes squeezed shut as a feverish excitement rises. It is impossible not to imagine that the friction of his hand is the gentle resistance of another body as he thrusts into it, and the only control he is able to offer is to shadow the features so that the face becomes any face, the body just a body. He will not color the eyes in hazel or flash a sunshine smile over its shoulder as the pace increases; he will not imagine the sensation of being spread out, prone, above a stocky, muscular form and burying himself deeply within it. And then from somewhere his mind trails a peal of the Captain's laughter, the whisper of his First Officer's name, and Spock feels his balls tighten quickly with the rapid approach of orgasm. As his blood sings in his ears and reason deserts him, a kaleidoscope of images assaults him: Kirk on the bridge turning a carefree smile towards the science console; Kirk slinging an easy arm around Spock's shoulders; Kirk's squat, square hands gripping a glass as he stretches his legs across the desk; Kirk's impossibly warm skin, flushed with exercise, and the bulge of his arousal tenting the front of his pants...

It's possible he mutters *Jim* as he comes and it's possible that the word only explodes inside his head, but sticky semen splashes over his hand and the Captain's name is on his lips, and the Captain's face is etched deeply into the disordered mess of shame and relief and helpless lust that drops him backwards onto his pillow.

Jim, he thinks desolately as his body ceases shaking and his heart begins to slow.

Jim.

~*~

Chapter 7

The erection proves resilient. There's not much he can do about that.

It persists throughout his - mercifully solitary - shower and is only slightly abashed by the sudden rush of cool air as he exits the haze of perfumed steam and re-emerges into the relative arctic blast of the locker rooms, where a few assorted crewmembers have begun to change for an evening game of soccer. A couple of them offer nods and the sort of uncomfortable greetings that you get when a superior officer and his subordinates are forced to converse in an off-duty scenario without alcohol, and, although half of them will absolutely have sprung inconvenient wood for no reason at all in the gym, he has no doubt that word of the Captain's erection will make its way around the junior decks before morning. Kirk very much hopes that no-one joins the dots between *aroused Captain* and *Suus Mahna with the First Officer*. There are enough rumors about him as it is.

Scrutiny and extrapolated invective are enough to wilt his recalcitrant member at last, although the lingering sense of arousal predicts that something will have to be done about it later in the evening. He dresses quickly and glances at the chronometer: less than ten minutes have passed since the notification came through. He throws some cheerful wishes for a good game over his shoulder - might as well make them feel bad about gossiping - and leaves for his quarters.

The light on his terminal is blinking like a beacon in the dark room, and he leaves the main lights low as he crosses to his desk and retrieves the information package. The familiar crest fills the screen as he activates the security protocol that scans his retina and checks it against his voice print ID, and a tinny computer voice asks him to hold for a recorded message from Admiral Fitzpatrick. Kirk releases a breath that he doesn't remember holding; Fitzpatrick is good news on a number of levels. They are in a section of the galaxy that is under his purview, meaning that any Starfleet personnel currently on assignment within that sector are technically answerable to him, and an encrypted communication for the Captain's eyes only, while almost certainly not the most exciting document this side of the Magna Carta, is likely to be comfortingly routine.

Kirk clicks *play* and the screen fills with the Admiral's serious, fatherly face. "Kirk," he says without preamble, "Sorry about the late hour. I've just left a meeting with the Junior Minister for Federal Expansion, amongst others, and this can't wait. I realize that the *Enterprise* is stationed in Beta Aurigae for another four days, but I'm going to have to cut that short. Your new orders follow - Fitzpatrick out."

Fitzpatrick's image abruptly disappears and the room darkens for a moment as the screen blanks. And then there's another Federal crest and a new document that opens with a destination, a mission objective and a timescale before devolving into a detailed background summary.

It's the destination that gets Kirk's attention.

In the shadowed semi-darkness, his eyes widen for a moment and a smile spreads slowly across his face. He reaches for his comm port.

"Spock," he says, gaze fixed on the screen as though the words there might suddenly dissolve into something much less exciting, "Would you come in here a moment?"

Spock allows himself to stare at the ceiling in an ambivalent afterglow for 3.4 minutes before rising abruptly and crossing to the bathroom to clean himself. He is standing in an unsatisfied haze beneath the sonics when the sounds of occupation suddenly erupt behind the second door. It's a little too much of a reality check, with the warm cloud of orgasm still lingering in his groin, and he scrubs quickly and exits as quietly as he can. He is dressing himself in the loose robes he wears for meditation when his comm port buzzes.

He knows who it will be, of course. Theoretically it could be one of many people, but statistically, at this time of the evening and with the ship so secure and functional she's practically humming a jaunty tune, the odds are upwards of 98 percent that it will be the Captain. Spock is not certain he is ready to face the object of his self-reproach just yet, but he doesn't have much of a choice. He opens the channel.

"Spock." It is, of course, the same voice that propelled him into climax less than ten minutes ago. "Would you come in here a moment?"

There is a tinge of breathless excitement to Kirk's tone that piques Spock's curiosity and earns another interested twitch from his lethargic cock, which, fortunately, is still heavily invested in the refractory period and can do no more than quirk a metaphorical eyebrow at present. Nevertheless, Spock diverts a portion of his focus to stabilizing the blood flow to his groin and says, "Of course, Captain. I will join you momentarily."

They have never openly declared an embargo on using the bathroom as a thoroughfare, it's just never happened. In the early days of Kirk's captaincy, their relationship was so overtly hostile that it simply wouldn't have occurred to either one - they barely acknowledged that they even *shared* a bathroom, let alone that the opposite door led into the other's quarters. By the time the freeze had thawed sufficiently for them to voluntarily spend off-duty hours together, it had just become one of their established courtesies, like the median temperature setting and the observance of each others' traditions. So he lets himself out into the corridor, startling a passing Ensign whose face flashes panic and then immediately schools itself into studied innocence before she scurries out of sight. He buzzes formally at the Captain's door. "Come in, Spock," calls Kirk, and the door slides open.

It was something of a surprise to discover, in the first stages of infatuation, that it is the smallest of details that deliver the most blinding assaults on reason and emotion. When Kirk is at his ease, he absently toes his boots off his feet and leaves them scattered haphazardly around the room, canted at all angles, and pads about in his stocking feet. It is both shockingly intimate and staggeringly mundane, and yet it never fails to elicit a lightning tug of yearning from his First Officer that he suppresses only with great difficulty.

Kirk glances up and flashes him a brilliant smile. "Sorry, Spock, have I caught you in the middle of meditation?" he says.

"Negative, Captain," says Spock, mindful of the fact that his given occupation for the evening, while deliberately vague, heavily implied the processing of paperwork somewhere along the line.

Kirk absorbs the information perfunctorily and beckons Spock to his desk. "I thought you'd want to see this as soon as possible," he said.

"The communication from Starfleet Headquarters?" says Spock.

Kirk nods. "New orders. I trust we're just about wrapped up with the gravitational measurements?"

A day ago, the idea of abandoning his unfinished project would have been a source of consternation. Today, it's a manifest relief. The computer banks have stored sufficient data to allow him to process the results at his leisure, but it is no longer enough to occupy him on a full-time basis and he badly needs distraction. He says, "Affirmative. What little information remains to be gathered can be easily accomplished by the science staff aboard the *Potemkin*. Might I inquire as to the nature of our new assignment?"

Kirk's grin widens and he swings the terminal around to face his First Officer. "See for yourself," he says.

Spock leans carefully across the desk, close enough to allow himself to read the text on the screen but far enough away that the heat of Kirk's body only slightly intrudes into his personal space. He focuses on the document.

After a moment, he glances up.

The Captain's face is shining with delight. "I guess Finagle's Law doesn't apply on this occasion, Mr. Spock," he says. "It's not somebody else's home port this time." He nods at the guest chair. "Have a seat, Spock. I think this calls for a drink, don't you?"

Spock raises an eyebrow and lowers himself into a sitting position. Presently, he says, "This is unexpected, Captain."

"Do you think we could dispense with the formalities for this evening, Spock?" says Kirk cheerfully. His hand hovers over the replicator button. "Pineapple juice? Or tomato? Or I *think* Scotty said he'd programmed gespar... We're off duty. I don't think the chain of command is going to break down if you call me Jim."

Spock knows better than to trust a replicator with gespar juice. He says, "Pineapple will be satisfactory, Jim." It earns him a dazzling flash of the sunshine smile, thrown carelessly over the Captain's shoulder.

"It'll be a short stop, I'm afraid," says Kirk as he decants a generous measure of cognac into a wide-bowled glass. "Did you read the details?" The replicator beeps and the Captain retrieves a chilled glass of juice, which gives Spock the chance to answer his question with a disapproving eyebrow. "No, of course you didn't." He grins as he settles back into his seat. "We're to dock at Vulcan Space Command for no longer than six hours, but I'm personally authorizing three of those as leave for you. And when I say 'authorizing' I mean 'ordering'. No excuses. I can handle the diplomatic side of things for a few hours."

Spock sips from his glass. He's prevaricating, of course, because he knows what reaction his next words are going to produce. Nevertheless, he says, "Thank you, Jim, but that won't be necessary."

"That's why I made it an order, Spock," says the Captain amiably. He sets his drink on the desk and leans forward, clasping his hands in front of him. "Look - I'm not trying to make you spend time with your parents, Spock. That's not my place. All I'm saying is - when was the last time you visited your homeworld?"

Spock knows precisely how long it is since he last set foot on Vulcan. This is part of the problem. He says, "Jim, unlike Humans, Vulcans do not feel a strong emotional connection to our native soil. It is important in terms of ritual and ceremony, but I do not experience any particular longing to return."

"Then beam down and stock up on home comforts," says Kirk. "One way or another, Mr. Spock, you're leaving this ship for three hours while we're in orbit around your home planet, so you might as well find some way to justify it to yourself."

Spock privately doubts that, but extracting himself from Kirk's plans typically involves a modicum of misdirection and the appearance of acquiescence, so he offers a non-committal nod and sips from his glass.

"Besides which," says Kirk, leaning back in his chair and cradling his brandy against his chest, "your parents will know we've docked. *You* can explain to your mother why you haven't left the ship if you like, but you can rest assured that I won't lie to her on your behalf." He purses his lips but his eyes sparkle.

"My mother has been the wife of the Vulcan ambassador to Earth for almost forty years," says Spock calmly. "She is well aware that duty takes precedence over personal preference."

"Keep telling yourself that, Mr. Spock," says Kirk. "Perhaps you might look like you believe it one day."

"I might also point out that it is almost as long since the *Enterprise* was last docked over Earth, and you yourself did not avail of the opportunity to spend time on the planet's surface on that occasion."

Kirk huffs a laugh. "That's different, of course."

"I fail to see how."

"Well, for a start I'm the Captain," he says with a beatific smile that cannot disguise his manifest amusement. "There's no CO on board to order *me*." Spock acknowledges the truth of the statement with a quirked eyebrow and a patrician nod. "Secondly, every other crewmember aboard this ship is Terran or of Terran descent. We simply didn't have time to beam everyone down and I could hardly grant myself a privilege that I denied to my crew. Moreover, I'm not exactly starved for Terran culture aboard the *Enterprise*. But, really, the most important factor, Mr. Spock, is this: it's different because I've ordered you to spend some time planetside, and you lack the authority to make a similar demand of me. And don't think I don't know that you wanted to." He takes a triumphant gulp from his glass.

"I believe you'll find that it was on Dr. McCoy's advice," says Spock after a moment.

"This will be too, if I ask him," he says. "Spock - look. I know your attachment to Vulcan is ambivalent at best. But who knows how long it might be before you have the chance to visit again?" There is an unspoken question hiding behind the words, but Spock chooses not to analyze it just now. "I'll beam you down in the middle of the L-langon Mountains if you choose. But you *will* beam down."

For a moment, Spock debates the merits of leaving it at that, since there will be at least two days in which to consider his options. But there is something in the Captain's eyes that makes him press further. "Jim," he says slowly, "Why is this important to you?"

It's the right question. He sees that in the same instant that he realizes he won't get an answer.

"Because *home* is important," says Kirk. His voice doesn't waver and he doesn't hesitate, but it's still not the full truth.

"The *Enterprise* has been my home for almost as long as I lived on Vulcan," says Spock slowly. "Longer, given the years of my childhood that were spent on Earth."

Something eases momentarily in the Captain's fixed expression, but it's gone almost before it registers and a darkness floods back in. Kirk covers it quickly with a smile and raises his glass. "To home, then," he says. "In whatever form it takes."

"To the *Enterprise*," says Spock, and lifts his glass in return.

Kirk barks a laugh that chases the shadows from his expression and spreads his grin more firmly across his face. "Mr. Spock," he says happily, "You're a stubborn man."

Chapter 8

The Veleth Hai are a humanoid race from a planet known to the Federation's databanks as Ilion VII, although that's almost certainly not what its inhabitants call it. The reason nobody's entirely certain what the inhabitants call it is because their communication is exclusively by way of a neural mist that envelops the planet and functions, apparently, as a kind of telepathic conductor. This works great for them but is less than conducive to conversational repartee when a psi-null species comes calling. Therefore, the Veleth Hai were the opposite of impressed when the Human crew of the USS *Merrimac* made first contact a little over three Terran months ago, and it turned out that the new guests had the collective psi-ability of a damp brick. In the usual order of things, their supercilious antipathy would have earned them a limp Federal handshake and a less than heartfelt, *well, let's stay in touch*, from the powers that be, except that the reason the *Merrimac* was in the Ilion system in the first place was because scanners show that the fourth and seventh planets are home to some of the most extensive seams of topaline, pergium and diamond detected anywhere in the galaxy. It'd be a shame to give up so easily on what could be a warm and promising friendship.

Negotiations, unsurprisingly, are not going well.

After the Veleth Hai made it abundantly clear that, as far as they could tell, the Human race was a collection of dribbling, barely-sentient knuckle-draggers whose command of warp technology was a development of questionable security for the rest of the galaxy, sole tactical authority for the Ilion project was, begrudgingly, ceded to the Vulcan High Command. Kirk thinks he has a fairly clear picture in his head of how *that* conversation proceeded, but anyway. Nobody in the return party was expecting balloons and home-baked cookies when they re-entered orbit around Ilion VII, but it turns out that the Veleth Hai don't think much of the kind of company the Vulcans are keeping, and it took the best part of seventeen days' negotiations to even get the diplomatic contingent beamed down to the planet's surface.

That was a little over a week ago. The *Enterprise's* new mission objective comes from Starfleet HQ, of course, and not the Federal offices, and so reading between the lines is a surprisingly illuminating experience, given the extraordinary levels of *schadenfreude* implicit in the summary that was appended to Fitzpatrick's communiqué. The lengthy silence from the surface of Ilion VII was just beginning to make the admiralty twitch when it was abruptly broken by the stone-faced Vulcan attaché to the Office of Federal Expansion, who was obliged to deliver the news that, no, no arrangement has yet been forthcoming, because the Veleth Hai, being a race who communicate exclusively by thought, don't actually have what might be colloquially termed "a language". It did not take anyone seven days to work *that* out, Kirk is privately certain. He'd bet his last bottle of Saurian brandy that ninety percent of the communication black-out was devoted to the best way of phrasing the news so as not to look as though they didn't actually do much better than the Humans.

Current speculation posits an emotional component to the Veleth Hai's communication structure, says the report, and the Captain can almost read, in the stark, prosaic lines of text, the smirks

hidden behind a genteel cough or twitching lips. He's not sure how much of the background information he ought to share with Spock, who will definitely pretend not to notice the schoolboy air of one-upmanship, but will miss none of the pedantry and superiority complex buried beneath double entendre and implication. At which point he will presumably skewer the self-conscious Human aggrandisement with the simple observation, which is not lost on Kirk, that, regardless of humanity's superior lexicon of emotional nuance, the psi-ability thing is the most pertinent factor here and all the hugs and manly tears in the universe can't change that.

It's a delicate situation. Everyone's feeling a little bit humiliated, and everyone's a little bit touchy as a result. The Federation thinks – quite rightly, as it turns out – that Starfleet are laughing at them behind their backs; Starfleet thinks that the Federation are treating them like the embarrassing cousin that can't be trusted not to get drunk and ruin Christmas for everyone; the Humans think that the Vulcans are enjoying the fact that Humanity has basically been kicked off the Planet of Everlasting Riches for being too stupid; and the Vulcans think that the Humans are a little bit too happy to discover that they can't talk to the Veleth Hai either. Nobody knows what the Veleth Hai think. That's the problem.

However. In much the same way that there is a thriving academic population on earth devoted to deciphering cave drawings and Mayan hieroglyphs, there is a branch of anthropology in the Vulcan Science Academy whose singular fascination is the study of ancient Vulcan emotionality. Sorelan *trensu* is Professor of Morpholinguistics at the Vulcana Regar campus and is widely regarded as the leading scholar in his field. He has been hastily conscripted to the project against a backdrop of furious negotiation, threats and concessions, not least of which is, apparently, a substantial Federal funding injection directly into the Department of Morpholinguistics at Vulcana Regar that speaks of a certain reticence on the part of the professor himself. Kirk is unsure of the precise reasons that anyone wants the *Enterprise* to do the honors in terms of transporting Sorelan from Vulcan to Ilion VII, but it seems to be the one thing everyone actually agrees on at the moment, and the question of whether or not it actually makes sense to send a Constitution-class starship into taxi-duty is not his to ponder. They will arrive in a little under three ship's days. It should be interesting.

It's close to midnight by the time Spock returns to his quarters, and Kirk is not sure where the hours have gone, but that's not unusual for the evenings that they spend in each other's company. They danced necessarily through questions of protocol and logistics and staffing the professor's sojourn aboard the ship, but when business was concluded and Spock did not immediately stand up to leave, the Captain risked a segue into softer things, things that might make his friend stay for the sake of staying. They drifted over inconsequential: a book of rare Vulcan poetry that Spock thinks the professor might find illuminating; the quality of background music on weekend nights in the gymnasium; the qualitative difference between a Master's degree on Earth and the *tren'es* from the VSA; and when the talk inevitably turned to the gravitational acrobatics of the Beta Aurigae binary, Kirk watched his First light up from within with that specific fire that shines out of his eyes when he is transcended by science, and realized – suddenly, brutally – how much he had missed these moments.

His quarters seem smaller now, cloistered and claustrophobic, still two shades too warm from where he surreptitiously turned up the heat a little over an hour ago. He roughly strips off his

uniform and lowers himself onto the covers of his bed. Brandy swims in his brain, soothing but not quite narcotic, and he wonders idly how Spock plans to gracefully wriggle his way free of obligatory shore leave. Something sciencey is the most obvious candidate, though he's more likely to go a little more subtle now that he knows that it matters to the Captain.

That may have been a tactical error. *Subtle* is harder to counter, and Vulcans have *subtle* written into their genetic code.

But it was a good question. Why does it mean so much to Kirk that his friend spends time on his home planet? His only answer is hazy and uneasy at best, and it's not much of an improvement on the answer he gave Spock. Because home *is* important, and if it wasn't then Spock wouldn't have so much energy invested in trying to find where he belongs. Because he can be *half-Human* all he wants, but it's only ever dragged out as a qualifier when it grants him particular debating rights in any given dispute. Because it says *Vulcan* under *Species* and *Homeworld* in his personnel file, and it's how Spock thinks of himself and who he is. And because he's different from the man Kirk knew at the beginning of the mission – as though he's finally settling into himself – and that's part of a process of self-acceptance that inevitably leads to laying some demons to rest on the planet of his birth. And because this tiny, irrational part of the Captain hopes that maybe, if he's forced to do that now, he won't feel like he needs go back again for a while. Like, for example, as soon as the current mission ends.

Yes. That's not the sort of thought process best shared with his First Officer.

From the head comes the gentle sounds of Spock preparing for sleep: a clink of metal against metal, the splash of water into the sink, a muted cough. Kirk closes his eyes.

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"Tell me, Mr. Spock - what do you know about Professor Sorelan?"

The First Officer swings around in his chair to face the bridge. "Regrettably, Captain, I am not familiar with the professor's work," he says. "Morpholinguistics is not my field."

The ship is about to drop out of warp on the edge of the Eridani system, which means that Spock has known about the existence of Sorelan *trensu* and his Department of Morpholinguistics for a full sixty-seven hours now. Kirk waits.

"However, I have taken the opportunity to access the databanks of the VSA," he adds. Kirk purses his lips around a smile that Spock ignores. "His publication output is modest but intriguing. It seems likely that there is no scholar on Vulcan better suited to attempting communication with the Veleth Hai."

Earlier this morning, Lieutenant Afaeki obviated a Vulcan hijack of the data processing project in Labs 1, 2 and 4 by virtue of steely-eyed determination and an innate talent for deftly charting the fine line between *duty* and *insubordination*. It seems a little too obvious to be the main thrust of Spock's offensive, though, and the Captain is on his guard.

"Why do you say that?" he asks lightly.

"Sorelan's research interests are focused mainly on tracing the evolution of body language through pre-Surakian texts," says Spock. "We know that the Veleth Hai use non-verbal visual cues during face-to-face communication - without it, the crew of the *Merrimac* would have been wholly unable to determine their... distaste. I believe that the professor's expertise in this area will act as a guide in interpreting their telepathic communication."

"Like a kind of Rosetta Stone, you mean?"

Spock inclines his head. This is probably not a good sign. The fact that there's not even a *token* protest about the Captain's use of Terran history to elucidate a point means he's almost certainly plotting something.

"Perhaps," he says. "As Starfleet Command have adduced, the emotionality of the Veleth Hai communication system is not easily adaptive to Vulcan telepathic norms. A code-breaker of sorts may well be required."

Only a Vulcan could take a neutral verb like *adduced* and load it so heavily with disdain and implied reproach. Decoding emotionality may require a scholar at the level of Sorelan *trensu*, but the general population seem to manage the *encoding* part pretty well all by themselves. Maybe it takes a Human to notice it, though. Kirk feels a smile twitch the corners of his lips.

"Dropping out of warp, sir," says Sulu from the helm.

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu," says Kirk. "Lieutenant Uhura, let me know when we're in hailing range of Vulcan Space Central."

"Yes, sir."

As the star streaks coalesce into Eridani's filigree backdrop and the engines scrape mournfully down the octaves from their supersonic warp-speed whine, Spock stands and crosses to stand at the right of the command chair.

"Full impulse, Mr. Sulu," says Kirk, turning his head to throw a smile towards his First Officer.
"Welcome home, Mr. Spock."

Spock folds his hands behind his back and trains his eyes on the viewscreen, which is dimming by degrees as 40 Eridani A expands across the upper right quarter. Two pinprick shadows are just visible against her heavy, yellow bulk. "Thank you, Captain," he says.

"I trust the circumstances are a little more..." - and Kirk suddenly realizes there is no appropriate way to end that sentence. *Congenial?* Implies that Spock's wedding was ever anything but. *Relaxing?* Really? He's going to reference *pon farr* on the bridge? *To your liking?* Well, for a start, they're not, and besides, that phrase conveniently combines the very worst semantics of the previous two options. He settles for, "a little more agreeable than our last visit," and knows even before he's finished speaking that his words will earn him an imperious glance and an eyebrow arched so high it's practically disappeared off the top of Spock's head. Kirk contents himself with plastering his most ingenuous expression across his face and returning the gaze until his First looks away.

"Indeed, Captain," says Spock smoothly, and if Kirk wasn't 100 percent certain that his friend has a bulletproof shore leave contingency plan meticulously plotted, well. He is now.

"Hailing frequencies open, Captain," says Uhura. "In range in twenty seconds."

"Mr. Spock," says Kirk, because he can't resist. Yes, he'll pay for it eventually, but right now he can't resist. "Would you care to do the honors?"

The look he receives confirms the certainty of retribution at some point in the future, but Spock says, "Thank you, Captain."

"In range, Mr. Spock," says Uhura.

He straightens almost imperceptibly, so that instead of standing poker-stiff he now approaches a quantum state of collinearity. "*A'fic t'Stukh T'Khasi, nash-USS Enterprise se,*" he says formally, and something tightens in Kirk's belly, the way it always does when his First Officer breaks into his native tongue. There's something a little bit thrilling to be forcibly reminded that this is a man born into another race from another world, a man with whom he shares virtually no common cultural referents or experience, and still, *still* they have managed to forge the strongest and most complete friendship that Kirk has ever known.

There is a momentary silence, and then a voice replies, in Terran Standard, "*USS Enterprise, welcome to Vulcan. Stand by to receive orbital co-ordinates.*"

"Standing by."

"Co-ordinates received, sir," says Chekov from the navigation console.

"Thank you, Vulcan Space Central," says Kirk. "This is Captain James T Kirk. Requesting permission to make ship to surface contact with the Vulcan Science Academy."

Another silence, this time stretching long enough to trail a sideways glance from the Captain towards his First. Spock meets it and offers a raised eyebrow in return.

A hiss from the turbolift announces Bones' arrival on the bridge and Kirk turns his head to acknowledge the Doctor as he takes up a position to the left of the command chair.

"Home sweet home, Spock," says McCoy drily, as the continued silence segues gracefully from *common courtesy* into *possible comm malfunction*.

"Vulcan Space Central, do you copy?" says Kirk. He glances towards Uhura, who is watching the ceiling with a look of furious concentration on her face. She catches the Captain's gaze and offers a tiny shake of her head.

"Frequency still open, sir," she says.

Kirk opens his mouth to repeat the question and gets as far as drawing breath before the steel voice

finally cuts him off. "Permission granted," it says. "Proceed through conduit 117-38/4. Interference is expected due to weather conditions in the Raal region. Proceed through conduit 117-39/7 if contact is lost."

"Thank you, Vulcan Sp..."

"Transferring to Quarantine and Border Controls for final scans. Vulcan Space Central out."

There is a moment of perfect, speechless quiet on the bridge.

"Well," says McCoy presently, "Warm and welcoming as ever."

Kirk darts another quick glance at Spock, who is regarding the blank viewscreen with consternation.

"The expedient manner would seem to go beyond formality and prudence," he says slowly.

The Captain sighs. "They're not happy we're here," he says. He purses his lips. "This may be a little more delicate than we were expecting. Uhura, see if you can raise the VSA on either of those conduits and patch it through to my quarters. Mr. Spock, I want you to join me for the call and on the away party when we beam-down."

"Captain..." he begins to say, but Kirk holds up a hand to cut him off.

"I realize there's some history there, Mr. Spock, but I'm afraid you'll have to set it aside for now," he says. "I need you with me for this."

"Captain," says Uhura, "Unable to establish a link to either conduit supplied by Vulcan Space Central. Interference is too strong."

Kirk curls his hand into a fist and gently strikes the arm of his chair. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Keep trying, and call Mr. Scott to the bridge. Mr. Sulu, you have the con until Mr. Scott arrives. Have him complete the final formalities with Quarantine and Borders. I'll be in my quarters." He stands, glancing a summons to his First, and adds under his breath, "Trying to work out what's going on."

~*~

"Jim," says Spock as the turbolift doors close on the bridge, "I do not believe my participation is advisable."

An on-duty *Jim* is always cause to take note of what follows, and Kirk twists his head to train an evaluative gaze on his First Officer. Spock is facing resolutely forward, hands folded tightly behind his back, and only the lines of tension in his face betray his distress. He says, gently, "I'm sorry if it makes you uncomfortable, Spock..."

"It is not a question of my discomfort," says Spock, but he still won't look at the Captain. Whoever decided that Vulcans don't lie obviously didn't count *prevarication* under that general rubric. "However, the situation is politically sensitive. I believe that my presence will unduly complicate matters."

"Spock, it's been twenty years since you left Vulcan," says Kirk. "How long can the VSA hold a grudge?"

"Vulcans do not 'hold a grudge', Captain."

Kirk smothers a mutinous grin that is determined to worry its way across his face, because now is clearly not the time. The doors slide open onto Deck 5 and he says, as they step out of the lift, "But you feel that your decision to turn down your place at the Academy two decades ago is likely to exacerbate our current diplomatic difficulties?"

"It may contribute to a certain intransigence," says Spock.

"And you wouldn't call that 'holding a grudge'?" He knows the grin is in his eyes, but there's nothing he can do about that. Spock doesn't sigh, but Kirk can tell he wants to.

They have reached the Captain's quarters and he opens the door. "All right, Spock," he says as they enter and cross to his desk. "I'm not sure it matters what anyone calls it. I'll play it by ear, but it strikes me that it would look very odd not to include you in these talks. Especially if there are issues of cultural sensitivity at stake." He opens his comm port. "Kirk to Communications."

"Communications. Uhura here, Captain."

"How's that conduit looking, Lieutenant?"

"I've got a patchy signal, sir. No visuals but the VSA are standing by on an audio-only channel."

"Sorelan?"

"No, sir. Professor Sorelan was unavailable. I have the Dean of Anthropology for you, Professor T'Polak."

Kirk glances at Spock. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Stand by."

"Standing by, sir."

The Captain straightens, pressing a hand to his forehead. "Please tell me this is a question of protocol," he says.

"It... may be," says Spock.

"But you clearly don't believe it is."

"It is redundant to speculate, Captain."

"Not always, Mr. Spock," says Kirk. He didn't feel this tired fifteen minutes ago. "It's an audio-only channel," he says, scrubbing his hand over his face. "At least we can gauge the general mood before we decide whether or not to announce your presence." He sighs and lowers himself into his chair. "All right. Have Uhura patch them through."

Spock flicks open the port. "Spock to Communications. The Captain is ready to receive the transmission from Professor T'Polak."

"Aye, sir," says Uhura, and a deafening blast of static slices through the tense air of the Captain's quarters. Kirk winces.

"Vulcan Science Academy, this is Captain James Kirk of the *USS Enterprise*," he says over the hissing white noise. "Do you read me?"

"Cap... K, this iscan Sci... my..."

The Captain closes his eyes and takes a breath. "Say again, Vulcan Science Academy. We have a lot of interference at our end."

"...."

"Vulcan Science Academy, this is *Enterprise*. Do you copy?"

"...can..." A high-pitched feedback whine, as of a starship hull gently rending under intense atmospheric pressure. "...lak, do you..." An explosive buzz of electrical interference, another shrill protest, and sudden silence. Kirk looks at Spock, who has already quirked an eyebrow at the comm.

"Vulcan Science Academy, this is *Enterprise*, do you copy?"

He is not expecting a reply, and the sudden muted hum that speaks of a conduit still open against the odds is something of a surprise. The voice, when it follows, is distant and distorted, with a disconcerting split-second echo, but there is no mistaking a note of iron-willed intransigence that does not bode well for the conversation. "*Enterprise*, this is T'Pilak *trensu* of the Vulcan Science Academy. To whom am I speaking?"

"*Dif-tor heh smusma, T'Pilak trensu*," says Kirk, in case it might make any difference. Even across a blind channel and some thousand kilometers of atmosphere and planetary surface, it palpably does not. "This is Captain James T Kirk." He glances up at Spock, meets his eyes, and shakes his head. Spock nods and steeples his hands. "I trust you received a communiqué from Starfleet Command informing you of our arrival."

"We received a communiqué, Captain," she says. Kirk waits, but she does not elaborate.

"I had hoped to speak directly to Professor Sorelan," he says when it becomes clear that she's not going to add anything further.

"I regret that Professor Sorelan is unavailable at present, Captain."

"In that case, perhaps you might be able to confirm the final arrangements for his transfer to *Enterprise* on his behalf," says Kirk.

There is a long, uncomfortable pause. Then T'Polak says, "It appears there has been a miscommunication, Captain Kirk. Professor Sorelan is unavailable for transfer to your ship at this time."

"Excuse me?" says Kirk before his brain can flip his vocal cords back to *diplomatic*.

"Starfleet Command have been informed," she says.

In the absence of the appropriate Vulcan to glare at, Kirk transfers his wide-eyed fury to Spock, who furrows his brow in the direction of the comm port and sits forward in his seat.

"T'Polak *trensu*, this is Commander Spock," he says. "This is most irregular."

"Ah, Spock," she says. For a sparse, two-syllable sentence, it is so heavily inflected with censure that it convincingly refutes Spock's earlier denial of the Vulcan capacity for grudge-holding. "*Dif-tor heh smusma*."

"*Sochya eh dif*," he answers perfunctorily. "Nevertheless, it must be clear that we have received no transmission from Starfleet Command rescinding the order to collect Sorelan *trensu* and transport him to the Ilium system."

"I cannot speak for Starfleet Command," she says. "The communication was made earlier today. I regret that you have had a wasted journey, Captain Kirk, but the fact remains: Sorelan is unavailable at present."

Kirk leans forward, elbows braced on the desk, and schools his features into something approaching patience. He says, "You must appreciate, T'Polak, that we can't simply turn the ship around on your say-so. My orders stand until such times as they are officially revoked by my commanding officers."

"You must do what you must do, Captain," she says blandly.

"And when is Sorelan likely to become *available*?" he says. Frustration colors his tone freely now, but there's not much he can do about that.

There is a small silence. Then T'Polak says, "I cannot say."

"Cannot or will not?" snaps Kirk, but his eyes have sought Spock's again and he reads in them a confirmation of what he has just begun to suspect: T'Polak wasn't expecting that last question and it was clearly the right one to ask.

"I see no benefit in prolonging this communication, Captain," says the professor stiffly. "I have no doubt that Starfleet will find an alternative ambassador to the Veleth Hai. Live long and prosper. T'Polak out."

She is gone before he can open his mouth to respond and the sudden absence of electrical hum sucks a vacuous silence into the room that makes the Captain's ears ring. He takes a deep breath and leans back in his seat. "Well," he says. "That was unexpected."

"Indeed," says Spock.

"Analysis?"

"Difficult to say," says Spock slowly. He straightens his spine, and rests his hands on either side of the chair. "The level of hostility is clear. However, it is impossible to determine its cause. I do not believe my presence contributed significantly to the antipathy already manifest in Professor T'Polak's tone." A beat. Then, "Fascinating."

"Is Vulcan opposed to communication with the Veleth Hai?" says Kirk.

"Vulcan stands to benefit in equal measure with all members of the Federation if mining rights can be established on Ilion VII. I see no logical reason to oppose this mission."

"Nevertheless, Space Central weren't exactly welcoming. And now the VSA has followed suit."

"If Vulcan High Command were to depart from Federal policy on this matter, it seems likely that the Vulcan Science Academy would comply. However, T'Polak's hostility need not reflect an overall policy shift. The VSA is quite capable of independent opposition to the Veleth Hai project."

"On what grounds?"

"I cannot say."

"But you have a suspicion?"

"Perhaps." Spock steeples his hands. "I am reluctant to verbalize it at present, Captain, without sufficient evidence. Moreover, we are neglecting to consider one pertinent fact."

"Which is?"

Now Spock looks up, and it's not quite amusement in his eyes and not quite mischief, but there's a glint of *something*. "Sorelan *trensu* may be, in fact, simply unavailable."

Kirk huffs a small laugh. "Touché, Mr. Spock," he says. He crosses his hands across his chest and lets a wide smile break across his face. "You know, if I didn't know better, I might suspect you orchestrated all this yourself."

The eyebrow shoots up. "For what purpose, Captain?"

"Well," says Kirk, "It seems highly unlikely I'll be beaming you down for mandatory shore leave *now*."

~*~

Chapter 9

"They're saying four days, maybe five," says Komack irritably. "We've only managed to get *that* much out of them in the past ten minutes."

It's an interesting experience, facing the wrath of Admiral Komack while not being its primary target. Kirk would be better placed to enjoy it, however, if he wasn't industriously biting back on his own impotent rage, because the target is currently Spock and that's actually worse.

He says, as equitably as he can, "They're clearly stalling, sir."

"Of course they're stalling!" snaps Komack. "And I'm damned if I know what their game is, but your orders still stand, Kirk. The Federation's not going to be held to ransom by a bunch of intellectuals with a bug up their ass. Commander Spock!"

If Spock is startled by the abrupt re-focusing of the Admiral's attention, he gives no sign. Only the set of his jaw reveals his diminishing patience, and Kirk is fairly certain that Komack will miss that entirely. "Yes, sir," he says.

"I want answers, Commander," says the Admiral. "These are your people. I want to know what the hell they're playing at."

"With respect, Admiral," says Spock levelly, "These are not *my* people. Our only commonality is that we are of the same homeworld."

"Don't give me semantics, Spock!" growls the Admiral. "You're a damn sight better placed to find out what's going on than anyone else aboard that ship. Why the hell do you think we sent the *Enterprise*?"

"Sir, if you were of the opinion that my presence aboard the *Enterprise* might add additional leverage in any negotiation with the VSA, then I regret to inform you..."

"I don't care what it takes, get it done!" snaps Komack, and Kirk feels his temper rise with break-neck force. Unseen beneath the desk, he digs his fingernails into his hands.

"Admiral," says Kirk and pauses to reflect on his tone. It is vitally important to strip it free of the tumbling fury coiling in his belly. "Sir, I have no intention of abandoning this mission because of a rebuff from the VSA. I have submitted a formal request for a meeting with the Vice-Chancellor in ShiKahr as soon as possible. However - it wouldn't hurt to have a little diplomatic pressure exerted from HQ. I'm not certain of our standing in Vulcan political circles at present."

"Damn it, Kirk, you're a representative of Starfleet! That's your standing." And if the tone of morally-affronted outrage is understandable, it's not exactly helpful.

"Yes, sir, but the VSA is not answerable to Starfleet," says Kirk.

Komack's eyes narrow. "Watch your tone, Captain," he says. "Your job is to get Professor Sorelan out of his office and onto your ship. You let me worry about what goes on behind the scenes."

"If I might make a suggestion?" says Spock. Two pairs of Human eyes converge on him, one openly hostile, the other startled.

"Go ahead," says Komack.

"The Veleth Hai mission is not time-sensitive," says Spock. "If Professor T'Polak has indicated that Professor Sorelan might be available to depart in four days' time, perhaps it would be wise to take her at her word."

"You think she *meant* it?" says Kirk.

"It makes little difference whether she meant it or whether it was simply a diversionary tactic. The words have been uttered on record. She will find it difficult to retract them now."

Sixteen light-years away, Komack leans back on his chair and trains a sceptical gaze on the *Enterprise's* commanding officers. He says, "I'm not buying it, Spock. Maybe the High Command knew what she was going to do in advance and maybe they didn't, but they've closed down tight behind her now. If she retracts, they'll back her."

"With respect," says Spock, "I disagree."

And if the blaze in Kirk's belly was nuclear before, it's now the heart of a bright-burning, newborn star. It's as much as he can do not to turn a wide, open smile on his First for that staggering act of rebellion, and so he fixes his gaze on his desk for as long as it takes to steady his expression and re-collect his thoughts, and then lifts his eyes to meet Komack's.

"If Commander Spock feels that way, sir, then I'm bound to support him," he says. "His assessment of the situation..."

"His assessment of the situation is not what signs off on your orders, Kirk!" barks Komack.

"Acknowledged, sir, and I have no intention of disregarding orders. I am simply suggesting that there is merit to Commander Spock's appraisal of the situation."

"You're not the only Vulcan in Starfleet, Commander," says Komack. "I haven't sought your opinion on Professor T'Polak's reputation or word of honor. I want you to do your damn job, and your job at this minute is to move one Professor of Morpholinguistics from Vulcana Regar to the Ilion system. Now, I don't much care if you have to beam him up naked from his bedroom to accomplish that, but you've got your job to do and I've got mine. Take your meeting in ShiKahr, Kirk, but don't tell me to pin any hopes on Professor T'Polak's pinkie-swear that Sorelan's going to be good to go by the end of the week. She doesn't want him gone and by all accounts he doesn't want to *be* gone. I don't need to tell you that I'm not expecting you to take no for an answer, Kirk."

Kirk digs his fingers into his palms again. "No, sir."

"Good. Komack out."

The screen blanks so abruptly that Kirk is obliged to blink a couple of times to persuade his eyes that they haven't gone blind. He lets out a long breath.

"Jim," says Spock quietly, "That may have been unwise."

"I don't believe I said anything out of order," says Kirk, more lightly than he feels.

"I am not certain that agreeing with me was a tactical advantage."

"I doubt it was agreeing with you that got Komack all hot under the collar. It was the fact that agreeing with you contradicted him."

"Indeed," says Spock, with a heavy tone of *that was kind of my point*.

Joy - ridiculous, unbidden, and almost completely inappropriate - bubbles in the Captain's chest and floods his head with a kind of reckless energy. He turns a huge smile on his friend, the smile that he wanted to show him a moment earlier.

"Well, Mr. Spock," he says happily, "You started it."

~*~

If there is one thing that Vulcan authority figures understand really well, it is the psychological power of symbolism. Spock is privately certain that the Vice-Chancellor of the Vulcan Academy of Science does not typically conduct his business in a cavernous hall that sucks the rapid-fire clip of their footfall up to the distant ceiling as he and his Captain cross the wide expanse of floor to a forbidding wood-effect desk that sits in the shadows of the furthest wall. But there is a subtle but tangible advantage to be gained by making them walk the empty meters, while Solvis and his associates watch mildly from their privileged position and radiate an air of infinite patience that manages to imply that their guests could really move a *little* faster.

Spock is sure that the Captain's thoughts mirror his own, and, while the feeling is uncomfortably akin to being caught out in a species-wide lie, there is also a warm sense of satisfaction curling in his chest at the unruffled, pleasant smile of greeting fixed to Kirk's face as they approach the dais where the Elders wait. In his many years of living and working alongside Humans, it has been Spock's experience that their default position around Vulcans is either manifest impatience or intimidation. The Captain is the only man he has ever known who has taken Spock's people so calmly in his stride. It's his nature to assume that the world will simply orient itself around him, and the amazing thing is that it generally does. Perhaps if he spent more time worrying about cultural observance and niceties he would be more vulnerable to their ideological bite, but Kirk has always just preferred to think of the multiplicity of galactic life as different shades of the same essential brotherhood: he treats everyone with the respect he expects for himself and his crew, and that's actually a much more powerful technique than simpering political correctness. Spock fully expects that it will be as effective as a concrete enema against the grim tenacity of the leaders of the VSA, but, really, out of every Human on planet Earth and her combined colonies, Kirk is the only one with even half a chance of success here.

They draw to a halt in front of the long desk. Spock estimates that they have walked 100 meters from the door to the dais, and decides that this room must be used for formal functions, although he cannot imagine what kind. In tandem with his Captain, he raises his hand in the *ta'al*. Solvis alone returns the gesture.

"Live long and prosper, Captain Kirk," he says, and his voice is deeper than Spock had expected. The empty air catches his words and twists them into the shadowy heights. He is perhaps one hundred and fifty years old, elegantly slipping into middle age and wearing his authority like the ermines of an ancient Terran king. His eyes slide economically to the right and meet Spock's. "Commander Spock," he says, and the tone is cold.

Spock feels the Captain bristle and hopes he won't allow it to show.

"Peace and long life, Solvis *osu*," says Kirk with a tight smile. It's... adequate. Solvis probably doesn't notice, at least.

It would be inaccurate to say that Spock hasn't pondered this very moment for many years. He does not often revisit the circumstances of his departure from Vulcan, and less so now that there is an entente of sorts between himself and his father, but - lately in particular - he has occasionally found himself indulging in idle speculation about the path along which his decision has inexorably led him. There is another life, another Spock, hovering ephemerally on the horizon of his choices - a Spock who followed Sarek's wishes and applied himself to the Vulcan disciplines and sciences. A Spock who never joined Starfleet. A Spock who has never known Kirk. There are days when that knowledge prickles bullets of cold panic along his spine, the knowledge of how close he came to never finding the means to slot together the disparate pieces of his soul into one coherent whole, and even now, with unrequited emotion tugging a hole in his belly and rending his chest inch by inch, day by day, he knows he would not have had this other life, not for anything.

"Thank you for agreeing to see us," says Kirk. His voice is deceptively light. Spock has heard that tone before, and Solvis would be very foolish to mistake it for capitulation to the semantics of big rooms and impressive desks.

"I regret the circumstances," says Solvis smoothly, and Spock suppresses a sigh. Why no-one bothers to do their homework before meeting with James Kirk is a mystery to him, but he recognizes the universal language of underestimation in the Elder's tone, and things are likely to go downhill quickly from here. Spock waits. Solvis obliges:

"Nevertheless, I fail to see what assistance my colleagues and I can render."

"That's... disappointing," says Kirk. The smile has not moved, not even fractionally. "I understand that the VSA has always enjoyed an amicable relationship with Starfleet and the Federation as a whole."

"I see no reason for that state of affairs to cease," says Solvis.

"I'm sure you're right," says Kirk. "I wonder - what percentage of the Academy's annual income is derived from Federal grants these days?"

Solvis is not exactly lacking in the arts of cordial evisceration himself, and his eyes barely narrow. "The Academy's funding is a matter of public record," he says.

Kirk turns an open, artless smile upon his First Officer. "Mr. Spock?" he says.

"38.7 percent in the last academic year," says Spock.

Kirk raises his eyebrows and turns them back to the dais. "That's rather a lot of money," he says. "I'd imagine it would be quite difficult to make ends meet if that were to suddenly dry up."

Solvis folds his hands on top of the desk. "That funding is ring-fenced by the Vulcan High Command," he says calmly. "I would appreciate if you would refrain from idle threats, Captain."

"It was my understanding, though," says Kirk, "That the Vulcan High Command supported the Veleth Hai project." He allows the comment to hang in the dry air for a moment, then adds, "An agreement was made, Solvis *osu*. I'm here to collect Professor Sorelan."

"Professor Sorelan," says Solvis icily, "Is unavailable."

"So Professor T'Pilak informed me," says Kirk. "I'm simply not clear as to why Professor Sorelan might have been available two Terran days ago and suddenly unavailable when the *Enterprise* arrives at Vulcan."

"Circumstances change. There is no mystery, Captain Kirk."

"I respectfully disagree," says Kirk. "*I remain in the dark.*"

"Neither Professor Sorelan nor the Vulcan Science Academy is obliged to account for his private affairs. Professor T'Polak informs me that he is unavailable. He is, therefore, unavailable. If you imagine that the Vice-Chancellor of the Academy is in the habit of interrogating our most eminent scholars, then I regret to inform you that this is not the case."

"But he may suddenly become available again in four or five days' time."

There is a short silence. "From where have you determined this information?"

The Captain is far too practiced to share a triumphant look with his First Officer, but something warms in the air between them. He says, "Professor T'Polak indicated as much in a discussion with Starfleet Command."

The folded hands are retracted and disappear beneath the desk. "Then Professor T'Polak spoke out of turn," says Solvis.

"Her words are on record," says Spock now, and the look that the Vice-Chancellor turns upon him is dripping with animosity.

"Commander Spock," says Solvis, and there is a slight but discernable emphasis on *Commander*. "We are surprised that you would support an unwarranted intrusion into matters of Vulcan privacy."

"My orders come from Starfleet Command," says Spock. "They are the same as Captain Kirk's."

"Your priorities," says Solvis, "Are regrettable."

Well, *that* does it. "Commander Spock's priorities are loyalty to the oath he's sworn to Starfleet and a commitment to honor his word," snaps Kirk. His anger flares brightly in the dim room and agitates the torpid air. "I'd say that, of all the priorities on display in this room, his alone are admirable, Solvis *osu*."

Solvis locks down like a starship entering battle. His expression barely shifts, but the shadows freeze around him. He says, "I believe that concludes our meeting, Captain. If there is nothing further?"

"The VSA made a commitment to deliver Professor Sorelan to the *Enterprise* for transport to Ilion VII," says Kirk. "I expect that commitment to be honored, sir. If the VSA wants to retain any credibility within the United Federation of Planets, I'd advise you to think very carefully about the consequences of breaking your word. *Enterprise* will be in orbit for another two hours. I'll expect your communication before we depart." A tiny pause, but loaded with the sort of tension that could warp steel. "Thank you for your time."

He turns on his heel while Solvis is in the process of nodding a glacial goodbye and strides savagely into the indistinct depths of the hall. Spock raises his hand in the *ta'al* and derives a small measure of satisfaction from the distaste that flashes briefly in Solvis' eyes as he's obliged to return it.

"Live long and prosper," says Spock evenly.

"Peace and long life," mutters Solvis, and Spock turns to follow his Captain.

~*~

Alpha shift has just concluded and the corridors are filled with crewmen easing into leisure time, passing between their stations and their quarters or on their way to various off-duty pursuits. Even after four and a half years, the sight of the Captain among them is enough to temper the atmosphere with something that's a few parts respect, a few parts awe, and a few parts open admiration. It never ceases to fascinate Spock, the easy assumption of the mantle of responsibility that straightens Kirk's back and fixes a warm smile to his face no matter how difficult an interview with the VSA he's just passed. He cannot help but be drawn to it, and the brutal reminder of his relative place on the *Enterprise* versus the planet of his birth does not exactly moderate the rush of affection it elicits.

They do not speak until the turbolift doors cocoon them from listening ears, and then Kirk releases a weary puff of air and sags a little and says, "I think I'd better comm Admiral Komack and tell him we'll be here a little longer than planned."

Fatigue tugs at his shoulders and drains the color from his face. Spock says, "Jim, there will be time for that later. I believe you require rest."

"I'm fine, Spock," he says, but his eyes remain closed. "Given the circumstances, it seems like Space Central might take a little persuading to allow us to remain in orbit. I'd prefer to get the ball rolling now."

The doors open onto the residential deck, and McCoy abruptly halts in the act of stepping forward. "There you are," he says. "Was just on my way down to the transporter room. How'd it go with friend Solvis?"

He falls into step alongside them as they make their way along the corridor to the Captain's quarters, and Kirk says, "It could have gone better, Bones."

"You look like you're 'bout ready to fall over, Jim," says the Doctor. "Spock been remiss in his duties?"

That earns him a sharp glare from Kirk, and Spock quickly puts in, "My duties do not include harassing the Captain regarding his health, Doctor. I believe that falls under your remit."

"Yeah, well, my remit's telling me that you need a bite to eat and a sit-down, Jim," says Bones easily. "How 'bout I get your Yeoman to bring us dinner in your quarters?"

Kirk turns a wry smile on his friend. "How about *I* get my Yeoman to bring us dinner in my quarters?" he says.

Bones is unfazed. "Fixed your diet card again anyway," he says cheerfully. "Spock - you joining us?"

The question takes Spock by surprise, and he realizes that his routine with the Captain has become so entrenched into his personal worldview that it would never have occurred to him that he *wouldn't* be included in the invitation. He says, "Thank you, Dr. McCoy. I believe my duties *do* include protecting the Captain from the over-zealous ministrations of the ship's Doctor. I shall be glad to join you for dinner."

They follow Kirk into his quarters, and the Captain busies himself in dragging an extra chair from

the sleeping area and arranging it in front of the desk. McCoy sits, and Spock, after a moment's hesitation, follows suit. "Been up to the bridge yet?" says the Doctor as Kirk lowers himself into his seat and sets about tapping a meal order into the terminal.

"No," says the Captain absently. "We've only just beamed back aboard. Why?"

"Uhura took a surface-to-ship message while you were gone," says Bones. There is a glint in his eye. "For Spock."

Kirk looks up, meets Spock's gaze and raises his eyebrows. "For Spock?"

"Yup," says McCoy happily. "From the Lady Amanda." He glances sideways at the First Officer with a mischievous grin. "Don't look so panicked, Spock, it was recorded. It wasn't live."

"I do not *look panicked*, Dr. McCoy," says Spock, but he sounds stiff even to himself.

A slow smile spreads across Kirk's face. "I believe I told you you wouldn't be able to avoid your mother while we were docked," he says.

"I assure you, Captain, I am not seeking to avoid Amanda," says Spock, and Kirk shrugs and turns his grin back towards the terminal screen.

"Call your mom, Spock," he says amiably.

"Captain, the political sensitivities of our current mission may not permit..."

"Spock," says Kirk, "I bow to your superior knowledge of how to handle Sarek. But just... trust me on this. Amanda is expecting your call." He holds up a hand to obviate Spock's token protest that he does not *handle* his father. "I'm sure she knows you're busy. I have no doubt she has endless respect for your duties and obligations to Starfleet, Spock. But she's Human, and she's your mother. Trust me - you'll save yourself a world of grief if you take five minutes out of your evening to let her know you're alive and well and thinking about her. The food'll be a little while. Go and do it now."

Spock folds his hands in his lap to give himself a moment's grace. He says, "The time in ShiKahr is approaching the evening meal. It is considered a serious breach of decorum to intrude upon mealtimes. I will make the communication later tonight."

The Captain's eyes sparkle. "You'd better," he says. "I'll be checking the communications log. Now, Bones - brandy or bourbon?"

~*~

It doesn't matter how hard she tries - and she *does* try, he knows that - Amanda is never able to strip the warmth from her voice or her eyes when she addresses her family. It's something her husband has learned to live with over the years, and something that her son has slowly learned to cherish. She doesn't often send him a private communication because she knows that her tendency towards demonstrative affection makes him uncomfortable, so when she does she's inclined to allow herself a little emotional wriggle-room. As her face fills his terminal screen, the first thing he sees is the tenderness of her smile and its untroubled baptism of contentment and love. Her skin is a little paler, a little more lined in the cheek and creased around the eyes than he remembers, but her voice is unchanged.

She says, "Spock, by the time you get this, you'll be in orbit around Vulcan. Welcome home, dear. I hope you'll have a chance to spend a little time planetside, but of course duty comes first. I had hoped so much that I'd get a chance to see you before you leave, but, sadly, that won't be possible. Know that you're never far from my thoughts. I won't say the words and embarrass you, but I know you already know what's in my heart. Stay safe, dear."

The screen blanks and an insipid line of white text asks if he'd like to replay the message.

Spock is not sure.

Regardless of McCoy's needling or the Captain's declamations on the expectations of the Human matriarch, Spock knows his mother well enough to know that, in the first place, she has made her peace with Vulcan priorities and will not seek to interfere in matters of duty, and in the second place, she will actually *want* to see her son while he is within beaming distance of her. At the very least, he'd expected some sort of open invitation, qualified with the understanding that it was unlikely to be fulfilled.

He stares at the blinking text for a moment, then flicks open his comm port. "Spock to Communications."

"Communications, sir. Palmer here."

"Lieutenant Palmer," he says, "Earlier today Lieutenant Uhura received a personal message addressed to me from a private residence in ShiKahr." He hesitates. "I would like to return the message."

"Yes, sir," she says. "It'll take me a moment to retrieve the conduit, sir. Please stand by."

"Acknowledged," he says. He leans back in his chair and folds his hands across his chest.

Amanda has never pressed him to respond in kind to her emotional advances, nor has she ever expected any particularly Human display of filial devotion. But she *will* have wanted to see him, he is certain of that. She would never expect him to prioritize her over the multiplicity of conflicting demands on his time, but the fact that she has essentially precluded any possibility of a visit is... troubling.

"Communications to Commander Spock," says Palmer suddenly, shattering his thoughts. "The conduit is open, sir. I have a gentleman by the name of Taaval standing by."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he says. A subtle sonic shift indicates the transfer, and then his screen lights up with the impassive features of his father's assistant. Spock nods a greeting. "*Taaval - nash-Spock se.*"

"Greetings," says Taaval mildly. Terran Standard is the *lingua franca* of Sarek's household, whether it finds itself on Earth or Vulcan.

Spock hesitates. "I had hoped to speak with the Lady Amanda."

There is a short pause, mirror of Spock's own. Then Taaval says, "I regret that the Lady Amanda is... unavailable."

If Spock were Human, he might be inclined to wonder if all of Vulcan had collectively disappeared on an impromptu vacation without leaving a forwarding address. Since he is not, he contents himself with a brief reflection on his new least favorite word in Standard.

"Then perhaps I might speak with Ambassador Sarek."

"The Ambassador is..." - and here the pause is too pronounced, too tortured, to mistake the discomfort behind it - "...also unavailable."

"That is unexpected," says Spock slowly. Taaval does not reply, but simply regards him dispassionately. It is not unusual for Sarek to be abruptly called offworld, and, wherever possible, Amanda will accompany him, but if this were the case, then Taaval would have said as much. Spock feels the first pricklings of unease. He says, "Might I ask when the Ambassador and his wife are expected to return?"

"They are not absent," says Taaval, "Merely... unavailable."

"And when might they be available once more?"

There is the tiniest, faintest intake of breath, but the momentary dip of the eyes and tightening of the shoulders that it accompanies are reminiscent of a teacher losing patience with a particularly obtuse student. Nevertheless, when Taaval speaks, his voice is level. He says, "I estimate perhaps 1.3 days." There is a short pause, during which his gaze quite deliberately locks onto Spock's and fixes him with a meaningful stare. "It is 2.87 days since both the Ambassador and his wife became unavailable."

"I see," says Spock.

And then he *does* see.

And a moment later something else clicks as well.

~*~

It's not particularly late, but it's been a trying day and there's no work outstanding - or, at least, nothing that's going to be fixed tonight - so Kirk has decided to try for an early night. His brain is firing haphazardly in a way that suggests that sleep will be elusive, but he lacks the energy to run it off in the gym and so he's sought out his battered old Melville and tossed it on the bed, and is preparing for a warm shower to try and soothe some of the restlessness away. The buzz at his door is, therefore, neither wholly welcome, nor wholly disagreeable.

Not that it matters. Part of being the Captain is that you don't get to decide when you want to actually *be* Captain. "Enter," he calls, and disappears into his sleeping area to pull on a robe as the door slides open.

He knows it's Spock before he turns, before his First Officer speaks. There's just something about the way he carries himself into a room, something about the way the air shifts around him. But it's still a pleasure to step into the living area and have it confirmed. He smiles. "Spock. What can I do for you?"

"Captain," says Spock, and folds his hands behind his back. Kirk waits. Then he waits a little bit more, and finally he quirks an eyebrow.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?" he prompts.

"I believe..." Spock is scouring the ceiling with his eyes, as though the words he's looking for

might be scrawled on the bulkhead. He radiates discomfort, and Kirk is obliged to restrain the urge to lay a placatory hand on his friend's arm. "I believe," says Spock again, with a valiant resolve, "That I may have acquired an insight into Professor Sorelan's sudden absence."

"Oh?" says Kirk. "I thought you already had a theory - you just didn't want to share it before you had the evidence to back it up?"

"Yes, Captain," says Spock. "I had considered the possibility that the Professor may have been laboring under some form of professional embarrassment. It seemed likely that he and Professor T'Polak had come to the conclusion that the Veleth Hai project was outside of Sorelan's field of expertise, and were unwilling to subject Vulcan pride to any further humiliation."

"But - you no longer believe this is the case?"

"It may be," says Spock. "However... another possibility has presented itself."

Kirk waits, but finds he's disinclined to let the hiatus linger this time. "Spock, you're going to have to tell me," he says.

Spock tilts his head back. The height differential means that he's really very good at avoiding the Captain's eye when he wants to. He says, "The symptoms of *pon farr* typically require four to five days to fully resolve."

"Oh," says Kirk. There is a moment of silence. And then a small laugh escapes him, bordering on the hysterical. "Oh!"

Spock says nothing. Kirk finds, horrifyingly, that he wants to giggle. He buries the urge with pacing. When he thinks he can trust himself, he says, carefully, "That would... seem to make sense, Mr. Spock."

"I believe so," says Spock stiffly.

"This flash of inspiration," says the Captain. "You're not... yourself...?"

It takes his First a moment to work out what he's talking about and then his eyes abruptly widen. "No, Captain!" he says.

"Good..." says Kirk absently. "I mean, I know it hasn't been seven years, but... you know... Perhaps space travel..."

"No, Captain," says Spock firmly.

"Good," says Kirk again. And then, "Excellent." He completes another circuit of the room and then says, "I'm going to have to pass this on to Admiral Komack, you know."

"Yes, Captain," says Spock.

"I just... In case you were uncomfortable... you know."

"I had anticipated the necessity."

The Captain hesitates by his desk, lifts a stylus, stares at it for a moment. He says, "Is everything all right, Spock?"

He's not looking at his First, so it's a feeling rather than an observation that alerts him to the subtle shift behind him. Kirk looks over his shoulder. Nothing about Spock's expression has visibly

changed, but there is a palpable aura of distress that is quite separate from the discomfort of his revelation. Spock says, "I have nothing further to report, Captain."

"Come on, Spock," says Kirk. "I know that tone."

"It is..." says Spock, and in the fractional hesitation Kirk revises his initial assessment: this is not distress, it is closer to misery. Without thinking, he takes a step forward. "...a personal matter," finishes his First.

And the Captain wouldn't be the Captain if he *didn't* step forward now and close his fingers around his friend's arm, and he expects Spock to gently extricate himself and move away. It's not just a surprise when he doesn't, it's actually astounding.

"All right," he says gently. "Perhaps we'd both better get some sleep. It's been a long day."

"Yes, Captain," says Spock, and his eyes, which have been cast resolutely downwards, flicker upwards to meet Kirk's. The glance lasts a second, no longer, but it pins Kirk to the spot and freezes every muscle in his body.

There it is. *There*. Something... more.

Still Spock makes no effort to pull away and Kirk realizes he's holding his breath, but he can't release it now, not without calling attention to the sudden suspension of everything familiar. Something twists in the Captain's belly, long-suppressed and all but disregarded, and he's certain - he'd *swear* - that he just saw it mirrored in Spock's eyes.

"Thank you, Jim," says Spock quietly, and gently steps away, out of Kirk's circle of personal space. Air rushes in to fill the vacuum, cold and colorless, and the Captain lets himself breathe again. "I believe a period of meditation would be of benefit this evening."

"Whatever you need," says Kirk, and then realizes, abruptly, how that sounds. He amends it quickly: "It's been a difficult day for you, Spock. I'm sorry."

He's at the door now, eyes still hooded, and he nods once. "Goodnight, Jim," he says. The door opens and Spock looks up, once, briefly, but for the power in that tiny glance it might be the eye of a telescope, pointed into infinity. Then he's gone, and Kirk is left in the sudden silence, standing motionless by his desk.

~*~

Chapter 10

Spock is eleven years old, and he knows when his mother is lying.

“It is not logical to interrupt my studies at this time,” he repeats.

“Yes, dear,” says his mother from deep inside his closet, in the voice she uses when she’s not really listening. “It’s only for a few days.”

“The duration of the interruption is of little consequence, Mother,” he says. He is supposed to be folding the robes that she has laid out on his bed, but, since the underlying enterprise is manifestly without logic, it follows that it would be illogical to expend energy that’s better diverted to explaining to Amanda why he can’t simply up and leave for a vacation of indeterminate length at his grandparents’ house. “It is the fact of the interruption itself that will be traumatic to the learning arc.” She knows this. He knows she knows this.

Amanda steps out of the closet with three tunics, assorted undergarments, and a travelling cloak slung over her arm and rolls her eyes in impatience when she sees him sitting placidly on his bed, hands folded in his lap.

“I asked you to pack these, Spock!” she says, crossing quickly to his side and decanting layers of clothing onto his mattress. They settle into a neat fabric-strata with a billowing puff of must-scented air.

“Yes, Mother,” he says, but makes no move to begin.

Amanda moves like a Terran swan – stillness and economy of motion belying a furiously-working mind and a capacity for industry entirely at odds with the face she presents to the world at large. This makes it all the more disjunctive when extreme emotion disrupts her typical air of unruffled contentment – like now, when her eyes widen and her mouth tightens into a thin line of anger.

“It was not a request, Spock!” she snaps. “You know better than to disobey me. Do it now!”

“But, Mother – ” he begins, but she cuts him off.

“No ‘buts’! You don’t have to like it. You don’t even have to understand it. You just do it, Spock, do you understand me?”

He has never seen her angry. He has overheard whispered arguments with his father – generally concerning some aspect of Spock’s development and parenting requirements – and he’s seen her face glaze with the icy, frozen smile that she reserves for the parents of children who torment him, when they are foolish enough to underestimate the Human wife of the Terran Ambassador and her capacity for maternal defence. Sarek seems to spend half his life at some level of disappointment with his son, but Amanda has never lost her temper in his presence. If he didn’t know she was lying before, he’s certain of it now.

He offers a meek, “Yes, Mother,” and sets to folding his robes.

~*~

She doesn’t travel with him. Taaval takes him to the transport station, and Spock finds that his

controls are faltering. He has spent enough time on Earth to understand that a full Human boy of his age might be tempted to give in to tears at this point, so it's some kind of grim satisfaction that the Vulcan in him is dominant, even today, and that Taaval, who shares no bond with his employer's son, cannot see the struggle that rages behind Spock's impassive eyes.

A porter takes his trunk at the gates, and Spock turns to his companion, sucking in a breath that puffs out his chest and straightens his spine, buying him perhaps half an inch of extra height. It's decorative rather than demonstrative, but it helps to settle his tremulous anxiety as he says, "Please let my parents know that I will communicate with them on my arrival at the house of Skon and T'Rama."

But Taaval simply inclines his head and says, "I will be receiving all communications on your parents' behalf, Spock. I will be glad to know of your safe arrival."

Taaval is Sarek's man, and even at eleven Spock has not yet decided where he sits on the complicated continuum of friend to enemy. If he has an opinion on the Ambassador's choice of wife or his half-breed son, he's far too clever to let it show. Spock swallows his rising agitation and says, "Please give them my regards."

Taaval nods again and raises his hand in the ta'al. Spock mirrors the gesture, and it takes some considerable effort to ensure that his fingers do not shake.

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While Skon is occupied at the Academy in ShiKahr, T'Rama typically absents herself to their summer home outside Kir, close to the shores of the Thanar Sea. It is a modest, comfortable villa, cooled by the ocean winds and built around a pleasant, leafy courtyard in which she spends at least half of her day in pursuit of Golic meditation. After a brief interview on his arrival, Spock has found himself conscripted to a mat by her side for four hours of every day; clearly, whatever she found in the meld has convinced her that his parents are woefully remiss in their instructions in the Vulcan disciplines.

He has no logical objection. The courtyard is almost completely canopied by the heavy, spreading branches of four ancient trees, and the sunlight that streaks through their leaf-blanket is tepid, dilute, like a high summer day in San Francisco. Salt breezes sweeten the air and the sand beneath his mat is comfortably warm, like a pot that has been left in the morning sun. And his grandmother is easy company – disturbed, perhaps, by the dissolution of traditional values in the younger generation, and possessed of priorities that are not precisely consonant with Spock's scientific leanings, but quiet and undemanding, and not noticeably inconvenienced by his company. His objection, therefore, is not logical; it is emotional.

Meditation is ointment to his troubled mind, but a true kohl-tor is impossible to achieve in his current state, and hours of silence and struggle are entirely too conducive to a runaway thought-train of panic. He made the promised call to his home immediately upon arrival, and to his grandmother's tight-lipped disapproval, and Taaval was blandly impassive, thanking him for his trouble and assuring him that it would comfort his parents to hear of his safe arrival, while making no actual promise to convey the news. Since then, Spock has attempted to convince T'Rama on four separate occasions to allow him to try again, and she has acceded once, this morning, and then only hesitantly. Taaval thanked him again for his efforts and dodged every question about his parents' presence, welfare and health, before nodding unctuously and signing off before Spock could reciprocate the closing salutation.

It has been five days since Spock was unceremoniously ejected from his home. Even accounting for

the vagaries of Standard, he is certain that constitutes more than a few, and yet there has been no mention of making arrangements for his return. His studies are suffering and, worse, he can no longer suppress the niggling doubt that there is no home for him to return to. Why else the secrecy?

“Spock,” says T’Rama by his side, “You will never achieve s’thaupi if you continue to fidget so. Be still.”

He stomps on the billowing adrenal spike that her sudden words have startled out of his restless brain and says, “I apologize, Grandmother.”

“Apologies are unnecessary. Stillness is necessary. Be silent, and be still.”

Invisible above the tree-blanket, marine birds trace their path on soaring thermals in the rise and fall of their mournful cries. He forces his Self inside, into the quiet place of darkness and knowledge, and reaches for peace even as logic shakes its metaphorical head and whispers that peace cannot be grasped at, that it shrinks from the clutch of desperation. In this shadowed anteroom, the meditative trance is a locked door for which he has no key, but thoughts play like an ancient Terran film strip across the whitewashed walls of his mind. He sees the night that he returned from his abortive pre-kahs wan adventure, the night that he almost died, and he sees his mother’s face: white and tightly-drawn as she processes the knowledge of her almost-loss. Fear is instinct rather than pure emotion; it’s a life-sustaining state of being, and it is simply the external manifestations and their restrictive chokehold that the Vulcan way seeks to repress. He understands fear well enough, and it is fear that inscribes the bloodless wash of grey across his mother’s features that night.

It was fear he saw behind her eyes as she hurried him out the door five days ago.

Meditation spits him violently back into the lazy sunlight of the courtyard, gasping for breath, and his spine sags his neck forward, crushing his head towards his chest.

“Spock!” says T’Rama sharply, and then, more evenly, “Spock?”

For a moment he cannot speak, and he turns his head towards her and knows that he stares at her with Human eyes, in which she reads entirely too much. She stands abruptly in one easy, fluid motion and he hears the soft clip of her footsteps on flagstones as she disappears into the house. He is left alone in the shade of the in-du-ka, beating ineffectually at a hurricane of panic and confusion, belly and cheeks burning with a furious shame.

Why was she afraid? Why was she afraid?

His thoughts are spinning so riotously that he does not hear his grandmother’s return until she is almost behind him, stepping onto the sand with a brittle crunch and kneeling elegantly beside him. “Drink this,” she says, pressing an earthenware beaker into his line of sight and folding her hands neatly into her lap as he takes it from her and risks raising his head a fraction. He doesn’t ask what it is, simply raises it to his lips and tastes cold water, sweet and freshly pumped from the villa’s underground spring. “Thank you, Grandmother,” he says.

“I wonder what your instructors are teaching you,” she says. “A simple kohl-tor ought not to be so difficult to achieve at your age.”

He expects her to make some reference to his lineage. It’s what his tutors would do at this point. But she only fixes him with an unwavering stare – a stare that has, sadly, passed unaltered to his father and has been regularly employed in lieu of words in those long, uncomfortable interviews

that inevitably follow any kind of misdeed – and waits for him to speak.

He says, “I was unable to achieve the requisite level of mental clarity.”

“That much was obvious,” she says. “Is your mind troubled, Spock?”

Amanda has asked him the same question more times than he can count, and the sudden association forces another frantic wave of agitation to swirl in his belly. But he is gaining control of himself at last, and he says, “I am experiencing concern as to the welfare of my parents.”

“Your parents are well, Spock,” she says. “You must learn to trust those whose knowledge eclipses yours.”

He hesitates. “Perhaps if I might share in that knowledge...?”

“One day,” she says. “For now, you must only trust.” She stands abruptly, and when he tilts his head to follow her, her face is haloed by a shaft of molten white sunlight. “Come. There is clearly nothing to be gained by pursuing tvi-sochya this morning. We will turn to your studies for now.”

~*~

Samaris is a young woman from the coastal village of S’Sharan V’Kir-kal, the closest township to his grandparents’ villa, and she arrives in the evenings to help T’Rama with those tasks that her advancing age has complicated. Her second daughter is only months older than Spock, so she has always tended to treat him as though he were an extension of her own family, watching him with the inscrutable, all-seeing eye of Vulcan matriarchy. It ought to be cloistering and offensive, but instead it’s oddly reassuring. She knocks on his door in the hours after dinner and says, “Your mother has arrived from ShiKahr, Spock. Your grandmother is talking to her now.”

For a moment he can’t properly process the words, and then joy spikes in his chest and lifts him from his seat before he’s aware that he’s moving. Samaris watches impassively as he scrambles to compose himself, straightening his back and folding his hands in front of him, viciously suppressing a rising tide of emotion. “Thank you,” he says. “In which room is my mother waiting?”

“They are in Madam’s study,” she says. “I am instructed to supervise your packing.”

It’s clearly an injunction against interrupting his elders, but Samaris says nothing as he strides rapidly across the room and passes her in the doorway. She swivels to follow his movement and raises a meaningful eyebrow as he hesitates in the corridor.

“I will return shortly,” he says, stripping – with effort – every interrogative inflection from his tone so that it doesn’t sound as though he’s asking permission. “I wish to greet my mother first.”

She allows her silence to register her disapproval for one long moment, and then nods. “Quickly, please. There is much to do.”

It is difficult to suppress the urge to tear haphazardly along the short corridor and down the stairs. His grandmother’s study is close to the main entrance and he sees from the lobby that the door is closed, but as he approaches and raises his hand to knock he hears T’Rama’s voice through the heavy panelling.

“You are clearly insufficiently recovered for travel, Amanda,” she says. “You ought to have rested another night.”

“I am well enough, thank you,” is her answer, and the elation that threatened to expose him a moment earlier skips painfully again against his heart. It is her. It is her. He grips his hands tightly behind his back, feeling his fingernails bite deeply into his palms, and acknowledges at last the prickling dread that had wondered if he would ever hear that voice again.

“There is nothing to be gained in risking your health,” says his grandmother now. “Spock is welcome to remain for as long as necessary.”

A small, self-deprecating laugh. It’s not likely to go over well with T’Rama. Amanda says, “I wanted to see him.”

There is a significant pause, and Spock can imagine the look on his grandmother’s face. She says, slowly, “This is more difficult for you, Amanda. The risks to your wellbeing are... immoderate. I am surprised Sarek agreed to your departure.”

Tightly: “He did not.”

“You ought not to treat these matters so lightly. Your Human physiology is not compatible with...”

“We have been married for twelve years, T’Rama. It is sufficiently compatible.”

In the loaded silence that follows, Spock is abruptly aware that he is eavesdropping. Quickly, he raises his hand and knocks on the door. The pause that follows is so pronounced he can practically feel the consternation from inside the room.

At length, T’Rama’s voice calls, “Enter.”

Amanda is seated in the occasional chair by the door, while T’Rama stands by the window, framed by the setting sun. “Spock,” she says as Amanda stands quickly and visibly suppresses the urge to run to her son and wrap her arms around him. “I sent Samaris to help you pack. Why are you not upstairs?”

“Forgive me, Grandmother,” he says. “I wished to greet my mother.”

A beatific smile splits Amanda’s face and she clasps her hands in front of her chest, manifestly as a last resort. She says, “Spock. It’s so good to see you.”

He turns towards her, and registers her appearance for the first time. Amanda has always been small, sparsely proportioned and almost bird-like against the strong, robust lines of her Vulcan contemporaries. He has always been aware of her relative fragility, and he has seen the way his father instinctively hovers close by her side, as though he can surround her with his superior strength like a forcefield. But five days’ absence has stripped the healthy glow from her skin and she stands awkwardly, as though her body is trying to bend in on itself. Her eyes are bright, but too-bright, and there is something buried behind them that she doesn’t want him to see.

The knowledge strikes him, violent and visceral as a punch: she is in pain.

“Mother...” he says, and he sees the exact moment she realizes that he knows. The smile wilts on her face.

“I’ve come to take you home, dear,” she says.

“Amanda, please sit,” says T’Rama. “Spock, you should be packing.”

His mother lowers herself back into her chair with a valiant effort at insouciance, but her

movements are too practiced, too pronounced, too performative, and he does not miss the tiny grimace that escapes her before she can suppress it. Spock says, "Mother, are you unwell?"

"No, dear," she says, and turns a smile on him that is very nearly convincing. "Just a little tired. Run along and do as your grandmother says."

"Is my father well?" he says quickly, on the crest of a sudden wave of nameless fear.

"He's well, dear," she says. "He's looking forward to seeing you."

"Spock!" says T'Rama sharply. He glances up, and she's using the Stare.

"Yes, Grandmother," he says softly.

"I'll be waiting right here," says Amanda. "It's so good to see you, dear."

Spock leaves the room, closing the door quietly behind him, and waits for a moment in the corridor outside. But they have either finished speaking or else they distrust his easy acquiescence, because no sound escapes the electric silence in the room beyond.

Something is wrong; that much is clear. He turns and crosses to the stairs, but a lingering unease is worrying a hole in his belly and spreading little tendrils of doubt into his disordered thoughts. For now, there is only confusion, but in years to come, Spock will look back at this moment and realize that this is the first time he begins to understand that his parents' marriage is a terrible mistake.

Chapter 11

It's been a long evening.

They usually are, these nights that pretend to be uneventful right up until the moment you're getting ready to fall asleep. Kirk doesn't need to look at the chronometer to know that it's long past midnight – the dull throb behind his eyes and the sense that ship's gravity is trying to suck him through the floor are enough to tell him that he really doesn't want to know what time it is.

Spock made a vague effort towards pretending that it wouldn't be a problem for him to stay and help talk to Admiral Komack, but gave up with suspicious ease when the Captain suggested that he'd subjected himself to enough embarrassment already. It's not like Spock to acknowledge that *embarrassment* even exists outside of the hypothetical, and if he's forgetting to maintain that air of rigid Vulcan denial, then he definitely didn't need the kind of conversation that followed for seventy minutes after Kirk delivered the news to their Operational CO.

Confirmation of their amended orders has just blinked its arrival on his terminal, and the Captain spends less than half a second wondering whether or not he ought to pull on his uniform and head up to the bridge. But it's not the sort of news that can't wait until morning, and he feels a small grin tugging at the edge of his mouth as he contemplates the shipwide excitement it's unlikely to engender. He acknowledges receipt with a click, and his hand hovers over the power down command for a second, while little zig-zag lines of fatigue shoot across his straining eyes.

He definitely shouldn't do this. It's *clear* that he shouldn't do this. Whatever that moment was earlier on, the one that he has no intention of trying to process tonight, the one that is likely to shimmy across his conscious mind every single time his brain starts to slip into unconsciousness and pull him back from the brink of sleep in a rush of adrenalin and excitable panic; whatever that was, this is not likely to expedite the kind of resolution he's hoping it leads to.

Whatever that moment was. He *knows* what that moment was. He's just not sure what to do with that knowledge. And he's not used to being unsure at this point.

His hand settles on the desk.

“Computer,” he says, because this can still be undone, right up to the moment when it can't. “Take a message, recorded, and deliver to Lieutenant Palmer for transmission to the house of Ambassador Sarek and his wife. Message reads: Ambassador and Lady Amanda, greetings from Captain James T Kirk of the *USS Enterprise*. It may interest you to know that we are to remain in orbit around your planet for four Vulcan days.” He hesitates. “Commander Spock has not informed me of his plans – no, wait. Strike that last sentence. Resume. Crew will be granted leave to beam down to the planet during this period. I would be delighted to offer you the hospitality of the *Enterprise* at any time during our stay. Live long and prosper. Message ends.”

“Transmit?” asks the computer, and of course it doesn't have an accusatory tone – of *course* it doesn't – but it's amazing what wonders a guilty conscience can conjure. Spock will be furious, and rightly so. There is no way he ought to transmit this.

“Transmit,” he says.

And that just about kills all possibility of sleep for tonight.

Alone in his quarters, Spock stares at the *asenoi* for a full thirty seconds past the point where he accepts that it's an exercise in futility, mostly because half of him is Human and that half got *all* of Amanda's stubbornness. He's been here before, his body recognizes the signs, and his brain has gone into full-scale rebellion. It won't be forced into meditation at those moments when he needs it most, and he's *certain* his contemporaries don't have to deal with this sort of thing. There are days when he understands perfectly well why his parents' DNA so fiercely resisted combination, and it's because *logical* and *illogical* ought never to have to collide within the confines of one unfortunate skull.

He has, quite simply, no idea what to do.

All things considered, it has been a horrible evening. First there was the message from Taaval that catapulted him back into memories he seldom revisits for the crushing weight of impotent rage they engender, and the panic, and the fear. He learned the techniques for their management many years ago – much of which involves keeping well out of his father's way – and they might not have been so disastrous to his equilibrium, were it not immediately necessary to go and have the kind of hideous conversation with his Captain that catapulted him back into *another* set of memories he'd really rather he never had to think of again. Why on earth Kirk might think that his friend would be in any way pleased to return to Vulcan in light of the last time he was here is something that Spock can only vaguely comprehend with reference to memories of Amanda's wide-eyed delight every time their ship dropped out of warp on the edge of the Sol system. It just seems to be a Human thing. Long and frequently excruciating experience has taught Spock that sometimes it's safer just to leave it at that.

And even that might not have been so bad – he's survived that talk before, and the last time it happened it was *Spock* who was the subject – but for the fact that his friend reads him entirely too easily. Spock has long since given up trying to differentiate the subtle nuances of Human emotion, and McCoy just generally assumes whatever it pleases him to assume about Spock on any given day and runs with it, but Kirk has never had any difficulty in seeing through his First Officer's carefully-polished Vulcan veneer. There are times when he is immeasurably grateful to be seen so completely and to know that, in all the universe, *one* person at least has taken the trouble to know him and the world didn't end because of what he found. Mostly, though, it's massively inconvenient to have to try to remember that whatever he *thinks* he's buried beyond the ken of Man, Kirk will probably pick up a scent and worry at it until he stumbles across the truth by himself. Or until Spock just gives up and tells him.

He could have coped with the distress. It's been a long and manifestly trying day for the First Officer, and he could have left the Captain to draw his own conclusions; they probably wouldn't even have had to have drinks and chat aimlessly while Kirk made certain his friend was all right, since there was already a villain in place, his name was Solvis, and it was perfectly reasonable to assume that Spock's disquiet was due in large part to the Vulcan Science Academy and their gift for verbal warfare. The Captain has an unwavering respect for the private matters of his First, so long as they don't interfere with the running of the ship, and so long as he thinks he already knows what the private matters might be. Spock is *used* to being known. He could have coped with that.

It's the look that he can't get past.

He knows what was in his eyes when he looked up, and he *knows* that Kirk saw it. He also knows his Captain too well to believe that he read it as anything other than what it was. This is why

meditation eludes him tonight: because there is simply no getting past this point.

That, and the fact that he's almost 57 percent certain that he saw his own desire mirrored in his Captain's eyes. There's that too.

He has *no* idea what to do.

~*~

Kirk's adrenal system shocks him awake a good forty minutes before his alarm is due to go off, with a bolt of inexplicable panic that definitively proclaims the end of the sleep cycle for this particular night. It's too early for his brain to be happy about the situation and too late for it to be practicable to lie with his eyes shut and his pillow over his face and hope for some kind of somnolent mercy. He supposes he ought to be grateful at least that he managed a full two hours since the last burst of wakefulness. It's been that sort of night.

A lingering odor of ginger and lavender and pine in the head tells him Spock has passed a similarly restless few hours, and he'd prefer not to think about the implications of that just now. So instead he lumbers into the shower, feeling seventy years older than he did twenty-four hours ago, and turns his face into a blast of steaming hot water in the hope that it might persuade his headache to clear. Plan B is coffee. Lots of coffee.

Spock's not on the bridge yet, which is not *that* surprising, since there's still another thirty minutes before Alpha shift officially begins, and the Captain's presence causes the kind of muted commotion that tries desperately to pretend it's not a commotion at all because why would it be a problem that the Captain has turned up half an hour early without warning and for no reason? Ensign Gavrikova has pulled command duty overnight and she's done a good job, he reflects, as he scans her hastily-assembled handover report and relieves her with a request to find a Yeoman and have a carafe of hot, strong coffee sent up ASAP. They are in orbit around the peaceful homeplanet of Humanity's oldest friends, so naturally nothing startling has happened overnight, and he turns, rather self-consciously, to the Communications report as the minutes count down and his command crew start to filter onto the bridge. There it is: 0047 hours, transmission from the Captain's quarters to the house with a family name that Kirk avoids ever mentioning so that Spock won't find out he can't pronounce it. It's done. The Captain purses his lips, and then brightens considerably as Yeoman McConnell arrives with the coffee.

There is no mention in the report of the Science Officer requesting permission to serve his shift in the labs. That *is* surprising.

McCoy turns up in the final press of bodies disgorged from the turbolift as the chronometer slides nonchalantly from Gamma back to Alpha. Spock peels off from the group and strides silently and purposefully towards the science station, and the Doctor ambles towards the command chair with a sideways glance towards the First and an interrogative eyebrow for the Captain.

"Good morning to you too, Spock," he says amiably, which obliges Spock to turn back from his viewer and nod curtly towards the bridge.

"Doctor," he says. A beat – tiny, infinitesimally tiny, and yet unquestionably a beat – and then he adds, "Captain."

A small voice buried somewhere deep within Kirk starts singing. This *again*.

“What’s crawled up his green-blooded backside?” says McCoy, and Kirk cannot repress a big, glowing smile.

He shakes his head. “Command business,” he says. “I see it didn’t take you long to find the coffee, Bones.”

“Figured with the day you had yesterday, best coffee on the ship’d be on the bridge this morning,” he says, unapologetically helping himself to a cup from McConnel’s tray. “You look like hell, Jim. What did you do, work all night?”

“Not quite,” says Kirk. He grins. “Although I appreciate the vote of confidence, Doctor,” he adds.

Bones shrugs. “I’m a doctor, not a cheerleader,” he says. “Reckon you need about eight days’ solid shore leave, then you might start looking like a Human being again, Jim.”

“Funny you should mention that,” says Kirk, and, because he wouldn’t be Jim Kirk if he didn’t use an opening like that for all it was worth, he turns over his shoulder to Uhura and says, “Lieutenant, get me a shipwide frequency, please.”

“Yes, sir,” she says. “Frequency open, Captain.”

Kirk offers another smile into Bones’ open curiosity, and addresses his crew. “This is the Captain speaking,” he says. “By now you will all be aware that we have been delayed in orbit around Vulcan for approximately twelve hours longer than we had initially intended. Late last night, I received word from Starfleet HQ that we are to remain in orbit for a further four days. It is my pleasant duty to inform you that, given the lack of any pressing alternative responsibilities during this time, Starfleet Command have authorized the next four days as shore leave for all hands. Please liaise with your commanding officers regarding the appropriate paperwork and remember that you remain a representative of Starfleet at all times while planetside. On behalf of the command crew, I would like to wish you all a very safe and pleasant shore leave. Kirk out.”

There is silence on the bridge, and a palpable air of the opposite of rapturous enthusiasm.

“Shore leave on Vulcan,” says Chekov slowly. “....Thank you, sir?”

Kirk grins at the navigation console. “Don’t mention it, Ensign.”

“Well,” says McCoy after a moment. “Guess that’s you off four hundred Christmas card lists, Jim.”

~*~

Kirk catches up to Spock as he’s halfway down the corridor that leads to the officers’ mess, moving at that unmatched Vulcan pace that he uses when he wants to be impressive, or when he doesn’t want to be caught. He can’t ignore a direct order from the Captain, though, so when the inadequate Human muscular system makes it clear that catching up to Spock is going to involve running after him down the corridors in full sight of the crew, Kirk settles for calling a cheerful, “Just a moment, Mr. Spock,” instead.

Spock turns as Kirk draws level with him, and deflects with a well-placed defensive opening.

“Captain,” he says. “I was on my way to lunch, if you would care to join me?”

“I’d be delighted,” says Kirk, and falls into step beside him for a full two paces before adding, “I notice your name is not on the list for shore leave.”

Spock does not sigh, but Kirk can tell when he wants to. He says, “I am not in need of recreational leave at present, Captain.”

“We had an agreement,” says Kirk.

“I believe you phrased it as an order,” says Spock.

“That’s right,” says Kirk amiably, “I did.”

Another non-sigh. “The circumstances no longer obtain,” says Spock. “The new arrangements for our stay are substantially different to those under which the original orders were to be carried out.” A pause. And then, resignedly: “I am prepared to fulfill your requisite three hours planetside, should you so order, Captain.”

Kirk lets that sit for the final few yards of the corridor, but halts at the door to the mess and turns to face his friend. “I had thought,” he says, “that it might be an interesting experience to visit Mount Seleya. Would that be permitted, do you think?”

“It is... not unheard of,” says Spock slowly. “The priests do not welcome outsiders, but they are generally more accommodating to visitors who arrive in the company of Vulcans.”

“Of course,” says Kirk. “If only I knew a Vulcan who might accompany me on such a trip.”

This provokes an actual eye-roll, and it’s as much as Kirk can do to swallow his grin. He raises his eyebrows innocently.

“Very well, Captain,” says Spock. There is a fractional sag to his shoulders, as of a man who knows when he’s beaten. “I would be pleased to escort you on a trip to Mount Seleya.”

Kirk’s grin breaks free despite his best efforts. “I appreciate that, Mr. Spock,” he says.

The door glides open on a scattering of Alpha shift crew and the ship’s CMO, sitting by himself at one corner of the long table, scowling at a PADD in front of him and munching absently at a huge sandwich. Kirk greets him with a brief clasp of his shoulder and makes his way over to the replicator bank, where he slides his diet card into the slot and waits for the machine to beep. The plate that emerges is not exactly what he was expecting. Kirk notes with some dismay that the chicken that was supposed to be fried is actually grilled, the sourdough roll is absent altogether, and the potatoes that were supposed to be mashed with butter and cream are actually... salad. He glances up at Spock, who is staring into the middle distance with an expression that manifestly refuses to get involved.

“Just be glad I let you keep the chicken,” grunts Bones without looking up, as the Captain settles into the seat beside him.

Kirk is privately convinced that there is a regulation *somewhere* that prohibits the ship’s doctor from tampering with the Captain’s food order more than twice daily, and if there isn’t, he’s damn well going to agitate until the admiralty get behind him on this one. In the absence of any legalities upon which to charge his friend with mutiny-by-calorie-count, he settles for biting dramatically into a stick of celery and nonchalantly changing the subject.

“Shore leave plans, Bones?” he asks, nodding at the PADD.

The Doctor looks up as Spock slides into the seat to his left. “Readin’ up on the three dozen Vulcan parasites that are able to adapt to a Human host,” he says.

Spock glances at the image on the screen. “The *sakasu-nalatra-neshuhk* is exceptionally rare, Doctor,” he says placidly. “The Federation no longer routinely vaccinates against it.”

“Uh-huh,” says Bones. “What you wanna bet one of our boys comes back with a dose?”

“Well,” says Kirk cheerfully, “Won’t that make a pleasant change from the sort of maladies you typically see after a shore leave on Wrigley’s or Risa?”

Bones acknowledges that with a heartfelt nod. “Ain’t that the truth,” he says. He sets down his overflowing sandwich and brushes crumbs off his hands. “Guess I don’t have to ask if you’re planning a pointy-eared vacation, Jim. He talk you into it yet, Spock?”

Spock’s hand stills in the act of scooping up a spoonful of soup. “I have agreed to accompany the Captain on a trip to Mount Seleya,” he says.

Bones rolls his eyes. “Yeah, that’s how it starts,” he says. “I tell you ‘bout the time I ended up spending a three-day leave on Starbase 14 scouting old antique shops? Jim got it into his head there’s some old replica of the HMS *Enterprise* he just had to send home to Iowa for Captain Kirk Snr – this’d be, oh, four, five years ago, right back at the start of the mission – and for some reason yours truly has to tag along too. Never did get within so much as sniffin’ distance of a decent, honest-to-God glass of bourbon that whole weekend.”

“Never found the replica either, as I recall,” says Kirk.

“Nope,” says Bones. “That was kind of my point, Jim.”

Kirk laughs easily. “Don’t worry, Spock. I doubt there are any antique shops near where we’re going. I take it you won’t be joining us, Bones?”

“Ha!” says the Doctor. “Some chance. I’m headed for K’lan-ne with M’Benga, the hospital where he interned. Might as well see if I can’t learn a few tricks since I’m here.”

“That sounds a lot like work, Bones.”

“Sounds a lot more likely to have bourbon than Mount Seleya, too.”

“It’s shore leave, Bones,” says Kirk. “Shore *leave*. Vacation.”

“Uh-huh,” says McCoy. “On *Vulcan*.” A beat. “Don’t think the crew’s gonna let you forget this any time soon, Jim.”

Kirk grins at Spock and receives an eyebrow in return, then follows his friend’s upward glance as the Chief Engineer crosses to the table bearing a tray of something that looks disturbingly like what the Captain thought he was ordering five minutes earlier. He lowers himself into a seat with a nod to his companions. “Captain. Leonard. Spock.”

Kirk shoots a meaningful glare up at the Doctor, who blithely ignores it and turns to the Chief Engineer instead. “We’re talking shore leave plans, Scotty,” he says cheerfully. “You just about set for a wild time with Vulcan’s nightlife?”

“Aye,” says Scott with an air of Celtic affliction. “Been meanin’ tae talk tae the Cap’n ‘boot tha’.”

“What’s on your mind, Scotty?” says Kirk.

“Well, Sir,” says Scotty. “It’s just that the warp engines could dae wi’ a wee bit of a recalibration, and the anti-matter converter’s been sluggish o’ late. Wi’ yer permission, I’d like tae commute my leave tae o’ertime an’ take a look at them while we’re in orbit.”

“Commute?” says Kirk. “You mean ‘convert’?”

There is a significant pause. “If ye say so, sir,” says Scott.

~*~

The *Enterprise* during shore leave is a different creature, someone the Captain doesn’t quite know. It’s as though he’s surprised a famous actress on a trip to the grocery store in ratty old slacks and without her make-up: recognizable, still unmistakably beautiful, but missing that vaguely exotic mystique that makes her so powerfully attractive. It’s not that the corridors are quieter per se; more that the energy has changed, and Kirk has found himself swept up on the tide of restlessness that pulses through the ship.

Mindful of the way that his thoughts have been manifestly ungovernable all afternoon, he’s taken the precaution of stopping by the gym after dinner and trying to beat them into submission with a ninety-minute workout that has left his muscles aching and his skin flushed, but has only varnished over the nagging thrill of anticipation that keeps tugging his brain out of orbit. So he’s allowed his feet to carry him as far as sickbay, where Bones is just finishing a stack of paperwork and glances up as Kirk’s shadow falls across his desk.

“Let me guess,” he says, “Ship too quiet for you?”

It’ll do. It’s easier than the truth. He says, “Something like that.”

“Sit down, Captain. I got a prescription for antsy COs.” He stands as Kirk lowers himself into the spare seat, and crosses to his liquor cabinet. “Course, it’d be a damn sight more effective if the Captain called a shore leave some planet where I can get my hands on the good stuff,” he adds.

Kirk laughs. “Bones, it’s hardly my fault they were out of Kentucky bourbon on K-7.”

Bones sets a glass down on the desk in front of him and pours a generous measure of Aldebaran Old Peculiar No. 7. “Yeah, well,” he says, “I can think of half a dozen places we could’ve stopped since then, Jim.” A beat. “Funny how these things turn out.”

The Captain raises his glass. He says, “No doubt Jabilo knows a place or two in K’Lan-ne, Bones.”

“Yup,” says the Doctor. He takes a sip and purses his lips around the burn. “When are you and the hobgoblin planning on beaming down to Seleya?”

“Spock’s making the arrangements,” says Kirk, and takes a gulp from his glass to cover the adrenal spike that accompanies his words. “Tomorrow or the day after. We’ll visit the temple and then spend the night in the guest quarters on the lower slopes. Sure you won’t join us?”

“Not me,” says McCoy. “Had enough of that mystic mumbo-jumbo last time we were here. Besides” – he takes another sip – “can’t see as Spock’d want an old country doctor there. Not this

time.”

The Captain hesitates. McCoy’s tone is as innocent as his face, but Kirk has the distinct impression he’s being baited. Carefully, he says, “He hardly wants to be there himself, Bones. He’s humoring me.”

“Huh,” says the Doctor. His stare is relentless.

But Kirk has known McCoy for a long time; too long to fall for a pregnant silence and an unasked question. He makes himself grin and says, “Something on your mind, Doctor?”

“No, sir,” says Bones, stretching his arms over his head and clasping his hands at the base of his skull. “Guess it’s just what the doctor ordered, Jim.”

“Just not *where* you thought you were ordering it?” says Kirk cheerfully.

“Actually,” says Bones, “It’s not all that much of a surprise, Captain.” A beat. “Not really.”

“Your face on the bridge this morning said otherwise.”

“Didn’t say it wasn’t a shock, Captain,” says McCoy with one of his cryptic little smiles. “Just not a surprise, is all.”

Kirk meets the stare head-on, but the blue eyes miss *nothing*. In the absence of anything adequate to puncture the spreading silence, the Captain drains his glass and sets it on the desk with a muted *thunk* that rings in the still air. He says, “Thanks for the drink, Bones. I’d better get moving.”

“Sure,” says McCoy easily. His eyes follow the Captain as he stands, grips the back of his chair, slides it neatly beneath the desk. “Just be careful, Jim,” he says quietly. “That’s all.”

Kirk laughs, but fails to inject his intended measure of insouciance. He says, “It’s Mount Seleya, Bones, not Qo’noS.”

“You know what I mean,” says McCoy.

There’s nothing to say to that. “Good night, Bones,” says Kirk, and leaves before the Doctor can reply.

~*~

Alone in his quarters, Spock sits for a moment in quiet contemplation while his terminal blinks and wonders politely if he’d like to replay the message. The still, heated air swims with words just spoken, and they conjure his mother’s face in the darkness as clearly as it smiled out of the screen towards him moments earlier.

Silently, thoughtfully, he reaches out a hand towards the power-down command. The room goes black.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A/N - Again, translations are available as a rollover pop-up. Or you can just look at the chapter end notes - there's not too much Vulcan in this chapter.

Mount Seleya rises up from the barren sands of Vulcan's Forge like a long, wizened hand reaching for the distant sky. The harsh yellow light of the desert sun inscribes every ancient crevice, every precipice, every shale-bathed foothill, in stark, shadow-relief against the red rock face, painting her with a raw, visceral beauty that is not entirely safe – like a bird of prey, or a predator poised to strike. She whispers softly to Kirk's wanderer's soul in a language against which he has no defense, a vicious magnetic pull that has always urged him inexorably upwards, onwards, away from the familiar and the known.

That might be a particularly vivid metaphor for the mission to date. It's certainly uncomfortably close to allegorizing his thoughts about the next couple of days.

He stares at the image on his terminal and the short scrawl of words that follow. Like everything the Federation libraries have on Vulcan, its laws, its customs, its traditions, and its people, the entry for Seleya is reprehensibly vague. The Captain isn't *completely* certain, in fact, that he didn't commit a major cultural faux pas by asking to visit the temple in the first place. Kirk is reasonably confident that his First wouldn't have agreed to anything scandalous, but he'd be happier if the databanks were able to give him a better idea of how not to offend everyone he meets while he's planetside. The VSA is one thing, but this is supposed to be a *vacation*.

Mount Seleya: sacred mountain located in the southern province of Xial, says the screen. Home to the Hall of Ancient Thought [no entry exists]. A place of enormous cultural significance [reference required] within Vulcan history and society. 7,000m above sea level [citation required] at its highest point, Seleya is the tallest peak in a range of hills that run to the north and west across the province.

That's it. Kirk counts precisely four actual facts embedded into the airy, insubstantial text, and three of them he can get from a surface scan of the planet. The Captain has visited more worlds than he can count, made contact with hundreds of civilizations from every corner of the charted galaxy and beyond, and he has *never* felt more like an alien than he does right now. That's... not likely to improve in the near future.

He's half-heartedly scanning the library banks for a refresher course in Golic Vulcan when the merciful workings of a benevolent universe cause his door to buzz. "Come in," he calls, and the door slides open on the impressively innocent face of his CMO.

"Chief Medical Officer requesting permission to disembark," says McCoy cheerfully, crossing the room to Kirk's desk, where he tosses a vial of pills in his hand before plunking them down in front of the Captain.

"Permission granted," says Kirk, leaning back in his chair and stretching out the knotted muscles in his neck. He nods at the bottle. "What are those?"

"Present from Jabilo," says the Doctor. "You have any idea how many micro-organisms live in Vulcan mountain water, Jim? Or the pathogen load in a *va'khen* bite? And all that raw food they serve in the sanctuary's fine if you grew up on Vulcan, but the human digestive system's not designed..."

"All right, Bones. Thank you," says Kirk. He grins.

"Yeah, well, I wanted to send you down with a hypo-kit, but our friend Dr. M'Benga thought you might not feel like sticking yourself in the neck every four hours. You can thank him for those. Make sure you take them."

"I will, Bones." He palms the vial. "Quit clucking."

"Don't see why you can't just hole up in some hotel on the coast somewhere for two days and stop puttin' gray hairs on my head," mutters Bones darkly.

Kirk crushes a smile between his lips. "Oh, I think you're giving me a little too much credit there," he says. "You seem to manage that perfectly well without my help..."

Fortunately, the door buzzes as McCoy opens his mouth to reply and his planned invective is lost to posterity. Kirk turns his grin towards the sound and calls a cheerful, "Come in," and so Spock is treated to the full force of a James Kirk hundred-watt smile as the door slides open.

"Ah, Spock," says McCoy, "Just in time. I was just telling Jim here 'bout all the thousand and one ways he can become an expert in Mount Seleya's bathroom facilities."

Spock quirks an eyebrow. “Dr. McCoy, Mount Seleya is a place of spiritual retreat,” he says slowly. “There are no bathrooms.”

The Doctor throws a meaningful glare at Kirk. “That’s kind of my point,” he says.

Spock turns his interrogative eyebrow on the Captain, and Kirk decides to steer them firmly away from scatological allusions to sites of Vulcan worship. “Dr. McCoy was on his way to the transporter room,” he says, getting to his feet and rounding the desk to perch on the edge. “What can I do for you, Spock?”

The First Officer folds his hands behind his back and fixes his gaze on the far wall. He says, stiffly, “I had hoped to find the Doctor here, Captain. This concerns him also.”

Bones purses his lips and lowers himself into a chair. “Sounds ominous.”

Kirk shoots him a sharp look and turns his attention back to his First. “Go ahead, Spock.”

The hands clasped at the base of his spine visibly tighten and Spock drops his eyes. He says, “Late last night, I received a communication from my mother.”

The Doctor’s eyebrows shoot up and Kirk finds himself leaning forward, as though proximity might be some kind of defense. A tiny, freezing jet of guilt blasts through his gut. “Is everything all right?” he asks.

“My father’s assistant has informed her of our extended stay in orbit around Vulcan,” says Spock, and the bit where he says *my father’s assistant* sends such a tidal wave of relief crashing over Kirk’s panicking brain that it takes him a moment to realize that this isn’t actually an answer to his question.

“Ha!” says McCoy with his customary tact. “You can’t keep secrets from your mother, Spock. Heaven only knows how they find out, but they always do.”

“Indeed,” says Spock, with a glare so glacial that it actually causes the Doctor to stop talking. “In any event, she has...” A pause, while his eyes scour the floor. “She has requested that the Captain,

Dr. McCoy and myself enjoy the hospitality of the house of Sarek.” Another pause, so uncomfortable it’s practically scraping its metaphorical fingernails down a metaphorical blackboard. “Captain. Doctor. You are invited to visit my mother’s home.”

Silence settles like a thick and dusty blanket across the room. As the difficult seconds shuffle past, Kirk tries desperately to determine what’s the right thing to say. He’s never visited a world where hospitality *hasn’t* been a big deal, and, though he’s sure that the Federation databanks will say something trite and utterly useless like, *diplomatically important*, under *Invitations Into a Vulcan Home*, he’s equally clear that Spock is not exactly thrilled at the prospect.

Carefully, he says, “That’s very kind of her, Spock. What’s the customary response?”

Still, the eyes do not drift from their singular fascination with the deck. “I have informed her of Dr. McCoy’s prior commitment to the healers at *Shi’has t’K’Lan-ne*,” he says. “She sends her regards, Doctor. However, she was…” He takes a deep breath. “My mother can be quite insistent, Captain. It is not a Vulcan trait.”

Laughter sputters out of McCoy, and even the terrible Arctic bite of an affronted Vulcan glare can’t silence it. “So that’s where you get it from, Spock,” he says. “Jim, looks like she’s got you cornered.”

Kirk shoots him a scowl. To Spock, he says, “Tell Amanda I’d be delighted to accept.”

Spock hesitates, and then slowly nods at the floor. Comprehension dawns.

“Ah,” says the Captain. “I believe I’ve just been presented with a *fait accompli*.”

“She is,” says Spock miserably, “*most* insistent, Captain.”

A grin tugs its way free of Kirk’s lips. This is almost certainly karma. He says, “Very well, Mr. Spock. Perhaps you’d care to tell me the arrangements.”

“We are invited to join my parents tonight for the evening meal. Accommodation will be provided for an overnight stay, and in the morning we can proceed to Mount Seleya as initially arranged, Captain.” He hesitates. “I apologize for the disruption to our plans.”

Kirk shrugs and shakes his head. “They weren’t precisely *your* plans anyway, Spock,” he says. “No need to apologize. Please tell your mother I look forward to seeing her again.”

Spock nods, a little more convincingly this time. “Thank you, Captain,” he says. Finally, belatedly, he lifts his eyes and seeks out McCoy’s. “Enjoy your stay in K’Lan-ne, Doctor,” he says. “I understand that the healers there are particularly gifted in their instructions in the *tow-kath*. However, any advancement in your skills will be an improvement over your habitual bones and rattles.”

Kirk buries a laugh in a coughing fit and turns his head into the safety of his terminal screen as Spock leaves, and risks glancing up at Bones only when the door has safely whooshed shut. But the Doctor’s eyes are sparkling.

He says, “Sounds like your shore leave just got a whole lot more interesting, Jim.”

“I had that coming,” says Kirk, and shakes his head at McCoy’s quirked eyebrow. “Never mind. Another story for another day. You’d better get going; M’Benga will be waiting.”

“Yup,” says Bones easily, lifting himself out of the chair with a sigh. “Damn. What I wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall in Spock’s house tonight.”

“Polite conversation with the ex-Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Earth?” says Kirk. “Sounds more like your idea of Purgatory to me, Doctor.”

“Huh,” says Bones. “Maybe.” He crosses to the door, but turns back with his hand hovering over the release button. “Seems to me like our hobgoblin’s always full of surprises, Captain.” A nod and an enigmatic smile. “See you in a few days.”

The door slides shut behind him and Kirk finds himself staring into empty space. Thoughts, half-formed, swirl in his head but dart out of sight when he tries to bring them into sharper focus. He shakes his head, turns back to his sleeping quarters, and begins to re-pack.

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The first thing Spock registers is the heavy perfume of roses at sundown, suspended on the still, heated air. The second is a primal thrill of recognition that buzzes in some ancient circuits of his brain: a beat that is two parts possession and one part memory. He wasn't lying when he told the Captain that he experiences no particular emotional attachment to Vulcan, but, standing on the first soil he ever knew, he feels a primitive pull of ownership, as though the land has a claim on him that he can never completely shake.

Spock is aware of Kirk's gaze and glances to his left, where the Captain, stiff and pressed and looking distinctly uncomfortable in his dress uniform, throws him a companionable smile and raises his eyebrows in the direction of the looming boundary wall that separates the streets of ShiKahr from Spock's childhood home. A latticework gate is set into the dark, polished stone, through which the uncountable scents of Amanda's garden spill onto the street, and, beyond it, a narrow pathway leads through the lawns and up to the house. Spock feels his throat tighten and is suddenly immeasurably grateful for his friend's presence. He would not have chosen to return, but there's a little comfort in the fact that he's not alone.

"No time like the present," says Kirk evenly, but his eyes don't leave Spock's. Reluctantly, Spock releases his gaze and steps forward to press his hand to the scanning pad to the right of the entryway. The gates snap open.

The Watcher – known as T'Khut this late in the year – is high in the sky and approaching her fullest phase. As the sun settles into the horizon, the vast bulk of Vulcan's sister-world is darkening into shadows, haunting the Cimmerian sky like a ghost. Spock sees the Captain's head craning upwards, fixing her in his vision as he moves, and cocks his head towards him, which interrogative gesture Kirk acknowledges with a wry smile.

"The cloud cover was too heavy last time we were here," he says. "I couldn't see her from the surface." A beat, full of the breathless wonder of the explorer. "Your world is beautiful, Spock."

Spock follows his friend's upward gaze, where stars are just beginning to pierce the hazy crimson mists. *Beautiful* is not a word that he has ever connected with his homeworld. It is not only that his years on Earth have embedded in him a deep and abiding affection for the kaleidoscope greenery of a water-rich planet, and it is not only that his years on Vulcan have, for the most part, been difficult; it is simply that it has never occurred to him to see the aesthetics of the ragged, arid landscape as anything other than the by-product of a strong sun and a tidally-locked co-orbit. *Arresting*, perhaps, even *magnificent* in places, but utilitarian, unlovely. Only now, staring into the evening sky through the eyes of a man primed to find magic in every dark corner of a thousand uncharted worlds, does the thought present itself that perhaps anywhere is beautiful if James Kirk is there to see it.

The Captain lowers his gaze and his eyes find Spock's. A slow smile spreads warmly across his face and, unexpectedly, his hand comes up to clap Spock's shoulder. It stays there just a moment

too long, warm and familiar through the starched fabric of his uniform, and Spock thinks he feels the fingers contract, as though they would extend their hold on his flesh. But at that moment the main door opens on a slight figure, silhouetted against the light from the house, and Kirk's hand falls quickly away. The moment is gone; the man is gone, and in his place is the Captain, with his Captain's smile and his Captain's manners, turning the full force of his charm on the Ambassador's wife.

"Captain Kirk!" says Amanda warmly. "Welcome – welcome to our home."

"Mother," says Spock, and she turns to him.

Moments like these, when she is unobserved by his father's people, are when she lowers her barriers completely and allows every beat of her heart to show on her face. Love shines from her eyes as she says, "Na'shaya, ta-kam. Nuh'mau-wak."

He raises his hand in the *ta'al*, and, unhesitating, she presses a mirror gesture against his in the *el'ru'esta*. She says, "It's good to have you home, Spock."

He cannot truthfully offer the standard response, so instead he says, "Thank you, Mother."

There is a pause, and he thinks for a moment that she will press the issue, but instead she clasps her hands resolutely in front of her stomach, smiles brightly, and says, "Won't you come inside? Leave your bags by the door; Veshek will take care of them for you. Spock, I don't think you know Veshek? It would have been Selaas when you were last here."

She is moving as she speaks, that curious combination of motion and meaningless words that Humans use to segue from one situation to another, and he watches her carefully as she walks. Her spine is stiff, her footsteps slightly asynchronous, her gait too rigorously contained. From nowhere comes the illogical thought that she has never looked so small.

In the lobby, she turns to face them again and even this small pivot is disjointed. But there is no sign of discomfort or distress behind her easy smile as she says, "I hope you'll forgive my husband's absence, Captain. He'll join us for dinner, but he must rest for now."

"Of course," says Kirk smoothly. He hesitates. "I hope the Ambassador is not ill, Ma'am?"

“Amanda,” she corrects amiably. “He’s been indisposed, I’m afraid, but it’s nothing to worry about. Would you care for a drink, Captain? Or would you prefer to freshen up? I know how intolerably warm the city can seem when one is not used to it.”

The Captain shoots a lightening glance at Spock. He says, “Perhaps I’ll take a moment or two before I join you, yes.”

“Of course,” she says. “And won’t you feel free to change into something a little more comfortable? I can assure you we won’t take offense, Captain. You must be stifled in your uniform.”

Kirk laughs and glances at Spock again. He says, “Your son protested the dress uniform too, Ma’am. I have some desert wear with me for tomorrow’s expedition – I believe I’ll take your advice.”

“I’m glad,” she says. “Spock, perhaps you’d show Captain Kirk to the guest quarters? Veshek has made up your old room for you.”

She is tired. Fatigue darkens her eyes and hangs heavily on her small frame, but her smile is bright and as stubborn as ever. She notes his small hesitation and raises an eyebrow in a gesture that is both a question and a command, and that part of him that is eternally a son acquiesces without further reference to logic. But the same part cannot refrain from asking, quietly, “Are you well, Mother?”

The other eyebrow joins its twin. “Quite well, thank you,” she says. Pointedly, she adds, “etek-Stariben nash fa’k’shatrisu, Spock?”

“vesh’Khart-lan na’koon-ut-kal-if-fee t’nash-veh,” says Spock. “Eh’isha... V’tosh ish-veh kup-stariben.”

She inclines her head towards Kirk with a sheepish smile and he meets it with a visible effort towards equanimity.

“Of course,” she says. “I should have realized, Captain. Forgive me.”

Prickles of color on his throat mark a rising flush, and Spock realizes, with a thrill of icy horror,

that he has understood not only the words but their implication. But he simply nods and says, “Not at all, Ma’am. And I speak Vulcan far less well than your son would have you believe.”

“Amanda,” she says. “And I doubt that very much, Captain. Vulcans have no place for either hyperbole or modesty, as I’m sure you’re aware by now.”

A sharp bark of laughter escapes Kirk and he flashes a golden smile at his First. “I believe I’ve had occasion to notice, yes,” he says. The eyes hold Spock’s for a moment, then turn back to his mother. “We’re holding you back, Ma’am. Mr. Spock – lead the way.”

“Amanda, Captain,” she calls after his retreating back, and he turns his head to acknowledge the words with a nod before falling into step alongside his friend.

ShiKahr is limited by the encircling city walls, relic of a more dangerous time, and the suburban homes that brush up against them are necessarily less sprawling than they might otherwise be. The house of Sarek and Amanda is neither small nor particularly large, but is designed to give the illusion of depth. Spock leads his Captain up a short flight of stairs that circle off the lobby and connect with a gallery above, from which corridors lead to the right and the left. In the west wing, his parents’ quarters comprise a suite of rooms that encompass the Ambassador’s offices, Amanda’s study, and the marital bedroom where his father currently sleeps. Spock turns to the east, down a darkening corridor whose glass ceiling opens onto the sky and T’Khut, and it’s a measure both of Kirk’s curiosity and his reticence that he mentions the Watcher not at all, but waits until they are outside the doors to the guest room to ask the question that has hummed between them since they left Amanda.

Spock keys in the access code and the door slides open onto a spacious apartment, windowed on three sides and possessed of no furniture but a meditation mat, an *asenoï*, and a large bed set squarely in the middle. “These will be your quarters, Captain,” he says, but Kirk barely spares them a glance.

He says, “That insight you had about Professor Sorelan, Spock...”

Spock takes a deep breath. “Yes, Captain,” he says.

Kirk stares at him levelly for a moment, then nods into the bedroom. “Perhaps you’d better come inside for a moment.”

Spock hesitates, then steps through the door.

It slides softly shut behind him, and he turns to see the Captain standing on the threshold. His expression is unreadable. He says, “What is it, Spock? What’s wrong?”

“I believe,” says Spock, “That you have surmised the truth, Captain.”

“Jim,” says Kirk. “*Jim*, Spock. I’m asking as your friend. Is there something...?” He hesitates, then drops his eyes and paces to the center of the room. “There’s *something*,” he says. “It’s not... Tell me it’s not my business if you like, Spock. You’re right, of course. But I’m asking as your friend.”

“Jim,” says Spock, and, despite his injunction less than a minute earlier, the use of his given name causes the Captain to look up sharply. “It is... It is not for me to discuss.”

Kirk’s eyes have locked onto Spock’s and the brows arch gently as he speaks, reading him, as always, too easily. He takes a step forward. “I understand,” he says. “Just – please, tell me: is your mother all right, Spock?”

Spock hesitates. “She has said so.”

Another step forward, and he’s almost within the circle of Spock’s immediate space. Softly: “Then why don’t you believe her?”

He is standing too close; so close that Spock can smell the salt-sweet perfume of his skin, sweat drying in the chill of the bedroom. His scent flavors the air between them and Spock can taste it in the hollows of his own mouth. His eyes, dark with confusion and concern, are turned slightly upwards, pupils blown wide beneath his furrowed brows in the dusky evening light. He’s searching Spock’s face for an answer to a question he doesn’t understand; a question he doesn’t know he’s asked.

Spock is not certain he can keep his voice steady when he replies, but the silence will become its own response in a moment, and he knows that, if Kirk should see the tiny tremors in Spock’s shoulders or the erratic threads of his tattered breathing; if he should see the longing he engenders by simply standing so close and asking this question, then all the careful, measured arguments, all the sanity and the care and the necessity, will be crumbled in the time it takes to cross one footstep of floor and succumb.

Hoarsely, he says, "I must believe what she tells me, Jim."

The eyes hold him for a moment longer, then dip, and two soft hands rise in their place to grip Spock around his upper arms. "All right, Spock," says Kirk gently. His fingers squeeze and he looks up again. "I won't intrude on family business."

If that were all it were... But he can't say this. So instead he says, "Understand, Jim – if it were mine to speak of..."

"I understand," says Kirk. His face creases into a smile. "Your business is your business, Spock." His right hand drops to his side, but the left stays in place, and Spock can feel every imprint of every finger as though it pressed directly into his flesh. It's all he can do not to shut his eyes and simply drift into the sensation, to push back into the grip and feel it tighten, to close the empty air that separates him from his Captain and feel the heat that thrums in the space between them, pressed along the length of his body.

He feels his breath hitch in his throat, and the sudden tension in Kirk's arm tells him the Captain feels it too. The smile disintegrates; the eyes widen.

There is a long moment of silence so pure and so charged that it seems to wrap them like a cocoon and seal them outside of themselves. "Spock..." says Kirk, and it is barely a whisper. That one, breathless word pierces his belly and swirls a violent wave of desire that crashes into his defenses and, though he knows it's an answer in itself, he drops his gaze out of the reach of the warm, hazel eyes before he can see his thoughts reflected in them.

abrupt movement of his arm frees it from his Captain's grasp, and he steps backwards – less controlled than he would have preferred, but he does not stagger, he does not stumble. He keeps his eyes low and says, "I must go, Captain."

thinks he hears a rapid intake of breath from his friend but he cannot risk an upward glance to confirm it. If he sees distress – worse, if he sees his own longing written into Kirk's face – he will be undone. So he feels rather than sees Kirk's sudden turn; feels the disturbance in the air as his body twists away from him. The Captain's voice, when it comes, is steady. He says, "I'll meet you downstairs, Spock. I think I can find my way from here."

The words are not cold, not precisely, but they are stripped bare. The tone is all command-distance; it places a wall through the narrow space between them. It is a dismissal.

Spock says, “Yes, Captain,” and turns and leaves before he can slip any further from himself.

Chapter End Notes

Na'shaya tal-kam. Nuh'mau-wak - Welcome, dear. It's been too long.

etek-Stariben nash fa'k'shatrisu, Spock? - Do we speak of these things in front of Outworlders, Spock?

vesh'Khart-lan na'koon-ut-kal-if-fee t'nash-veh. Eh'isha... V'tosh ish-veh kup-stariben - The Captain was at my koon-ut-kal-if-fee. And besides... he speaks Vulcan.

Chapter 13

Kirk releases his breath and realizes he's shaking. He lowers himself onto the bed.

The room is bathed in shadows and silent but for the thundering rush of blood in his ears. He clasps his hands together in his lap and leans his elbows against his thighs, head canted forward, eyes fixed on the floor. Arousal boils in his belly, spreading tendrils of flame across his abdomen, insistent and hopeless and throbbing a low, keening ache through his groin. The air is heavy with the scent of Spock - warm, coppery spice tones that conjure a shadow of him in the centre of the room, and Kirk can feel the hardness of his flesh beneath his fingers, memories imprinted into the nerve endings like a holoivid on a three second loop.

In this disordered moment, he is certain that he has never wanted *anyone* the way he wanted Spock in the seconds before he broke free of Kirk's grip. The knowledge of it hollows him out, sucks at his center of gravity, skitters feverishly along the inside of his skull.

Never. Not anyone. *And he pulled away.*

Kirk stands unsteadily, feeling pitted and scoured, and scrubs his hands across his face. ShiKahr is a little over an hour ahead of ship's time; he shouldn't feel so tired. His hostess is waiting for him downstairs and the Captain is nothing if not scrupulously polite, but instead of moving towards the small door, tucked between the edge of one of the great enveloping windows and the interior wall, behind which, he guesses, is the bathroom, he crosses to the meditation mat, bleached yellow-white as T'Khut's reflected light competes with the last strangled breaths of Eridani A.

The window stretches from the floor to the ceiling and looks out over a complex of walled gardens, stacked geometrically into a deceptively compact space, and alive with shadowed color. It's the sort of place in which he can imagine a small boy finding shelter from a world that doesn't want him, staring upwards into the sky and dreaming of escape, and Kirk follows the imagined eyes of his vanished friend to the crimson firmament where unfamiliar stars remind him that he, too, is where he doesn't belong. He sucks an erratic breath and turns away.

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He follows the sound of Amanda's voice through an arched doorway off the lobby and enters a cavernous central room that easily stretches the length of the house. As in the upstairs quarters, glass is dominant and one wall is entirely windowed, stretching from floor to ceiling and opening onto a wide courtyard beyond, where a fountain sweetens the air and irrigates a sequence of raised flowerbeds. Evening drifts through a series of French doors that seem to be fashioned from the glass itself, carrying the scent of fresh water and blossom into the close heat of the living area, where Spock and his mother sit.

Amanda's face brightens as she registers Kirk's presence. She stands awkwardly, levering herself upwards on the arm of her chair, and the Captain sees his friend stiffen. Spock is facing away from the door, staring out across the garden, but he carefully sets his glass on the table in front of him and gets to his feet, turning stiffly and keeping his eyes lowered.

"Much better, don't you agree?" says Amanda brightly, nodding at Kirk's clothes. He's wearing a

loose, light-colored tunic and linen pants and, though the molten air still claws at his skin, at least now he feels as though he can breathe. Spock has changed into a heavy, embroidered robe of dark colors and abstract patterns and the effect is jarring, as though he's slipped into someone else's skin. Kirk feels his gaze linger a moment too long and trails it back to his hostess.

"Much," he says, smiling his diplomat's smile and forcing it into his eyes.

"The heat of the city can be quite challenging at first," she says. "It took me some time to adjust. You're fortunate to arrive so late into the year - wasn't it summertime when you were last here?"

The Captain glances towards his First, whose eyes have not left the floor. "I'm... not sure," he says. "I don't believe I ever asked." He hesitates. "Mr. Spock?"

"Late summer," says Spock.

There is an awkward pause while Amanda watches her son for signs that he will elaborate, but she covers it with a smile learned through long years of Ambassadorial functions. "Well," she says. "Won't you sit down and have a drink, Captain? I'm afraid we don't keep any alcohol, but we have a selection of Terran fruit juices. Or would you prefer something Vulcan?"

"I'm told that Vulcan foods don't synthesize well," he says. "Perhaps I should try the real thing while I'm here."

"Personally, I've never been able to tell the difference," she confesses. "But Spock and Sarek would certainly agree. Perhaps some iced tea? It's very refreshing."

"Wonderful."

She nods to her son. "Spock? Would you fix the Captain some iced tea, dear?"

"Of course," he says quietly, and slips past Kirk on his way to the culinary area on the west side of the room. His robes brush against the Captain as he moves and trail an involuntary shiver from the flesh beneath.

At Amanda's gesture, Kirk lowers himself onto one of the low, cushioned seats that surround the table, watching as she does likewise. Her movements are careful, deliberate, and that same prickling of unease returns. She catches his glance, and to cover it he says, "You have a fine home, Ma'am."

"Thank you," she says. "After dinner, won't you walk with me in the gardens? You won't believe what you can get roses to do in the Vulcan climate."

"You have roses? Terran roses?"

"I do. It took me several years to breed a strain hardy enough to survive the sunlight and thinner atmosphere, but now they grow almost like weeds."

She strikes him as just the sort of woman against whom Nature would throw up her hands and call it a day, and he laughs softly. "I believe your son has inherited your determination, Ma'am," he says.

A hand reaches silently into his field of vision, brandishing a glass so cold that condensation runs

freely down the edges. Kirk glances up and meets Spock's eyes before he can shield them, and sees a flash of panic chased by a silent plea before they cloud over and he looks away. "Thank you, Spock," he says, and his friend nods and crosses to stand a little distance away: not far enough to be rude, but out of the circle of acquaintance.

Amanda notices, of course, and her eyes follow her son and settle on him for a moment. Then they glide smoothly back to Kirk and she says, "Captain, please, call me Amanda while you're here. I invited you as a friend of my son, not as the captain of a starship. 'Ma'am' is so formal."

"In that case, you'd better call me Jim," he says. He glances up, and an ancient mischief makes him add, "And that goes for Spock too, of course."

There is a tiny movement to his friend's shoulders, as of a sigh swiftly suppressed. "Yes, Jim," he says.

"My wife has a habit of dispensing with formalities," says a diffident voice from the doorway, and Kirk stands quickly, turning to face Sarek as he enters. "I prefer to observe the courtesies, Captain Kirk. It is the Vulcan way."

The Captain raises the *ta'al*, and the Ambassador mirrors his gesture. "Live long and prosper, Ambassador," says Kirk.

Sarek inclines his head. "Peace and long life, Captain. You are welcome to our home."

His movements are slow but steady and only an aura of fatigue hints at convalescence. Otherwise he seems stronger than when they left him on Babel, recently perfused with his son's blood and McCoy's surgical skill. He crosses the room to Amanda, who has raised the index and middle fingers of her left hand for him to meet with his *ozh'esta*. Only then does he turn to Spock.

"*Na'shaya, sa-fa th'at*," he says.

Spock nods. "Father."

There is a silence so tense it's practically smoldering. Then Amanda smiles the smile of a woman for whom these moments are part of the fabric of daily life and says, "Well. Dinner, then."

~*~

"It seems," says Sarek, "Unlikely."

"You may be right, sir," says Kirk as evenly as he can. "However, that's not my decision to make."

They are seated on low, backless chairs around a table of polished stone as an elderly factotum serves *balkra* from a steaming urn that he carries on a thick static strap over one shoulder.

"Thank you, Veshek," says Amanda quietly. The lamps are low and the shadowy half-light from the ubiquitous windows drains the color from her face, etching lines of strain that speak of greater fatigue than she will admit.

"I do not suggest that you disobey a command, Captain," says Sarek. "I simply wonder at the wisdom of pursuing such a project. Diplomacy is often a question not simply of protocols, but of knowing when they are unlikely to achieve a satisfactory outcome."

"With respect, sir," says Kirk, "Many of Starfleet's - of the Federation's - greatest accomplishments would have been abandoned long ago had we followed that logic. The Romulan Peace Treaty would never have been negotiated. The Federation's current experimentation with time travel..."

"All causes with far more at stake than the establishment of mining rights on Ilion VII," says Sarek. "The Federation can survive on its current pergium reserves. It is illogical to expend such resources on a project with little chance of success."

"Then you don't believe Sorelan will manage to communicate with the Veleth Hai?"

Sarek regards him with a mask of Vulcan reserve. "I find it extremely unlikely," he says. He raises his glass to his lips as Kirk stabs his fork into something yellow and fragrant. "No doubt my son has expressed a similar sentiment," he adds.

Caught abruptly in the conversational spotlight, Spock stills for a moment, then clasps his hands in front of him. "I expressed some speculation as to the rationale behind the Professor's reticence," he says evenly. Kirk risks a glance in his direction and finds that the air above the table has focused into a narrow, laser-beam path between father and son. "However, upon reviewing his scholarly output, I believe that it would be unwise to discount his potential in this situation."

Spock has the singular ability to convey soul-crushing disdain without shifting his expression, and Sarek takes this opportunity to display its lineage in a spectacular battle of scrutiny that flares suddenly across the dishes. The muscles of his face do not so much as contract, but if this were a Human discussion someone would be getting their forehead repeatedly pounded against the nearest wall by now. He says, "You have concluded that Sorelan *trensu* has the skills necessary to make contact with a race of beings whose linguistic patterns appear to be coded in nuances of emotion?"

There is a meaningful silence. "I have," says Spock.

He damn well hasn't, or else he's kept it very quiet from his Captain, but Kirk smothers a smile and spears a yellow lump. Piquant steam curls up into his face and agitates the back of his throat, which is already struggling not to laugh and cannot cope with a chemical assault as well. He buries his sudden coughing fit in a hasty gulp of water and tries not to choke.

"So," says Amanda brightly. "Won't you tell us about your plans for tomorrow?"

She has deliberately thrown the question wide, but both she and Kirk know that Spock's not likely to answer, not in the middle of a Vulcan stare-off. Kirk wrestles his epiglottis into submission and strangles out a hoarse, "I'd asked Spock if he'd accompany me to Mount Seleya." He clears his throat and tries again. "I understand that it's a site of great spiritual and cultural significance. I'm relying on your son to keep me from causing offence." Amanda smiles. No-one else does. But, then again, they wouldn't.

"Why Seleya?" says Sarek, and Kirk resists the urge to roll his eyes.

The fact is, he doesn't have a good answer, and he's actually a little bit amazed that he's got this far without anyone asking that very question. *Because I've heard of it*, he thinks belligerently. *Because it's the one place I can name on this whole goddamn planet of secrecy and silence. Because I'd have skydived into the mouth of Hell itself if I thought it would get me an hour in your son's company, away from the ship, away from command, away from protocol. Because I picked it at random just so I'd have somewhere to suggest when I asked him to spend time with me.*

Because I'd swear on my ship that he nearly let me kiss him an hour ago.

"Call it an explorer's thirst for knowledge," he says. "I can't think of anywhere on the planet more representative of Vulcan culture and society than Mount Seleya."

Sarek inclines his head slightly. "It is not a curiosity, Captain," he says.

"Nor is it exclusive to the followers of Surak," says Spock blandly, but with suspicious speed. "The Captain is not a tourist. He is respectful of Vulcan customs. He honors Seleya with his interest."

Their eyes lock across the table again, and Kirk finds himself vaguely expecting the air to catch fire. Sarek says, without breaking the stare, "I meant no disparagement, Captain."

Kirk glances from Spock to his father. "Of course not, Ambassador," he says. "And I meant no disrespect."

"It's a difficult journey," says Amanda. "I made it twice, when I was much younger. Once shortly after Sarek and I were married, and once when Spock was a boy. Of course, a *true* pilgrimage begins at the mouth of Vulcan's Forge, but even Vulcans scarcely follow the full path anymore. You'll approach from the eastern landing, I suppose?"

"Yes," says Spock. "I do not anticipate proceeding past the lower sanctuary tomorrow. We must return to the ship by evening."

"How high is the sanctuary?" asks Kirk.

"It is a little over 1,000 meters above sea level. We should reach it by midday," says Spock. "Beyond it, the path becomes extremely difficult. It is... unlikely, in any case, that we would gain admittance to the Hall of Ancient Thought, Jim."

"The sanctuary is quite beautiful," says Amanda. "Many pilgrims break their journey there for several nights. If I'm not mistaken, you'll enjoy it a great deal, Captain - Jim."

"I have no doubt," says Kirk, holding up a hand to forgo a second helping of *balkra* from Veshek's urn; dear God, if ever there was a dinner that couldn't end soon enough, this is it. This is the one. "I look forward to it."

"We must leave before sunrise," says Spock. He glances at Amanda. "No doubt you and my father will not yet have risen."

"I shall be awake," she says mildly. "Your father will not."

Sarek looks vaguely surprised at the news - which is to say that he blinks slowly in his wife's direction - but makes no comment. Spock raises an eyebrow and half-turns his gaze on the Captain, but aborts the motion halfway through and re-directs his eyes to his empty plate.

"Well," says Amanda brightly. "I believe I promised the Captain a tour of our gardens after dinner. I imagine the heat will be almost out of the air by now, so perhaps you might find it tolerable, Jim?"

Kirk is reasonably certain he'd skip naked through the corridors of the Klingon High Council if it

would get him away from this table. He smiles. "That sounds wonderful," he says.

She turns an innocent face on her son. "Spock, your father tires very quickly at the moment and he will need to meditate before he sleeps," she says. "Perhaps you'd be kind enough to join him while the Captain and I take a stroll?"

A sudden glacial freeze across the table indicates precisely what the Vulcans think of *that* idea. Kirk wonders if it's his presence that obviates an explicit protest, or if they really are both that stubborn, and decides that, for present retributive purposes, he doesn't really care. He presses his lips together and lowers his eyes, but Spock will not have missed the gesture and will certainly not have mistaken its significance.

"Of course, Mother," he says stiffly, and she stands and lays a hand on his shoulder.

"Thank you, dear," she says. "Don't let him continue too long, will you? He needs his rest." She glances down at Kirk, and a mischievous glint in her eye tells him that she's daring the rage of her Vulcan every bit as much as the Captain is daring the rage of his just now, and that she is doing it for her own amusement, and that she understands that they have this in common. And that she approves. She holds out her arm. "Captain?" she says.

Kirk stands quickly and crosses the table to her, crooking his elbow for her to hold. He grins down at his First. "Mr. Spock, we'll need to finalize our plans for tomorrow," he says. "Can you spare a few moments later on?"

Spock cranes his head imperiously upwards. "I believe so, Jim," he says.

"Good," says Kirk. He turns to Amanda. "Lead on, Ma'am."

~*~

They have barely crossed as far as the fountain before laughter spills from her, high and clear, and he realizes that, in all the chaos of the Babel mission, he's never had cause to hear it before. He wonders, absently, if Spock would have taken after her - if this would have been *his* laugh - and if she ever wonders the same thing herself.

She says, "Good Heavens, Jim, I'm sorry you had to see that. I could knock their heads together sometimes."

"I believe," he says, "That I share that sentiment."

"I haven't told either of them about your message," she says. "I thought that was for the best. Taaval won't contradict me; he's glad of the opportunity to appear omniscient."

He grins. "I appreciate that."

"Not quite as much," she says, "As I appreciate your contacting me in the first place." She hesitates and they walk a few steps in silence before she adds, "I hope your visit hasn't been too uncomfortable, Jim. At least they'll talk to each other now but... still. Not much has changed."

"They're both remarkable men," he says. "It must be difficult to be constantly measuring one's achievements against one's father or one's son."

"You are also the remarkable son of a remarkable man," she says. "Was it so difficult for you?"

He hesitates, then half-smiles. "No. No, it wasn't."

Her free hand closes around his arm and squeezes tightly. She says, "I'm so glad he has you."

~*~

"Ah, Iowa," she says. "Yes, I visited once when we were on Earth for several months. Your state flower is the wild rose, I believe? It's extremely hardy. I cross-bred it with a middle-eastern variety - let me see - ah yes, here we are. The bloom is more like the *persica* than the *arkansana* but the scent is similar - see." She grips expertly at the stem, twisting and pulling it free of the bustle of the main plant for him to sniff, and her face flares with an avid enthusiasm that he recognizes from her son. He bends to the flower, presses his nose into the scent, though in truth he could barely tell a rose from a chrysanthemum, let alone distinguish between varieties.

The garden complex snakes around the house in a complicated chain of compartments, perhaps twice as large as he'd guessed from his vigil at the guest quarters' window. It is entirely Amanda's domain, and under her patient hands it has exploded into a dizzying assault of scent and color. *Favinit* and *waneti* clamor for attention across glimmering walls; *yelas* and *lale* and *kal'ta* bustle in the verdant flower beds. A kitchen garden boasts *birkeen* and *hla'meth* and *kh'aa* and *theris* and a dozen other names that fall easily from her mouth as though she were naming her family. Here and there, where they can be persuaded to thrive, are flashes of the world she left behind: cilantro, basil, orchids, tomatoes, and, of course, her roses.

She says, "Tell me, Jim - do you miss Earth?"

He straightens, his head full of scent, and says, "Sometimes. Less often, perhaps, than I ought to."

"Does Spock?"

The question takes him by surprise and he almost defaults to denial, but there's a look in her eyes that tells him it's not an idle thought. He says, "He's never mentioned it, except in passing."

She smiles wryly. "That's not really surprising. I dare say he never mentions Vulcan either?"

Kirk hesitates. "Slightly more often than Earth."

"And I suppose he hasn't shared with you his plans for when the mission is complete?"

He knows he can't hide the flash of dismay that ghosts across his face at the words, the rapid swell of panic that rises quickly before it can be contained. Her gaze is impassive, but she doesn't miss it.

Carefully, he says, "We haven't discussed it."

Her hands trace idly over the blooms, agitating a wave of perfume into the night air. She says, "I see a change in him. More so even than the last time I saw him. He seems... easier in himself. It's as though he's finally found a way to look inside and see the man I always saw there, the good man - the *great* man - who was the very best part of two great worlds, instead of half a man on neither. I think... I think a parent always wants to see themselves in their child - it's what parenthood is about,

really. It's immortality; we want our children to carry ourselves into the future, and so we want them to be just as we are. And perhaps we've made it harder for him that way. I will always want to see the Human in him, I will always want to see those parts of him that make him my son. And Sarek will always want him to be more Vulcan, and somewhere in the middle of that, Spock got lost. I think, Jim, that you're the only person who has ever truly wanted him for what he is, not changed or altered or different. I think, perhaps, that you're the only person who has ever seen how truly exceptional he is. I thought I saw it in your eyes the moment I stepped onto *Enterprise* when Sarek denied him to his face - I thought I saw rage there, and I swear I could have thrown my arms around you and kissed you for it. I saw someone who was prepared to fight for him and stand up for him, no matter who was set against him - do you know how long I've wanted him to find someone like that? He's different, Jim, and I think you're the reason for it. And I couldn't bear to think that he'll be thrown back out on his own when the mission ends."

She has kept her eyes on her roses as she speaks, trailing absently beside them in her stiff, arrhythmic stride, and he finds now that he can't drop his gaze, not even as she turns her head towards him and sees what's written there. Her face softens a little and she says, faintly, "Oh..." And then, "Good."

Frozen in the milky light of the Watcher, his skin tingles as though a current passes beneath it. It feels half-real. He clears his throat, a reflex action designed to rupture the dreamscape, and says, "He won't listen to me, though. When the mission ends... he'll go where the admiralty order. I wouldn't... I wouldn't want to be separated from him either, but we won't have any choice."

Suddenly, she smiles - a wide, silvery smile that lights her skin from within. She reaches out a hand and closes it over both of his where he's balled them into fists in front of him, latticing her fingers over his. "You're James Kirk," she says. "You'll have a choice." Her fingers squeeze. "For both of you, dear."

There are a thousand things he wants to say. He wants to tell her that his name is as likely to work against him as for him, that his fame will make him a prostitute, not a king. He wants to tell her that he'd freeze time if he could and have them endlessly circling the galaxy, just as they are, if it meant that they didn't have to part. He wants to tell her about the complex game of hurt and counter-hurt they've played this past year, about the women he's seduced to show Spock that he can, about the women Spock has seduced to show Kirk how little he needs him. He wants to tell her about Spock's voice inside his head and the rapturous, vertiginous joy of being *known*, without words or body, but simply, unequivocally, *known*. He wants to tell her about the times when he's looked into his friend's eyes and felt a shiver of something - a pulse, a beat of yearning - and felt it stir something inside him that he struggles to contain. He wants to tell her that he stood in the guest quarters of her home and held her son by the arm and trembled with the effort it took to wait for him to cross that final line. He wants to tell her that her son turned away from him, and that he doesn't know what to do next.

And in the event he says none of these things, because her gaze shoots suddenly upwards, over his shoulder, and the tiniest thrill of panic flashes in her eyes before she schools them back into nonchalant pleasure.

"Ah, there you are, dear," she says. "Is your father resting?"

Kirk feels the blood run screaming from his head in a dizzying exodus that leaves his skin flash-frozen and reeling. He pivots awkwardly, wide-eyed, out of her grip, just in time for his eyes to confirm what his brain was really hoping to avoid.

Spock is standing in the trellised archway that leads into the rose garden. Of course he is. And there is *no way to know how long he's been there*.

"He is asking for you, Mother," he says.

"Did he achieve a *kohl-tor*?"

"Briefly."

"Good." She reaches out a hand to Kirk's arm and pats it gently, flashing him the briefest look of apology. "I'd better go to him. Spock - you'll show the Captain anything he needs, won't you?"

Kirk's eyebrows shoot up and she ducks her head out of their glare with a look that might very well translate as, *Well, there's not much you can do about it now, dear*. Spock's expression is unreadable.

He says, "Of course, Mother. Good night."

"Good night, dear." Her eyes flicker up to Kirk's. "Good night, Captain."

"Good night, Ma'am," he says, and makes himself smile.

Spock steps backwards to let her pass and she shuffles past him, awkward now without the Captain's arm on which to lean. Her footfall is soft on the flagstones, the only sound in the silence, retreating through the maze of stone and scent towards the glow of the picture window, which hovers above the trailing edges of wall-climbing roses. As the sound of her footsteps retreats into the preternatural quiet of a suburb on the edge of the desert, Kirk realizes he's holding his breath.

He risks a glance at Spock, whose eyes, predictably, are on the ground. He says, "I presume you've come to discuss the arrangements for tomorrow's excursion?"

Spock hesitates. He opens his mouth to speak, then closes it again, and Kirk knows: whatever he's heard, he's heard *something*. He says, "I was considering the benefits of reacquainting myself with my mother's garden. I was fond of it as a child."

"Perhaps you'd like to finish showing me around," says Kirk. He forces a half-hearted smile. "We became somewhat distracted by the roses, I'm afraid."

"That would not..." His words falter, and he suddenly looks up. His eyes are black with misery. "That would not be wise, Jim."

"*Wise*?" It's out before he can catch it, harsher than he would have chosen. Dark eyes pin him to the spot. There's no way to mistake what's in them; no way to pretend this is a different conversation. "Spock," says Kirk, a low sound; a question, "Why is it *unwise*?"

There is a loaded pause.

"My responses are compromised," says Spock.

A short, breathless laugh escapes Kirk. "So are mine," he says.

"Understand, Jim," says Spock, and hesitates, so long that Kirk begins to wonder if it's a sentence

in itself, a plea: *understand, Jim*. But then he says, softly, almost a whisper, "I cannot."

Frustration surges, so familiar that it's almost a relief. This is who they are, this is what they do. It's one of the reasons it's so damn hard to get him out from under Kirk's skin, out of his head. "Then don't," he says. The end of hope is something that can be assimilated; it's something he can live with. He has done it before. "It's all right, Spock. But let's stop pretending there's nothing there. It doesn't help either of us."

Seven feet separate them; seven feet of dark, desert air, in which thermals twist and billow micro-patterns in the thin film of sand that no amount of careful sweeping can ever banish from the garden. Kirk has often wondered what it must be like to read the thoughts of another sentient being, to have their private self laid bare before you to consume or ignore. No wonder Spock's people lock down their emotional response; no wonder they cultivate a façade of disinterested ennui. When there is no shelter even inside one's own head, the illusion of inscrutability is not affectation, it's necessity. And yet, even without those complex neural pathways, that evolutionary advantage so treacherous it must be shrouded in ritual and custom, Kirk can read the waves of desolation radiating from his friend across the quiet air. It's both a vindication and a defeat: no, he was not wrong, everything he thought he saw was as he thought he saw it. But the victory is Pyrrhic if Spock doesn't want to want him.

He says, "I have fought so hard, Jim."

Why? he wants to ask. It tangles in his throat and tries to force its way out. Instead, he says, "I've noticed."

It's supposed to be light-hearted provocation, but it comes from a wounded place and there's bitterness in it. Spock flinches.

"I would not..." he says. "I would not choose to be separated from you either, Jim."

The words hang in the empty air like ghosts, frail and insubstantial. Never in his life has Kirk arrived at this stage of the game and found himself so utterly uncertain. They are small words, banal - trite, even - and from any other almost-lover they would be meaningless. But Spock's most intimate confessions use words like these - *when I feel friendship for you, I'm ashamed; I do want to go back to the ship, Captain* - and their inconsequential language is what gives them their weight. Anyone can make a poetic declaration and rely on hyperbole to make it stick. Spock gives away much more of himself in naked idiom and lengthy silence.

Kirk has a choice. He can listen to what Spock's head is telling him, or he can listen to what Spock actually wants. And only one of those things accords with Kirk's own desires.

He takes a step forward, into the gap between them, and expects Spock to turn and stride through the archway, out of reach along the path, out of reach entirely. When he doesn't, Kirk takes another step. Any moment now, Spock will tell him to stop. In another footstep, in another stride, his hollow, shadowed eyes will flash an unmistakable command and the Captain will obey - of course he will - because it's what his officer needs. It's what his *friend* needs. He's been here before: close enough to see a thready pulse dance beneath the surface of Spock's throat, close enough to feel the heat rush into the empty air, close enough to smell his skin. Spice and copper and salt, tea and desert air, ginger and lavender and something else, something indefinable, something that is uniquely *Spock*. Dark eyes scour the contours of Kirk's face, drifting over the lines of his chin, his cheeks, his nose, and finally meeting his gaze.

There's only one way this can go now.

Slowly, carefully, Kirk reaches for Spock's right arm above the elbow, where it disappears into the ubiquitous hand-clasp behind his back. Corded-steel muscles contract at his touch and the Captain gently tugs it free, sliding his hand over the rich, soft fabric of Spock's robe, down over the crook of the elbow joint, over the radius, over the wrist. At the palm he hesitates, glances up. His breath is rapid, heavy in his throat; it tugs at his chest as his neck cranes upwards to meet Spock's eyes. Liquid shadow stares back at him, hooded and impenetrable, and only the fluttering, hummingbird breaths that twitch his shoulders and ghost across Kirk's face tell him what he needs to know. Kirk's unpracticed hands fold his two smallest fingers into his palm and pin them in place with his thumb. His middle and index fingers extend from the ball of his hand, and he presses them to Spock's.

The hummingbird breaths catch abruptly. "Jim," says Spock, a breathy rumble from the back of his throat, and his left hand rises to cup Kirk's cheek.

It's more certain than Kirk expected, more certain than he feels - but, then, Spock has done this before, while the Captain has only the barest glimpses of the *ozh'esta* with which to sketch an outline of how it should be performed. Spock's head moves in one fluid movement, closing the inches between them, and his hand slides down Kirk's face until only the fingertips brush his chin, tilting it gently upwards, canting his lips towards Spock's. At the very last, he hesitates, breath twisting in the fractional space that separates their mouths, skittering over the sensitized flesh until Kirk can't stand it any longer and reaches for the final millimeters. The soft skin connects, and it's like closing an electrical circuit.

For a moment they stand there, motionless, prostrated by sensation. Kirk is not entirely certain he *can* move; it's as though the pieces of him have flown apart and all that anchors him is the press of his fingers against Spock's and the joining of their lips. But his body moves by itself, left hand snaking over Spock's hip and sliding along his back to pull him closer, labial surfaces contracting, pressing harder, drifting over pliant skin. Spock's hand slips behind Kirk's head, carding through his hair, fixing him in place, and Kirk twists his mouth a little, parting his lips. Teeth clash as Spock responds, and that's as much as it takes.

The *ozh'esta* is forgotten as Kirk's hands fist in the fabric of Spock's robe, coiling and pulling, scraping him closer until their bodies collide from hip to face. Staggering to keep themselves upright, Spock's leg spirals between Kirk's, forcing his thigh against Kirk's aching cock. Kirk grunts and Spock seals his mouth firmly over the sound, lips scrabbling for purchase against lips, tongues slamming together, writhing and weaving. The Captain feels himself moving backwards - shuffling, awkward steps - until his head grazes against something solid and he feels himself pressed up against the wall by the length of Spock's body. *Spock's* body, long desired - no, longer still, wanted for uncounted nights, imagined in the crushing darkness with one hand fisted around himself and an agony of arousal burning in his belly. Spock's scent filling his nose, Spock's flavor filling his mouth, and it's as he knew it would be: salty, coppery, and piquant - the taste of peppers and spice, warm against his tongue, trilling against his sparking gustatory nerves. Spock's arousal digging into his hip, thrusting against him as he helplessly thrusts his own hardness against Spock's leg. Spock's hands on either side of his face, gripping his cheek and threading feverishly through his hair as all this longing, all this yearning, all this wanting pours out of them. *Spock*.

Fierce, impatient kisses trail from Kirk's lips and describe an arc along his chin, sucking and burying Spock's mouth against his neck. Kirk tilts his head up towards the sky, where the Watcher contemplates them impassively, feeling the tingling burn as Spock scrapes his lips lower, below the hem of his tunic, dragging his teeth over Kirk's collarbone. Kirk presses his face into the tip of a

pointed ear and feels a low rumble of pleasure as his mouth makes contact, and this, even this, is how he knew it would be; the taste, the sensation, the touch of cartilage beneath his tongue. His hands comb and clutch at Spock's hair, tugging and twisting his head so that his mouth releases Kirk's throat and their lips collide again. It's intoxicating, narcotic, exhilarating, it's *everything*, and still he wants more. His hand snakes between their bodies, twisting between the writhing mass of flesh to where the solid bulk of Spock's erection grinds against Kirk's groin, haphazardly grazing his answering flesh in stuttering explosions of pleasure. His fingers trail the contours of it, buried beneath the heavy robes, and suddenly Spock freezes.

His hands, cupped possessively on either side of Kirk's chin, contract, but his mouth retreats so that only their foreheads are pressed together.

"Too much?" says Kirk. "I'm sorry, I won't..."

But Spock turns his face to the side and closes his eyes. It's a tiny gesture; in anyone else it would mean nothing, but in Spock... Cold dread washes Kirk's belly, dancing in his veins, smothering his desire.

"Forgive me," says Spock.

"No - *wait!*" says Kirk urgently. His hands shoot up to close around Spock's wrists, to hold them in place against his face, but the fingers hang loose now, flaccid against his skin, and Spock will not look at him. "Wait - *Spock...!*"

"Forgive me, Jim," he says hoarsely. "I cannot..."

"Wait!" he says again. But Kirk is Human, and if he ever needed a reminder of what that means in real terms when faced with a Vulcan with a different opinion, the ease with which Spock slides his wrists from the Captain's grip drives home a lesson he won't ever forget. Freed, one hand - steady but fragile - rises to press abstractedly against Spock's temple as he takes a precarious step backwards.

"Forgive me, Jim," he says again.

"Spock..." says Kirk, but he's gone, footsteps rapidly retreating up the path towards the house.

~*~

Na'shaya, sa-fa th'at - Welcome, my son.

Chapter 14

Forgive me, Jim – I cannot...

What does that *mean*?

Forgive me, Jim, I cannot make love to you in my mother's garden, pressed up against the wall that separates the rosa vulcanis from the pel-tar'uk?

Forgive me, Jim, I cannot engage in a sexual act with my superior officer without making the requisite amendments to the command duty roster?

Forgive me, Jim, I cannot proceed until we've fully explored the possible ramifications of these actions and neither one of us is currently in a frame of mind conducive to open and frank discussion?

Forgive me, Jim, I cannot mate outside of pon farr?

With a non-Vulcan?

With another man?

With you?

Sleep is clearly out of the question. Even closing his eyes is challenging.

Years ago, soon after they realized they'd accidentally forgotten to hate each other, Spock spent a fruitless few weeks trying to teach Kirk the basic techniques of Vulcan meditation and pretending that the look he got in his eye – the one where he was manifestly working out how to dismember the Captain's body with minimal spatter-damage to the furnishings – was Kirk's imagination. They tried, harder than they might do now, because the friendship was so new and fragile, because it seemed important to build it some proper foundations before it crumbled, and because the unspoken fear hovered between them that if they couldn't manage this then maybe they couldn't manage any of the rest of it, but in the end it was either admit defeat or one of them was going out

of an airlock, and so they decided to agree that, whatever other gifts the Captain might possess, the Vulcan meditative arts are not among them. It's a good memory, even better because it could easily have gone bad and it didn't. It's got to be worth something.

Kirk slides off the bed – too hot for the thin coverlet, even halfway through the syrupy night – and crouches on the mat, the way he was taught. It's about the last thing he managed to accomplish before the lessons rapidly deteriorated into silent Vulcan acrimony.

Success is contingent on retreating inside the Self, he remembers Spock saying, tones of great patience glossing a murderous frustration. *Until you can balance and subdue the noise in your mind, you will not achieve the first level of the trance.*

It had seemed like an unrealistic goal at the time. How can anyone subdue the relentless torrent of voices questioning, processing, planning, predicting, sorting, interpreting? When those voices are the very essence of the Self – when they are what feeds his sense of who he is and what makes it possible to perform *James Kirk* the way he understands him? He said nothing at the time, mostly because the look on Spock's face advised against pursuing the multiple objections that immediately suggested themselves, and he did what he could, with predictably unsatisfactory results.

Tonight, the idea of silencing the constant, screaming thought-torrent seems conspicuously impossible. He closes his eyes and fights off the memories that rush him.

~*~

Seleya rises out of the desert like the fossilized claw of an ancient bird of prey, clutching at the soft skin of the Watcher as she edges along the horizon. To the west, her shattered crags cast long, undulating shadows across the Forge, but here in the glow of the early morning sun the sands are already a shimmering haze of thermals.

Spock has barely broken a sweat. He has also barely spoken. Neither of these things is a surprise.

Veshek knocked a wake-up call on the guest room door in the watery, pre-dawn gray, and Kirk was relieved to find that he'd snatched an hour or so of sleep in the end, curled into himself on the mat in front of the window. A brief spear of triumph – it had to count for *something*, surely? Even if it wasn't a true meditation? – stuttered and quickly died as he called an acknowledgement and eased himself off the floor, joints creaking and protesting. Another time, he might have passed this off as

an achievement just to see the look on Spock's face, might have laughed about it with Bones and waited to see if his First would take the bait, might have prodded for the traditional charge of illogic and the exasperated eyebrow raise. Maybe he still will. Maybe nothing has changed.

Maybe.

He cleaned himself in the stultifying, dry warmth of the sonics, shucking off an evening's heat and sweat to make space for the detritus of another day on a desert planet, pulled on his clothes – musty and crumpled and painfully infused with the scent of Spock – and made his way downstairs to the main room, where Spock waited by the great window with his mother, as promised, by his side. She was speaking to him in a low voice, face turned upwards towards him, and even in the murky half-light of the shaded lamps Kirk could see that her eyes were anxious, her face tense. Spock faced away from her into the garden, but, as she raised a hand to touch his elbow, her peripheral vision caught on the figure of the Captain in the doorway and a smile shuttered her expression.

“Good morning, Jim,” she said. “I hope you slept comfortably?”

He knows the lie must have been obvious – he knows his eyes are bloodshot and his sockets are dark with fatigue – but he managed an answering smile and said, “Like a baby, thank you.”

Her eyes drifted uncertainly towards her son, and he realized, abruptly, that she was following his gaze. “Spock...?” she said quietly, a reproach, and he turned at the sound of her voice: slowly, stiffly, reluctantly, but he met the Captain's eyes, though it clearly cost him to do so.

He met the Captain's eyes, and Kirk knew in that second that things were very definitely not all right.

Bones would make him talk it out; he'd worry and nag and cajole until Kirk mouthed some meaningless platitude to get him off his back. Spock won't do that. Spock will bury it in silence until he's processed what he needs to process and then he'll either come back again or he won't. Striding through the desert sands at an unmatchable pace, silent and fortified, Kirk can only watch him walking, out of reach, and fight down the massing terror that whispers that he's lost him for good. And he wants to say that he'll go back to what they had, that he'll throw a dust-blanket over last night and store it in the farthest edges of recall if only they can hold onto their friendship. He wants to say this so badly it's like bile at the back of his throat, but it's not the truth. The truth is that the memories fly at him from every direction, whispering, touching, choking him; friendship is a distant bird on the far horizon, soaring out of reach. Now he only *wants*.

“Spock, for God's sake!” he snaps, breathless and clammy, boots full of sand and friable desert

rock. “Slow down! I can’t match your speed.”

Ahead of him, Spock stops, robes swirling in the negligible breeze, but he doesn’t turn. Kirk slings his canteen off his shoulder and takes a long draught of water before staggering over the uneven landscape to his friend’s side. Without looking at him, Spock says, “We must maintain a brisk pace if we are to reach the sanctuary by noon.”

“At this point,” says Kirk, “I don’t care if it takes us until tomorrow evening and Scotty has to beam us out just before we jump to warp. If I pass out, you’ll have to carry me. Slow down.”

He holds out the canteen, eyes shaded against the sunlight as he stares up towards the mountain. In the barren wastes of Vulcan’s Forge, it’s the closest he can get to an olive branch. He knows even without turning his head to look that it will be refused.

“Thank you,” says Spock, “But I do not require refreshment at this time.”

It’s not designed to wound. He knows it isn’t. He knows that this is just where Spock goes, this place inside him where he can wall himself in with ice and granite. But still an aching, ugly part of him wants to spit, *Take a goddamn drink of water, Spock*, as though this matters, as though it’s significant. A part of him just wants to bruise Spock too.

He retracts his hand, screws the lid back into place, shoulders the canteen.

“Lead the way, Mr. Spock,” he says.

~*~

Eridani has crossed thirty degrees of sky by the time they reach the foothills, and her heat is like a full-body tourniquet, cloistering and suffocating. They stop for a moment in the shade of a craggy outcrop and Kirk drags his sleeve across his forehead, peering up towards the distant peak through dark glasses that do little more than filter out the glare. There are no clouds to lend scale to the vertiginous climb, but he thinks he sees a dusting of snow skittering along the high outline.

“You know,” he says to the shadow hulking on the cool sand where the rock meets the desert floor, “It’s going to be a long day. It’ll be a lot longer if we pass it in silence.”

In his peripheral vision, Kirk sees Spock freeze. There is a short pause, and then his First says, “I am merely attempting to conserve energy for the journey.”

“Bullshit,” says Kirk without looking round.

There is a hesitation, and he doesn’t need to see Spock’s face to know that an eyebrow scrapes his hairline. “I beg your pardon, Captain?” he says.

Captain. Not Jim. “That’s bull,” says Kirk. He pivots a quarter circle to face his First. “And you know it.”

He crosses further into the shade and hunkers down next to Spock, who is seated cross-legged on the ground. “This was clearly a mistake,” he says, and that ugly part of him flares a brief satisfaction at the naked pain that flashes in Spock’s eyes for a fraction of a second. “Seleya,” he clarifies. “It doesn’t surprise me in the slightest that your mother made the journey, but the *average* Human was always going to find it a challenge. So instead of torturing me, why don’t you make fun of me instead? Insult my inferior musculature. Slander the Human race. Spock,” he says gently, and silently adds, *this is what we do.*

“If you are experiencing difficulties, perhaps we should turn back,” says Spock.

“And tell Bones I made it as far as the foot of the mountain before I gave up?” He shakes his head. “I’d be eating salad for a month. Besides,” he adds, “I want to see this sanctuary.”

He pushes up from his squat and deliberately reaches a hand down towards his First. It’s a challenge, and Spock’s hooded glance, first at the proffered fingers, then gliding up to his Captain’s face, says that he has read it as such. His hesitation says that he is calculating the merits of refusing versus accepting; his grip around Kirk’s forearm says that he has recognized that he cannot unobtrusively decline. Kirk feels the bite in his muscle as gravity wrestles briefly with the body at the other end of his arm, and it’s like an anchor, linking him back to the way things were. It’s a small victory. It’s enough, for now.

They follow a raised path that meanders across the lower slopes, arcing around the base to a gap in the foothills, like a valley in miniature. Spock leads them under a shadowed overhang, down a thoroughfare worn into the solid rock by the passage of innumerable feet over thousands of years. It widens into the dazzling sunlight of a craterous bowl, perhaps a quarter mile across, through which runs a deep crevasse forded by a narrow wooden bridge. Thermals rocket along the abyss,

trembling the slats, and Kirk remembers hearing something about wooden structures being in short supply on Vulcan, given the scarcity of forests on the planet's surface. He tries not to wonder how long it's been since anyone replaced the trusses.

Spock slows on the approach to the bridge and stops in front of it, and Kirk could swear he's thinking the same thing. He draws level with his First and they watch in contemplative silence for a moment as a gust of air sets the bridge bouncing and rattling in a way that is the opposite of reassuring.

Kirk did not become Captain of the *Enterprise* by scaring easily, and he's seen much worse than this, but dying on shore leave is just plain embarrassing. Dying on *Vulcan* shore leave ought to be impossible, but too much else has happened in the past twelve hours that defies all reasonable expectations for that thought to be particularly comforting. He centers himself, the way he has learned to do when adrenalin spikes his heart-rate and his brain starts asking serious questions about what he thinks he's doing, and takes a step forward, but, before his foot connects, a hand closes around his upper arm. It's so unexpected, so startling, that it aborts his movement without any further reference to conscious thought and he staggers a little, catching his balance against the solid counterweight of his friend's hand.

"I will go first," says Spock.

A protest bubbles on the Captain's lips but Spock is already moving, feet cautious but unhesitating, hands tight on the railing, eyes fixed firmly ahead. Kirk is half a footstep behind him and the bridge creaks a warning shout under their combined weight, but it's sturdier than it looks. The restless air currents billow and buffet beneath them, smelling of empty space, of dampness and darkness and forgotten things, and Kirk resists the urge to look down. The bottom of the fissure will either be visible or it won't, and neither one of these scenarios is particularly reassuring.

This ought to be comfortingly familiar. It's become so embedded into their routine – this complicated dance of maneuver and counter-maneuver designed to keep the other one safe in the face of another brand new, unorthodox way to die – that Kirk barely even notices it anymore. It's a reflex action, shrouded in putative logic and amended in line with rhetorical necessity, but, no matter how it's dressed up, the imperative behind it is simple: there came a point, too long ago now to establish any specifics, when each of them independently realized how badly they didn't want to lose the other, and adjusted their risk management accordingly. Kirk can claim command protocol and Spock can claim the prudence of preserving the Captain's life, and neither of them would be wrong, but the fact is he'd sooner take a phaser blast than watch a phaser blast take Spock. So Spock called it first on the little bridge and calmly shouldered the Captain out of the way. So he's waiting impassively on the other side, head cocked towards a gap in the sheer walls of their canyon, through which Kirk can just see the start of a stone staircase. It ought to be a relief; it ought to feel like a tiny fragment of normality has worried its way into the howling cloud of crazy that has descended over their friendship, and it takes Kirk a moment to work out why it just feels *wrong*. As he pulls level with his First and follows his line of sight towards the steps, hewn out of the iron-rich walls of the mountain itself, he realizes that the joy has leached from the action along

with all the easy camaraderie that ought to flow between them. It feels wrong because it *is* wrong: it's perfunctory, it's imperative. They can't laugh about it, Kirk can't gently tease him about it or wonder aloud about the logic of grand gestures. It's been stripped of everything that made it warm and solicitous and reduced to necessity, and there's no way to know whether that says *I want to keep you safe*, or *regulations require me to prioritize your life over mine*.

Whatever prompted last night's incident, whatever Kirk thought he read in a fractured gaze or an uncertain word, whatever his friend's body might have answered while it was lost in the moment, Spock regrets what happened. That couldn't be clearer.

The first instinct is a kind of trickling, anxious sadness; the second is anger. He bites down on both, indicates the stairs, and says, "What's the protocol? Do I follow you, or do you follow me?"

"I am unaware of any precedent," says Spock. He turns his head to face Kirk, but avoids his eyes. "However, the journey to the sanctuary is traditionally undertaken barefoot."

Kirk casts a glance over the rough desert sands, pocked with irregular rocks and hazy with reflected heat. "Barefoot then," he says.

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The T'Let'theiri Sanctuary is set into a sheltered plateau where the foothills meet the mountain proper, shaded from the glare of the sun by the high lip of a shattered volcanic dome that rings it on three sides. It mitigates Eridani's assault sufficiently to allow a small spring to be coaxed from its underground retreat, and a steady stream of acolytes have channelled it into irrigation furrows that water a ragged copse of scrawny trees, through which a series of pergolas weave shade and privacy and secluded arbors. The grove abuts the spreading walls of the sanctuary building, which jut from the rockface and spill impenetrable shadow through the pillared entrance and into the brightness of late morning. Here and there, scattered, white-robed figures sit cross-legged beneath the trees or move silently across the wide, immaculate plaza that fronts the complex and culminates in an ancient altar halfway between the gardens and the top of the stairs. Kirk stands in the disregarded entryway, where huge boulders scabble for space at the base of a forbidding, scree-scattered slope, and even here meditation mats litter the shadows and firepots choke sweet-smoking incense into the blistering heat.

"The journey from here to the peak typically takes 1.7 days," says Spock. These are the first words he's spoken since they began their climb, and they startle Kirk, who spooks and struggles to cover it. Spock gives no sign of having noticed. "This is the last shelter before the Hall of Ancient Thought. We will end our expedition here."

Kirk nods at the distant figures. “Are they priests?”

“Perhaps,” says Spock. He is standing on the top step, half a head lower than Kirk, and he makes no move to step onto the rough stone platform beside his Captain. “It is not unusual to find adepts in residence at the Sanctuary.”

“It seems... peaceful. Too peaceful to disturb.”

“The sun is approaching the highest point in the sky,” says Spock. “Traditionally, acolytes pass the middle of the day cloistered in the meditation rooms. We will not disturb them.”

“They won’t wonder why you’re not joining them?”

“I believe,” says Spock, “That your presence will be explanation enough.”

“I see,” says Kirk. He stretches his shoulders back against the weight of his backpack. “Well, if you think it might be possible to find a patch of shade in which the ground temperature is below the threshold at which water boils, I’d be glad of the opportunity to get out of the sun.”

“Atmospheric pressure is lower on Vulcan than on Earth,” says Spock, and glances sideways. An eyebrow arcs. “Water boils at a lower temperature here.”

A smile spreads uncertainly across Kirk’s face, hesitant but hopeful. He says, “I’d settle for any place with shadows, Mr. Spock.”

“There is a shallow pool in the centre of the arboretum,” says Spock. “It is set beneath a pagoda to shield it from the sun. We can rest there.”

Kirk pulls his hiking boots from their bootlace-sling around his shoulder and crouches in the relative cool of the stairwell to pull them on. He’s looping a knot into the laces of his right shoe when a gong chimes from within the shadowed building across the plaza, bouncing off the high craterous walls, and he glances up.

“The call to meditation,” says Spock. “It is midday. We must find shade.”

His eyes are fixed on the diorama before him: close enough to hear the occasional sibilant snatch of conversation on the still air as figures in white move elegantly across the sand, but distant, separate, as though a screen divides them from the ranks of the devout. Kirk straightens, following his gaze, and says, "I won't argue with that."

Spock leads the way at a brisk pace, sweeping up from the stairwell in a billow of robes and silence, and the Captain falls into step behind him as they cross the wide expanse of plateau. Out of the shade of the overhanging rocks, the heat of the direct sun is like walking into a wall of fire, sucking the breath and the words from Kirk, and it occurs to him, not for the first time, to wonder what the hell he's doing. Not just Seleya – though that's also a good question, why a grown man would voluntarily place himself in a position in which every single breath burns the inside of his nostrils – but *Spock*. Their friendship is too important to throw away on lust and vague hope; it's too important to force into a new shape just because the Captain's desires have changed. He knows that whatever happened last night wasn't his fault, not in the sense of having forced something on his friend against his wishes, but he's also pretty certain that, of the two of them, he's the one with the experience in dealing with that sort of situation, and there was definitely a line that he ought to have known better than to cross. Spock is a pace ahead of him, close enough to reach out and touch, but a distance separates them that has nothing to do with physical space, and Kirk has no idea what to do about it, and no idea if it's fixable. Anxiety clutches at his throat, which isn't exactly helpful, given the effort he's already expending on breathing.

He says, "Spock." A small tightening of the shoulders in front of him indicates that he's been heard, but the head doesn't turn. Kirk has had just about *enough* of this. "Spock!" he says again.

"Captain, it is advisable that we proceed directly to the shaded area..." says his First, but he doesn't look at him and he doesn't slow his pace.

"That's what we're doing," says Kirk evenly. And then, before he can change his mind, he adds, "I want to know if you're planning to put in for a transfer when we get back to the ship."

And it's only because he's watching so intently that he sees the tiny stumble – too tiny to dignify it with the description, and looped smoothly into Spock's stride as though it never happened. But Kirk sees it, and for a horrible, frozen instant his brain takes it for an answer.

Then Spock says, "No. No, I am not."

Relief is like an assault; it punches him in the gut and catches his breath. It's a moment before Kirk can strip it from his voice, before he can even out his words. He says, "Good. Because I wouldn't have approved it in any case."

There is a long, difficult moment of silence, punctuated only by the crunch of two sets of feet on sand and the keening, lonely cry of a circling bird of prey coasting the thermals high above them. Presently, Spock says, icily, “May I ask why not?”

“You’re the best First Officer in the fleet,” says Kirk. “I won’t lose you. Promotion – illness, even – that’s different. But I won’t have you running away. There’s another six months of this mission left, and I’ve lost more than enough crew as it is.”

They have passed from the ragged wastelands onto the sanctuary grounds, bounded by the massive stone altar on its raised dais of ochre stone. Symbols cluster along the base, shallowed by millennia of dust-laden, abrasive winds, and Kirk recognizes Golic Vulcan, although he can’t read the words. Another time he would ask for a translation, hover by Spock’s shoulder as he traced the lettering with his hand and sounded out the glottals and the fricatives, and repeat them as Spock spoke, ignoring the barely-concealed rush of exasperation as ill-adapted Human vocal chords mangled the imitation.

Spock barely spares it a glance. He says, “The question is academic in any case. It is my intention to remain with the ship.”

The sand is different here, where it is cared for: buffeted into peaks and whorls by micro-currents of desert air, but softened and flattened, filtered of shale and pebbles, so that the ground beneath Kirk’s boots has the consistency of cookie crumbs. The effect is perceptually startling, and he has a sudden, disorienting sense of temporal vertigo, as though he’s standing on a precipice and staring into the depths of countless years of devotion. Kirk says, “Whatever happens – I said I wouldn’t choose to be separated from you, Spock. That’s... not contingent on anything.”

As though a string has been cut, the tension sags from Spock’s shoulders, and it’s only when it’s gone that Kirk realizes how tightly his friend had been holding himself. Spock half-glances backwards towards his Captain, and, though his eyes are lowered, it looks as though he’ll say something. But the small indrawn breath catches halfway through and he turns back towards the approaching gardens.

As they draw closer to the copse, the air begins to alter – subtly at first, then more distinctly. The scent of water begins to seep into the arid heat: the dankness of the sanctuary halls and their underground spring, the sweetness of the shaded pool and its myriad artificial tributaries, the damp, verdant fragrance of leaves warmed by the sun. Through the gaping pillars of the entrance, it’s now possible to see, recessed into the darkness, a series of doorways lit by a stream of torches and to hear muffled, distant footsteps on stone floors and the occasional fragment of whispered conversation. Spock flickers a brief gaze towards the shadowed depths, face outlined in profile on the edge of Kirk’s vision, and then turns away.

Kirk follows him along a gravel path, flagged with square chunks of mountain stone, into the trees. *Shade* is, perhaps, optimistic: these are desert plants, designed to economize on limited resources, and their leaf-cover is patchy, sufficient only to dapple the ground in erratic, fractal patterns, but the contrast with the plaza is pronounced. The avenues are laid out on a complex grid of geometric lines, intersecting at sharp, rigid angles and interspersed with private retreats fashioned from canvas awnings spread against the trunks of adjacent trees, in which disregarded *aseno*i still smoke in anticipation of afternoon devotions. Spock leads them along the central thoroughfare, and it's only when they reach the circular pool at its head that Kirk realizes that the intricate pattern of pathways forms the triangle of the IDIC.

Beneath the spreading canopy of the pagoda, Eridani's heat is diluted to the comfortable, lazy warmth of an Iowan midsummer's day. Icons punctuate the wide flagstones that surround the pool – figures both contemplative and warlike; arms outstretched in peace, or closed around *lirpas* – and between them are spread meditation mats of various degrees of antiquity and repair. Spock lowers himself onto one in that elegant way he has – like water pouring from a jug – and Kirk, after a moment's hesitation, settles himself beside his friend.

“You require rest and sustenance,” says Spock simply.

Kirk's not about to argue with that, so he pulls his canteen from his shoulder and allows himself the luxury of unreservedly slaking his violent thirst without breaking for air. When he physically can't fit another ounce of water into his body, he runs a sleeve across his lip and, in a moment of wickedness, offers the bottle to his friend. Spock, to his credit, manages not to look completely disgusted and instead shakes his head with only the faintest air of offended dignity. “I do not require water at this time,” he says.

“You haven't touched a drop all day,” says Kirk.

“My people evolved on a desert planet,” Spock replies. “We conserve water more efficiently than Humans.”

The Captain allows himself a small smile. “I should have guessed,” he says.

He sits back on his hands, stretches his legs in front of him, ironing out the aches and tensions in his muscles. The fragranced smoke of the firepots is weaker here, just enough to brush the desert winds with a faint perfume, and it sits easily on the cooler air. The shaded warmth, the scented breeze, the sleepless night he's just passed, the silence; it's intoxicating, narcotic, and he fights the urge to close his eyes.

Instead he says, "I owe you an apology, Mr. Spock."

Spock is sitting perfectly still, legs folded in front of him, eyes closed, so it's not possible that he freezes, but a sharp change in the atmosphere around him indicates the metaphorical equivalent. He says, "I am not aware of any offense committed against me, Captain."

Captain. Still *captain.* It basically gives the lie to his denial. Kirk says, "I knew you didn't want to spend time planetside this shore leave. I'm sorry I interfered in your personal business. It wasn't my right."

There is a long silence. It's almost impossible to restrain the urge to fill it with meaningless words, but Kirk holds himself in check and waits for Spock to speak.

Finally, his First says, "I believe I have accustomed myself to the inevitability of Human emotional interventions, Captain."

Another time, Kirk would be certain he was deliberately seeking a reaction and would happily respond in kind, but today...? "Nevertheless," he says, "I believe my actions may have made you... uncomfortable."

Spock is anything but stupid. Nor is he as emotionally inarticulate as he likes to pretend. There is no way he will miss the double meaning buried in the Captain's carefully-chosen words, but he can choose to ignore it. If he does, it will be an answer in itself.

But instead he takes a deep breath and opens his eyes. They fix on the still surface of the pool and do not move. Spock says, "Your actions are not at fault, Jim."

His voice is steady, impassive; only the relentless, unfocused stare suggests an air of weary defeat. Kirk says, "This... endeavor... was at my insistence. I value your friendship too highly to have any misunderstandings between us."

Spock hesitates, and his eyes restlessly scour the water. "Understand, Jim," he says slowly. "You neither insisted nor was I coerced. If there has been an error... it has been mine."

“I don’t believe that,” says Kirk softly.

Half-seen in profile, an eyebrow arcs and immediately drops. “I see no reason to doubt it.”

“I was *there*,” says Kirk. He shifts his hips slightly so that he’s canted towards his friend. “Spock, I just wanted...” He hesitates. “Never mind. I believe you know what I wanted.”

Silence descends like a curtain of lead. Insects hum in the moist air above the pool and pull concentric circles from the surface as they dip to drink; it’s the only indication that time continues to flow. After a moment, Kirk risks a upwards glance and sees that Spock’s eyes have dropped so that they’re fixed on the folds of his robe in his lap, but they’re unfocused; unseeing. He says, “If it’s not what you want... I’ll respect that.” A beat; two beats. Three, and he makes himself add, “But it’s what I want.”

Spock says, “You do not know what it is that you ask.”

Kirk fights the urge to roll his eyes. “Commander, the sum total of what I don’t know about this would fill the databanks at Memory Alpha. I’m groping blindly in the dark. The least you could do is explain.”

“It is not...” And he hesitates, and Kirk is certain that he’s never seen his First Officer struggle for a word. Hope prickles in his chest, and scatters as Spock finishes, “...safe.”

“*Safe?*” Anger flares, geysering like a pot left too long on the stove. “Don’t patronize me, Mister! I’m the Captain of a starship! I’m your superior officer, in case you’ve forgotten. My whole life is one long, calculated risk, so don’t talk to me about *safe!*”

The words are no sooner out of his mouth than he wants them back; even before the veil of ice descends again over his First, he knows that it’s too late. Spock stands quickly in one long, fluid movement, and folds his hands in front of him as Kirk scrambles to his feet.

“Spock...” says the Captain, but his friend’s eyes are shuttered and locked.

“If you are sufficiently rested, I suggest we begin our return journey,” says Spock in a tone that Kirk hasn’t heard for more than four years.

“And if I’m not ‘sufficiently rested’?” he says. It’s only partially a challenge – the rest is apology, and he sees the moment that Spock recognizes this when his blank expression softens slightly. It’s limestone for granite on the scale of stone-faced Vulcan obstinacy, but there’s an opening there and Kirk presses his advantage. “I slept poorly last night, Mr. Spock. I’m prepared to bet that you did too.”

“I spent the night in meditation,” says Spock.

Kirk huffs a self-deprecating laugh. “Yes,” he says, “I tried that myself, if you can believe it.”

There is a moment of appalled silence. “I... believe that you tried,” says Spock.

Kirk turns a half-smile on his friend. “And you? How far did you get?”

Spock hesitates. “I was unable to progress beyond the second level of the trance.”

“Let me guess – there was more noise than you could subdue?”

It’s a throwaway comment, designed to seal their entente with something like humor, and Kirk is utterly unprepared for the flash of misery that darkens Spock’s eyes for an unguarded moment. Instinctively, he reaches a hand towards his friend’s arm, but catches it mid-movement, and it hangs, uselessly, between them, a hand’s breadth from the dark fabric of Spock’s sleeve. Suddenly, from nowhere, the Captain’s brain replays his friend’s words from last night: *I have fought so hard, Jim.*

Spock says, “That has been the case for some time now.”

There is a beat – a heavy, frozen moment in which Kirk struggles to collect his wildly reverberating thoughts – and, in the absence of any clear idea of how to respond, his hand stretches the final inches towards Spock.

And Spock turns and walks away.

Kirk blinks. Catches his breath. Calls, “Spock – stop!”

It’s not an order – not quite – and they both know it. Spock stills but does not turn. He says, “Captain, we must proceed to the beam-up point. The journey will take some hours.”

“Spock...” says Kirk, but there’s nothing to add to that, not even when Spock starts walking again.

He can’t match Spock’s pace at the best of times and that’s always been a source of gentle amusement between them: Spock’s tolerant moderation of his natural advantages, both muscle-mass and stride-length, and Kirk’s awareness that he’s being humored. This is not the best of times – for a number of reasons, the most pressing of which is the fact that he’s under the direct sunlight of a planet for which only one of them has evolved, but only slightly behind that is the fact that, this time, Spock does not want to be caught.

Kirk refuses to run after him. He’s exhausted within moments of leaving the shelter of the trees, even before he hits the sands at twice his comfortable speed, so it’s not a practical option regardless of pride or chain of command or even common courtesy. He knows that Spock won’t disregard a direct order, and he knows that, even now, it’s extremely unlikely that he’ll pretend not to hear it, but the fact is that he doesn’t want Spock to stop because he *has* to. This isn’t a mission. This isn’t business; they’re not even on duty. Nothing vital depends on the maintenance of military discipline or the rigid policing of the command structure. There is no reason to exert his authority right now other than the fact that he wants to, and that’s not good enough. So he chokes down his abraded pride and he follows at the best pace he can manage while Eridani streams a blistering soup of desert heat into the silence of the sanctuary plateau.

He emerges, sweating and furious, into the shaded stairwell, to find his First folded into the shadows, eyes hooded and face turned away.

“What the hell was that?” snaps Kirk.

Spock does not pretend to misunderstand. He says, “I saw no benefit in prolonging the discussion.”

“And it didn’t occur to you that I might have a different opinion?”

“On the contrary,” says Spock. “I was certain that you would.”

Kirk rolls his eyes, pivots on his heel, turns back again. “My actions are not at fault,” he says. “That’s what you said. So why must you act as though I’m some kind of threat to you?” Spock opens his mouth to speak, but Kirk carries on. “Did you believe I’d abuse the chain of command to get what I wanted? Do you really think so little of me, even after all this time? Have I *ever* given you reason to think that I would do anything other than respect your heritage, or your person, or your wishes? If I haven’t done anything wrong, Spock, then how have I managed to destroy *all* of your trust in me?”

“You misunderstand me, Jim,” says Spock quietly. “It is not *your* responses that I do not trust.”

Bitter laughter chokes from Kirk’s throat. “This is ridiculous,” he says, and pushes past his First onto the stairs.

“Jim,” says Spock behind him. It’s enough to stall Kirk, though it’s several seconds before he turns, and it’s only then that his friend descends the seven steps to where the Captain stands, drawing level with him in the narrow passageway. He stands in front of Kirk, too close even for this constricted space, and meets his eyes.

Spock says, “Have I ever given you cause to think that my actions are motivated by anything but a regard for your wellbeing?”

It’s impossible to say who reaches for whom, but they are no more than a foot apart; it’s the work of a split second to close the distance between them, and their mouths collide violently in a kiss that is more about need than passion. There is no solicitous prelude, no gentle caress, no preliminary brush of lips on lips – just a raw collision of anger and yearning and confusion that welds them together so tightly that for long moments they can barely move. And Kirk knows when his hands fist in Spock’s robes and he slams them into the canyon wall so that he can press every inch of his body against his First – so that he can feel the sinewy lines of flesh and muscle beneath the heavy, rich fabric; feel his hardness and his desire – that it’s fleeting, transitory. That there’s an end even in the beginning and that Spock’s hands grip him so tightly and so possessively *because* they will release him again. He knows this even before Spock breaks the seal that joins them at their lips and digs his fingernails into the Captain’s back through the light fabric of his tunic, hard enough to bruise, and says, for the last time, “Forgive me, Jim.”

It would be easy to refuse. The words are almost in his mouth, bitter and vicious: a challenge – *and what if I don’t?* But he swallows them. He releases his hold on his friend’s robes and steps back a little to disengage their bodies, to let empty air rush in between them, and Spock turns away from him, straightens his robes, and begins to descend the stairs.

Kirk lets him get safely out of sight before he channels all of his fury into a vicious strike against the rock with the flat of his right hand. Pain sears up his arm, white hot and cleansing, and he feels

the bite of a dozen small abrasions where the ragged surface has torn the skin, but it's better than the impotent rage that burns in his chest, and it's better than the creeping cold panic in his belly. He slams his fist against the rock wall again, harder, and grunts as little spots of blood appear in craters of white skin.

Perhaps thirty feet of sanctified ground separate him from his First Officer, but it might just as well be half the galaxy. Spock's footsteps echo against the high mountain walls, plosive slap of sole against rock sounding cleanly in the silence and retreating into distance. His taste is in Kirk's mouth and on the air around him, and the memory of his grip aches in bruise-points along Kirk's shoulders, but it's all fading, receding into the past. Spiky creases of twisted tunic fabric describe the passage of clutching fingers, and they are obliterated by a perfunctory brush of his hand, as though they never were. It's all so easily cemented over, evidence erased, obscuring the irreparable fractures beneath a thin veneer of civility. There is nothing else to do but suck in a breath and suppress the swelling sense of loss, and follow his friend down the mountain.

He's taken no more than ten steps before his communicator gives a sickly twitter. The Captain curses quietly and fishes it from his back pocket.

"Kirk here," he snaps.

"Captain!" There is an air of relief to Scotty's voice that does not bode well. "We've bin tryin' tae hail ye for almost an oor."

Kirk licks his lips in order to give himself a moment's composure and says, more evenly, "Yes, Mr. Scott – we're at the very south of Vulcan's Forge. The geomagnetic fields here tend to interfere with electronic devices. What's happened?"

"We've heard from the VSA, sir," says Scotty.

A movement in his peripheral vision makes Kirk glance up in time to see Spock ascending towards him. He stops a couple of feet below the Captain and arches an eyebrow, but his face is blank. Kirk says, "Oh?"

"Aye, sir," says Scotty. "The Professor's aboard, sir."

Kirk opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again. "Professor *Sorelan*?" he says. "Are you telling me... He's on the *Enterprise*? Now?"

“Aye, sir,” says Scotty. “We’ve bin tryin’ to hail ye. Seems like they suddenly found him, sir, and I didnae want tae risk them losin’ him agin.”

Spock’s eyes are dark, shrouded, and stripped of expression, and Kirk realizes, suddenly, that it’s over. Whatever this intermezzo was – or could have been – it’s finished now, and there’s no chance to fix what it has broken. A hollow pit opens up at the base of Kirk’s stomach and threatens to suck the air out of his chest. “Very good, Mr. Scott,” he says. “Do you have a lock on us now?”

“Aye, sir,” says Scott. “First time in an oor, sir. Are ye ready for beam-out?”

No. “Yes, Mr. Scott. Beam out at will. Kirk out.”

He lifts his eyes to meet Spock’s and opens his mouth to speak, but there’s nothing to say. And then the beam takes him and the opportunity is lost.

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“Dress uniforms for all command crew, Mr. Scott,” says Kirk as he steps down from the platform.

If his Chief Engineer is taken aback at the utilitarian greeting, he covers it quickly. “Aye, sir, so ordered,” he says.

“Good work, Scotty,” says Kirk. “Where’s the Professor now?”

“Gettin’ settled intae his quarters,” says Scotty. “I’ve assigned Yeoman Rogers tae him, sir. He seems happy enough.”

Spock stands behind him and to the right – close enough that Kirk can feel him hovering on the edge of his personal space, but just out of sight. The Captain turns to Lieutenant Kyle.

“Lieutenant, please arrange to beam up Mr. Spock’s and my luggage and have it sent to our respective quarters,” he says. “Scotty,” he adds, as Kyle nods and sets to work, “I’m going to

change and then I'll meet you up on the bridge. Let's get started on the disembarkation protocols in the meantime."

"Aye, sir," he says. "Bin wantin' tae see how she handles warp since I tweaked the antimatter relay circuits, sir – give the word and I'll have her on the road in no time."

Scott crosses to the door, which swishes open on the figure of Dr. McCoy, resplendent and uncomfortable in the blue dress uniform of the Science division. They pass in the doorway with perfunctory nods, and Bones saunters into the transporter room with an impassive smile that broadens when he turns it on the Captain.

"Welcome home, Jim," he says. "How was shore leave?"

"Fine," says Kirk before his face can call him a liar, and turns to his First.

"Mr. Spock," he says, "No doubt some members of our crew are still planetside. I'll leave it to you to co-ordinate their immediate return to *Enterprise*. I'd like to depart in no more than an hour's time."

"Yes, Captain," says Spock, and there's nothing about his tone or his expression that screams *change*, nothing that might indicate that anything is different between the two of them. Only the knowledge of that lacerating embrace colors his words in darker tones. There is the smallest of hesitations – half a second, nothing more – and then he's gone and Kirk has to fight the sensation that he's just been slugged in the gut.

He turns into McCoy's upraised eyebrow. Bones misses *nothing*.

"Fine?" says the Doctor. "That's it? No heart-warming tales of reminiscing with the Sareks? No holos of Seleya? Just 'fine', huh?"

"I didn't think you were interested," says Kirk, starting towards the door. He's not actually expecting that to put Bones off, so it's not really a surprise when he follows.

"Who says I'm interested?" he says, falling into step alongside the Captain. "Just bein' polite. K'lan-ne was 'fine' too, thanks for askin'. Never did catch sight of a bottle of bourbon, but Jabilo knows this place serves somethin' called *kellorica* – and, damn, Jim, tastes like paint stripper and

cactus sap but it sure hits the spot. So, who sneezed in the hobgoblin's plomeek soup?"

The abrupt subject-change is designed to catch him off his guard, but Kirk has known the Doctor for a long time. So he makes himself smile and says, "Who do you think, Bones? It was just the two of us on a long desert trek. Are you surprised I managed to get on his nerves?"

"Surprised he has a nerve to get on," says Bones cheerfully. "Lord knows, I been tryin' to do it for years." A beat. "You gonna tell me how you managed it, or am I just gonna have to keep guessing?"

The tone is light, but Kirk knows better than to underestimate the Doctor's penchant for niggling at a mystery. As they step into the turbolift, he says, airily, "Another time, Bones. Let's just finish this mission first. How's the Professor?"

"Ha!" says Bones, inexplicably. Then: "I think you'll like him. God help me, Jim he's – he's almost *fun*."

Despite himself, Kirk's lips twitch. "High praise indeed, coming from you, Bones," he says. "I meant his health. Is he fit to travel?"

"Bit of dehydration, nothing major," says McCoy. "Official story from the VSA is they just suddenly rustled him up and sent him straight over to us. *His* story is he's partial to a bit of alone-time in the desert, takes off now and then for a few days and just kind of... hangs out. Helps his thought processes, he says. Not much by way of a calendar out in the Fire Plains, so I hear, and he got his dates mixed up, forgot he was supposed to be beaming up to the *Enterprise*. I'm not kidding, Jim. I *like* this guy."

"But why would the VSA conceal his whereabouts from Starfleet?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," says Bones as the doors slide open onto Deck 5. "Don't sound too logical to me, though, all this wandering in the desert. Kind of hard to explain to the Federation why you can't find one of your Faculty all of a sudden, 'specially when you're supposed to be above that sort of thing." They pull up outside the Captain's quarters and Bones rocks back on his heels, clasping his hands behind his back. "Don't mean you and the hobgoblin were wrong, of course. Just that the man's just south of two hundred years old, and he looks mighty sprightly for an old guy who's just gone through *pon farr*. But, then, I'm no expert."

Kirk's not sure whether he wants to laugh or punch a hole in something. He settles for hitting the door release button with more force than is strictly necessary, and turns to his friend. He says, "I need to get up to the bridge, Bones. I'll catch up with you later."

"Sure," says the Doctor, but as Kirk turns to walk into the empty chill of his quarters, he says, "Everything okay, Jim?"

Kirk blanks his face. "Fine, Bones," he says.

"Fine, huh?" says the Doctor.

"Fine," says Kirk, and shuts the door.

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There's a psychological power to the dress uniform that's two parts superstition to one part subconscious conditioning. Maybe it's because it's what he was wearing the first time he set foot aboard his ship, but it's always felt to Kirk as though the essence of his captaincy is woven into the rich, satin threads; as though authority is a question of external manifestation as much as a state of mind. Maybe there's something in that, but now's not the time to pursue it, and he's uncomfortably aware that the last time he wore these clothes everything was different, so whatever bureaucratic black magic is contained within the synthetic imitation-silk fibers, it's lost a little of its luster today.

He strides out of the turbolift to Scotty's hasty, "Captain on the bridge," and waves a hand vaguely to seat his command crew as they start to get to their feet. His eyes drift towards the science console entirely of their own volition and the sight of his First, poker-straight and unreachable, stabs an angry little burning pain into the hollow beneath his ribs. Spock meets his gaze, and that's worse than an evasion, because at least when he was avoiding the Captain's scrutiny it meant that there was something there that Spock didn't want his friend to see. Now he lets his eyes lock onto Kirk's, and there's the briefest flash of acknowledgement – of buried, brutalized sadness – before it's locked firmly away in that place Spock goes to when he doesn't want to be found. His face is blank. He's someone Kirk doesn't know.

"Thank you, Mr. Scott," says Kirk. "At ease, everyone. Let's keep the bridge informal unless our guest is present. Mr. Spock" – and the angry pain twists against his chest – "are all the crew aboard?"

“All hands accounted for, Captain,” says Spock.

Kirk slides into the command chair and fixes his eyes on the viewscreen, where T’Khasi sprawls lazily below them, haunted by the eternal shadow of her sister-world. “Then let’s get the hell out of here,” he says.

END OF PART I

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

PART II: EARTH

The orders come through on Christmas Eve: ground assignment at Starfleet HQ in San Francisco, while they take his ship apart and put her back together again. They're appended by brief word of thanks and a note advising him that he's been recommended for promotion to the rank of Commodore. Kirk scans the page once, then reads it through from start to finish, and wonders what he's supposed to feel.

It's funny. He's been dreading this moment for so long, and now that it's real it's been robbed of its horror. They're just words, after all: no better than he'd hoped, no worse than he'd expected. The ship's already pointed towards home so this is just another footstep in a long path that ends where it began: in the corridors of Spacedock, shaking hands and exchanging frozen smiles, with uncertain years stretching vacantly ahead. It's actually a little bit of a relief to start to shape those empty days. Maybe it'll be good to get a bit of sunlight and real Terran air, to eat food that's grown in soil and rainwater, to see old friends who've never left Earth's atmosphere. To climb into a ground car and crawl the dusty miles across the face of the planet to the place where he grew up; to feel the pull of gravity beneath his feet, settling his restless blood. To walk in cornfields warmed by the first sun he ever knew. To change. To grow.

He takes a deep breath, dictates a short, utilitarian acknowledgement, and leans back in his chair, clasping his hands across his chest. Beneath his desk, he toes off his boots, kicking them haphazardly onto the carpeted floor, and swings his legs upwards to rest on the plasticized surface, feet stretched out and away from him, muscles buzzing their unexpected freedom along the bones of his feet. Shift ended almost four hours ago, and he ought to eat something, ought to shut down his terminal and leave the constricting, silent space of his quarters; ought to change out of his uniform at least. His head and his neck ache, and he presses the balls of his fists into his straining eyes, rubbing until little kaleidoscopic stars sputter to life in the darkness.

Enough. He needs a drink.

Kirk stands, slowly, stretching his back and rolling his shoulders, easing out the tension of too much work and not enough hours, and crosses to his liquor cabinet. It's dwindling like the days of

the mission: three bottles left, none of them more than half full, and there's not much point in replacing them now. By unspoken agreement with Bones, he's saving the brandy for his final night on board, so he reaches for the Scotch instead and decants a generous measure into his glass, breathing deeply as the fumes billow upwards in the still air. Into the silence of his cabin drift the sounds of his ship at ease: laughter and high, excitable voices; music escaping as a door opens and quickly closes somewhere down the corridor; a mass of footsteps hurrying past. Life happening, one person at a time, oblivious and carefree, carrying echoes into the hollow chill of the Captain's quarters. He takes a gulp of whisky and glances at the chronometer.

Bones is expecting him at the party. He made that clear in that way he has that's about three quarters of a tone away from insubordination, the one he only gets away with because the chain of command gets kind of fuzzy once the doors of sickbay close behind him. There are half a dozen excellent reasons why Kirk ought to stay where he is, and maybe three times as many that are just *okay* but still perfectly valid - not least of which is the impressive pile of tapes sitting disregarded on his desk, which has not noticeably depreciated in size since he absented himself from the bridge shortly after lunch with the intention of putting a dent in it. But there's also the fact that the crew can't really relax in the presence of their commander-in-chief. There's the fact that Bones and his medical knowledge of blood-alcohol tolerance levels can't be trusted to pour the Captain a drink, which he will absolutely insist on doing, probably within seconds of Kirk's arrival. There's the fact that there's still a ship to command, 365 days a year, no matter what the calendar might say. And on top of it all, there's the fact that he's really not in the mood for a party, Christmas or not.

"It's not healthy, Jim," said Bones this morning, eyeing him over a biobed. Kirk has been avoiding sickbay all week for precisely this reason, but the Doctor cornered him with a query about end-of-mission medical reports and, with a grim sense of resignation, he decided just to get it over with. "Sixteen hour days, seven day weeks - for how long now? I've a mind to sign you off on medical leave, Captain."

"That won't change the fact that there's work to be done," said Kirk. "It'll just shift responsibility onto Spock."

"Yeah, well. Haven't seen much of him lately either."

"My point exactly."

"And here's mine." Bones has always had this ability to shift without warning from Genial Country Gentleman into Growling Wall of Menace, and he plays it so sparingly that it's never quite lost its ability to disorient. "Comes a point where the Captain can't function effectively if he's only ever breaking to eat and sleep. That what you want in your records when we hit Spacedock, Jim? We got another three and a half weeks for you to hide out in your quarters. The work'll get done without you killin' yourself to do it. When's the last time you spent an evenin' in company? And I don't mean dictatin' reports to your Yeoman, so don't try that one, Captain."

“Uhura’s party,” he said. She’d pled the case for a small soiree to mark the occasion of setting the *Enterprise*’s final course-heading for Earth, and he couldn’t exactly refuse, so they’d duly filed into the officer’s mess for vol-au-vents and Chablis and reminiscence. Someone had called on the Captain to say a few words, and he stumbled his way through praise for his crew and memories of the mission, of lives lost and lives changed, of friendship and bonds and camaraderie, and he knew he was avoiding Spock’s eyes the whole time and he knew that there was nothing he could do about it. He’d looked into a small sea of faces, some creased into faint smiles, some lost in other times, some surreptitiously dabbing at their eyes, and he saw Bones watching him with an unreadable expression and remembered, out of nowhere, an old fragment of Shakespeare:

Tend me tonight;

May be it is the period of your duty:

Haply you shall not see more; or if,

A mangled shadow: perchance to-morrow

You’ll serve another master.

“Party?” Bones rolled his eyes. “*Wake*, more like. Jim, it’s Christmas. Do it for morale or do it on doctor’s orders, I don’t much care which. Rec Room Four, party starts at eight.”

The whisky is not a brand he particularly likes, which is why it’s lasted as long as it has, but it’s warm and restorative and he feels it easing into his knotted muscles and beginning the Sisyphean task of straightening them out. Kirk crosses into his sleeping quarters, rolling the glass against his chest as he moves, and throws open his closet, as though inspiration is waiting inside, coiled and ready to leap at him. Truth is, it all feels like dress-up; he might as well turn up in an elf costume for all he feels like *himself* when he’s out of uniform, but the accoutrements of command won’t get Bones off his back. He pulls out a pair of black slacks and a nondescript shirt - easy, unremarkable clothes - and tosses them onto his bunk, downing the rest of the Scotch in the same movement that shrugs his Captain’s jersey up his back and over his shoulders. Now would be the time for his terminal to bleep another siren call, for someone somewhere to need something that just can’t wait for parties, but there’s never a mission when you need it. That’s his life, right there. Always run on somebody else’s schedule.

Benson has pulled command chair duty tonight - voluntarily, as it turns out, since it’s somewhere in mid-autumn on his colonial homeworld and he’ll be cleared for shore leave by the time they roll around to Proxima Centauri’s winter festival - and Kirk can’t resist buzzing up to him as he fishes under the desk for his discarded boots.

“All quiet, sir,” he says cheerfully. The Captain can hear the smile in his voice; Benson thinks it’s what Kirk wants to hear. “Enjoy the party, sir. We’ve got it covered here.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” says Kirk smoothly and signs off before he can ask the sort of question that telegraphs his ulterior motives: *no anomalies, Benson? You’re certain? Instruments functioning correctly? Perhaps I should check in, just for a moment...* Enough. He knows better than to doubt Bones’ resolve, and, even if the Doctor will understand the imperative, the necessity, the constant need to be on the bridge of his ship for as long as she remains *his* ship, he wouldn’t be Bones if he didn’t think he always knew best.

He pours himself another drink without bothering to pretend that it’s anything other than a stalling tactic and stands in the center of his sterile quarters, sipping quietly from his glass. The pile of tapes scatter an irregular rainbow across his desk and it would be so easy to slide into his chair, power up his terminal, lose himself in necessity. There’s work to be done, always; hours of it. Days of it. The pull is magnetic; it’s like gravity; it’s like a black hole, sucking him closer, dragging him in until he can almost feel the press of his seat beneath him and the brief glare of the screen scouring his eyes as it flashes into life.

Enough.

He purses his lips, hollows his cheeks. Then he drains his glass and heads for the door.

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“Ho ho ho,” says Santa, pushing a glass of bourbon into Kirk’s hand. At least he knows where he is with whisky; Bones’ cocktails have a tendency to get creatively combusive. “Thought you’d gotten lost, Captain. Take a wrong turn at the turbolift?”

“It’s only 8:30, Bones,” says Kirk, knocking back a gulp of his drink and scanning restless eyes across the room.

“Yeah, and you’ll be citing command protocol or fraternization regs by nine, Jim,” says Bones evenly. “There’s food. Hundred credits says you haven’t eaten anything since lunch.”

There’s no point in lying. Bones has spies everywhere. He says, “Starfleet regulations prohibit gambling, Doctor McCoy.”

“You fillin’ in for Spock now?” He glances sideways and Kirk keeps his face impassive, eyes fixed steadily on a group of Ensigns bobbing arrhythmically on the makeshift dancefloor. “Try the crab

puffs. They near-as-damn-it taste of crab.”

There are times when it pays to pick one’s battles carefully with Bones, so he moves silently towards the buffet and accepts a plate from a young Yeoman with a smile and a muted *thanks*. Bones trails him like a red-suited shadow, halting by the drinks table to quietly refill his empty glass with a potent mixture poured from two suspiciously unlabelled bottles. It’s difficult to tell in the half-light, but the Captain is nearly certain that’s smoke rising faintly from the surface of the liquid.

“I believe that beard suits you,” says Kirk as McCoy twists it out of the way to sip from his drink.

“Damned inconvenient,” says the Doctor, blinking away alcohol fumes.

“I thought it was Uhura’s turn this year?”

“Owed her a favor.”

“I think you just like wearing it.”

Bones grins wryly. “Not all of us’re Ebenezer Scrooge, Captain.”

“True,” says Kirk. His eyes flit sideways. “Some of us are Santa Claus.”

The grin widens. “Damn straight. You think of anyone else who outranks the Captain on Christmas Eve?”

Kirk says nothing, hiding a smile in his glass.

“Saw that,” says Bones cheerfully, swallowing a gulp of his volcano juice. “Hell, I’m gonna have half the crew complainin’ to me tomorrow about some mysterious case of the stomach flu, you don’t think it pays to do a little incognito intelligence-gatherin’ the night before?”

“I’m pretty sure they know it’s you by now, Bones.”

“Not all of them.”

“You’ve been dressed as Santa for three out of the five Christmas parties this mission.”

“Yup.” Another grin. “Remember the first one?”

Kirk purses his lips. “Not terribly well.”

Bones chuckles. “Yeah, it was a good one, wasn’t it?”

“It was instructive, certainly. I learned never to let you mix my drinks again.”

“You know your trouble, Captain?”

“I’m sure you’re about to tell me.”

“You don’t know how to switch off.”

Kirk grins. “I thought it was over-confidence? Or failure to delegate? Or - no, wait - a disinclination towards green vegetables?”

“Those too,” says McCoy.

“I can switch off, Bones,” says Kirk.

Bones snorts. “That so, Jim?”

“Case in point: I’m here.”

“No,” says Bones cryptically, eyes cast out over the party. “No you’re not. Not really.”

Kirk opens his mouth to reply but thinks better of it before the words have formed. When Bones waxes philosophical there’s often a little semantic wriggle-room, but Kirk thinks he has an idea of what his friend means. There are times - like now, as his eyes sweep lazily across the room, drinking in the sight of his crew at leisure - when he feels his life recede from him, as though it’s happening in front of him as he stands apart. His gaze drifts across a wave of familiar faces: across Sulu and Chekov seated at one of the tables that skirt the walls, Chekov gesticulating wildly, Sulu’s head thrown back in laughter; across Afeaki with her arm slung around Porter on one side and Chesnel on the other, calling something across the few feet of space that separate them from a table of science cadets that the Captain barely recognizes; across Lieutenants Kelly and Slovo by the replicator bank, cornered by their barely-coherent Scottish CO, who’s bracing himself against the wall and talking animatedly about warp core engines in between long swigs from a pint glass; across Chapel and Uhura dancing with Riley and Ngo and Rodriguez, beckoning to Moreau to join them while she hurriedly drains her drink through a ridiculously elaborate straw; across Kasinski with his arm slung loosely around Milton’s neck, Milton’s head resting on his shoulder, both of them watching their shipmates through contented, vacant eyes. This is the beating heart of his ship, this is the fabric of who he is. It’s a snapshot, a memory forming as he watches; something that, in years to come, he’ll look back on and think, *this was my life*.

The pain beneath his ribs, Kirk’s constant companion, twists viciously, and he turns away, covers it with a sip from his drink.

“The new orders came through,” he says quietly.

Bones quarter-turns towards him and levels a stare. “And?”

Kirk doesn’t meet his eyes, turning his gaze into his glass instead before looking up to peer into the middle distance ahead. “And... it’s largely as expected. HQ for eighteen months. *Enterprise* is going to dry dock for a refit.”

“Ship runs just fine,” says Bones flatly.

“She’s almost twenty years old, Bones,” says Kirk. “It’s a miracle they don’t scrap her. The engines are practically obsolete; the computer system is archaic. She hasn’t had an upgrade in nearly a decade - she’s well overdue.”

“But they’ll give her back to you when they’re through, right?”

Kirk lifts his glass to his lips, sips, holds the liquor in his mouth for a moment before swallowing. “I think...” he says slowly. “I think I’m done, Bones.” A beat. He expects the Doctor to say something, to bristle with outrage, to throw a thinly-veiled insult, and his silence is actually worse. So he fills it, unbidden: “Ninety-four men and women aren’t coming home with us. Ninety-four sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. Mothers and fathers. Lovers. We’ve lost 37 crew members in the last six months alone.” Another gulp, and he realizes there’s a fine tremor agitating the surface of the liquid as he lowers his drink. “When you can’t remember their names anymore, Bones - that’s when it’s time to quit.”

“Quit?” sputters McCoy.

“Not the service,” says Kirk. He stares at the ripples buffeting the walls of his glass: concentric circles, locked in an endless loop. “But perhaps - perhaps a ground assignment might be good for me. New challenges, new horizons. It’s not forever. There’ll be plenty of galaxy left when *Enterprise* is space-worthy again.”

“Uh-uh,” says Bones, and there’s such iron in his voice that Kirk’s head twists sideways before he can stop himself. The Doctor’s eyes are narrowed beneath the trim of his ridiculous hat, dark and combative, and it would be hilarious if it wasn’t so damned unsettling. “Now, you listen here, Captain: that’s not how it works, not for you. Jim Kirk I thought I knew wouldn’t stand for that level of bullshit, not in a million years. You think I don’t feel it too? All them kids, Jim - *kids*, barely out of the Academy, half of them - you think I don’t see their faces at night? That’s *why* you keep on going, so it damn well means something. So you have something to tell the folks back home when they ask you why their kid didn’t make it back. So I don’t want to hear about how you’re *done*, Captain. Men like you don’t get to be *done*. Bout time you wrapped up this pity party of yours, you ask me, and damn well start *fighting* for what you want.”

He knocks back the remnants of his glass, still half-full, and slams it down on a nearby table as Kirk carefully twists his own drink in his hands - slowly, deliberately, buying the time he needs to leash the rage that’s tightening his chest. The Captain looks up, steel-eyed, sucking in a breath to say something uncontrolled and uncensored, and the words rise like bile, bitter on his tongue. But McCoy cuts him off.

“Goddamn it, Jim,” he says, softer now. “It’s not...” He hesitates, mutters a curse, and turns his head towards the room at large, away from Kirk. “You remember what I said to you on Federation Day?”

It’s not what? Kirk wants to ask, but he doesn’t. Instead he says, “I’m not likely to forget, Doctor.”

“Well,” says Bones. His voice is conciliatory, though he still doesn’t look at Kirk. He sighs. “Now, don’t let’s you and me get all bowed up, Captain,” he says. “S’posed to be a party. Lemme get you another drink.”

Kirk huffs a laugh. It almost comes out right. He says, “I’m pretty sure you told me once that my trouble was I never learn from past mistakes, Bones.”

The Doctor glances sideways and half-smiles. “That too,” he says.

Kirk turns his gaze from the excitable crowd, up into the Doctor’s face, and feels a grin tug at the corners of his lips. He says, “Then observe my personal growth in action, Doctor McCoy: I’ll pass on that drink.” He sets his glass on the table and offers an apologetic glance to his friend. “It’s nine o’clock. Command protocol... you know.”

“Yeah.” Bones twitches his eyebrows, purses his lips. “I’ll see you on the bridge tomorrow, I guess.”

Kirk glances out across the dancefloor, where bodies writhe in Dionysian delight. “I’d imagine you’ll have your work cut out in sickbay tomorrow,” he says.

“Not if they know what’s good for them,” says Bones darkly. “I feed you enough bourbon, or you goin’ back to work?”

Kirk smiles. “I’m not sure I’m going to answer that, Doctor,” he says. A beat, and then he reaches out, closes his hand around Bones’ shoulder and grips briefly. “Goodnight, Bones,” he says.

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He doesn’t go straight back to his quarters. Out of the cloying heat and noise of the Rec Room bacchanalia, the prospect of chilly seclusion rapidly loses its appeal, and so he lets his feet take him where they will, which turns out to be the observation deck. Quiet but not silent; empty but not deserted; solitude in the company of the stars. It’s what he needs.

Residual anger trickles in his gut, unsettling his meditative contemplation, and he shifts

uncomfortably. It's not that Bones doesn't understand, it's that he understands too well sometimes. Sometimes he understands but he doesn't *know*, and that's when he's hardest to deal with. The weeks after Vulcan, he watched the Captain like he was an unexploded bomb, like he wasn't quite sure what would happen if he stopped watching. Like it was a little too convenient that they were plunged headlong into a long and difficult period of negotiations with the Vulcan High Command and the Veleth Hai and the Federal Bureau of Expansion; that Admiral Komack took it upon himself to personally hyperventilate them through the two inglorious weeks of conferences and diplomacy and mediations that formed an unofficial rite of passage into the Ilion system; that there was literally not a minute of his day or night for that entire fortnight that didn't belong to Starfleet HQ. And then there was the incident with the *Farragut*, and the Sextus mission, and the diplomatic crisis on J'Skuut, and if he found time to eat two meals a day he counted himself lucky; if he slept more than three hours together, it was practically a vacation. And the ship doesn't stop because there aren't enough hours in the day; the mundane doesn't just go away when life gets exciting. There are reports to write and requisitions to sign off and an ocean of bureaucracy to navigate, and they're there whether you're hanging in a dust cloud watching stars congeal or rattling through the void at Warp 9 with a Klingon armada on your tail. So, no, there was not time to fulfill Doctor McCoy's requisite three hours per week of down time and shooting the breeze, nor was there time to reassure him that whatever he thought he saw in the transporter room that day was just some stuff, some things that needed to be worked out, and weren't going to *be* worked out if certain members of the medical team insisted on interfering. So, yes, he's tired. He's tired of it all right now.

He folds his hands behind his back, peering out into the silent expanse of blackness. *You remember what I said to you on Federation Day?* said Bones, and of course Kirk remembers; he remembers the conversation practically verbatim, and he remembers the glacial discord that followed it too. Federation Day is bigger than Christmas on a 'Fleet starship; it's bigger than Thanksgiving or Diwali or Kwanzaa, because it's the common denominator. It's the one thing everyone has in common. Back home, people send cards and maybe have a couple of drinks, start an argument about Federal jurisdiction and planetary sovereignty, fly a couple of flags if the mood takes them, but in deep space it's all about remembering why you're here. And so he's tended to encourage the crew to celebrate it, to turn a blind eye to some of the ways in which they choose to do so, to authorize shore leave whenever he can, to double up his shifts so that the junior officers don't have to pull bridge duty when there's fraternizing to be done. This year, there was a kind of desperation to the festivity, a restlessness that disturbed him and tugged a hole in his chest right where it hurt, and he was glad of the extra workload, glad of the ubiquity of paperwork and the necessity of command distance. He stood on the bridge and watched the star streaks dance Warp 4 around his ship and wondered what his view would be this time next year; if the day would find him on another bridge or under sky. If he'd be alone.

Bones buzzed up to him as Beta shift was ending and he fought to keep the tension out of his voice, because he was sure it was some kind of medical reprimand, a reminder of the perils of sixteen-hour shifts. "Kirk here," he said, and it sounded clipped regardless, but maybe that was just fatigue.

"Easy, Captain," said Bones evenly, so maybe it wasn't just fatigue. "Got some interestin' news, is all, thought you might wanna swing by sickbay when you get off."

He was suspicious, of course, but the truth was, Bones had been at him for weeks to take a night off - to run laps at the gym, or get drunk and watch a game, or maybe just read a book that didn't have the word *Regulations* in the title - and it seemed like an easy fix: go and hear what he had to say, have a drink or two, then head back to his quarters and fall asleep face down and fully clothed on top of the sheets. So he made his way to the CMO's office as the Beta shift crowd dispersed to join in the festivities, offering Chapel a rueful smile as she rolled her eyes indulgently at a full complement of occupied biobeds, and buzzed for entry at Bones' door.

McCoy glanced up from a PADD and nodded at his spare chair. "Happen to notice if McKillen's stopped mutterin' yet?" he asked as Kirk lowered himself into the seat. "He was cussin' up a storm when he came in. Spock's got him down for a disciplinary when he sobers up."

Maybe this was always Bones' habit, randomly name-dropping the First Officer and glancing up at the Captain's face, and maybe it was just that Kirk was on his guard, but it had definitely insinuated itself firmly into their conversational patterns in recent weeks. Kirk said, placidly, "He was sleeping just now."

"Bout time," muttered Bones. "Man's got the constitution of a rock. Thought Chapel was gonna smother him with a pillow." He scribbled something on the PADD and pushed it to one side, standing up in the same fluid motion. "You look beat, Jim. You gonna have a drink, or you gonna fall asleep in that chair?"

Kirk smiled. "A drink will be fine, Bones." As the doctor crossed to the cabinet, he added, "What's on your mind?"

"You'll like this," said Bones cheerfully, pulling a bottle and a couple of glasses from the sideboard. He carried them over to the table, setting them in front of the Captain and unstopping the decanter. "Got a sub-space message today from our old friend Sorelan."

Bones' old friend, Kirk felt like pointing out. There was no time on the Ilion mission for companionable chats or heart-to-hearts, even if the Captain had been feeling particularly magnanimous towards the Vulcan race at the time. But he said, "I suppose he's back at the VSA by now."

"Got back last week," said Bones. "You know it's a holiday today on Vulcan? Not that you'd guess, the way the hobgoblin's been chewin' through paperwork all day."

"We're not *on* Vulcan," said Kirk levelly. "And I doubt the Professor messaged you just to tell you that."

“Nope,” said McCoy, settling into his chair and cradling a glass against his chest. With his spare hand, he nudged the other drink towards Kirk. “Thought we might like to hear ‘bout what happened with the Veleth Hai.” Kirk raised an eyebrow and leaned forward for his glass. “Not too successful, as it turns out. Turns *out*,” he said, warming to his story, “that what the first lot of Vulcans thought was their name, the way they kept on repeating it - *V’lth ha’ia, V’lth ha’ia* - oughtta’ve been translated as ‘get the hell off of our goddamn planet right now’.” He chuckled, sipped from his drink. “So we’re back to callin’ them the Ilionians, or somethin’. And they’re keepin’ their damn pergium.”

His grin was spread wide and expectant across his face, waiting for an answering smile, waiting for the Captain’s amusement to warm the frozen silence. Kirk forced out a hollow little laugh, nasal and inadequate, and shook his head.

“After all that,” he said bitterly. His shoulders felt suddenly heavy and he sat back in his chair, raising his glass to his lips and sucking in a draught of fiery Altarian brandy that seared a chemical heat over his tongue and down his throat. And then, glancing up at McCoy from hooded brows: “Is it appropriate for you to have that information, Bones?”

“Gonna be on the cortex in a couple days anyway,” said McCoy, with a defensive flare that marked the approach of dangerous territory. “Thought you might wanna know early. What you gonna do, court martial me for givin’ you the jump?”

Kirk’s head flicked up, startled. “Of course not!”

Bones eyes flashed fire. “Mood you been in lately, Jim, it’s kinda hard to tell.”

“The mood *I’ve* been in?” It was supposed to be a general question, an aggrieved rebuttal, but even as it left his mouth he realized that the emphasis had rearranged itself and changed the tone to something far too revealing. As the Doctor’s face softened into understanding, he tried a deflection. “We’ve been busy, Bones. That’s how it is sometimes, you know that.”

“Time was,” said Bones, “When you’d’ve asked for help. That’s what you’ve got a First Officer for.”

“We’re *all* busy,” said Kirk. The stare was relentless but he met it, raised an eyebrow in silent challenge.

Bones looked away first, casting his eyes apologetically downwards. “Hell, Jim,” he said slowly, “I wasn’t gonna say anything, figured it was your business. But the crew’s on edge, the ship’s on edge, and I wouldn’t be much of a doctor if I let it go. Wouldn’t be much of a *friend* if I let it go.”

“If anyone’s *on edge*, Bones, it’s because we’re overworked and approaching the end of the mission.”

“Yeah, and maybe that’s part of it too. But that ain’t all of it, Jim. It’s like steppin’ back in time four years every time I walk on the bridge, what with all the silence and the tension and no-one knowin’ where to look. So - you gonna tell me what’s goin’ on? Or am I gonna have to guess?”

A flash of dark eyes, turning away; hooded and unreachable... Kirk straightened in his chair, tightly-coiled and buzzing with cold fury. “I’ll thank you to leave my business alone.”

“I’ll do that.” Bones’ answering stare was unreadable. “Just as long as you don’t go makin’ it *my* business, Jim.”

Kirk snorted a humorless, abrasive puff of laughter and set his glass down heavily on the desk. Brandy splashed up the sides, pooling on the wooden surface below. “If I knew how to do that, Doctor McCoy, I’d have saved myself a world of trouble these past years.” He stood quickly, his chair scraping a fricative whine across the floor. “Now, if you’ll excuse me - I’m tired and I have work to do before I can turn in.”

But Bones was scrambling to his feet too, knuckling his hands on the desk in front of him. “Goddamn it, Jim, you’re one obstinate son-of-a-bitch when you put your mind to it!”

Kirk froze in the act of turning to leave. “You’re addressing your superior officer, Doctor!”

“So put me on report! Don’t change the fact that you’re so goddamned stubborn you’d rather make a martyr of yourself than admit you made a mistake! Maybe be a goddamned Human being for once!” He threw a hand up, waving towards the door. “So go back to your work, Jim. Do your penance, or hide behind the job, or whatever it is you’re doin’. And maybe it can be fixed and maybe it can’t, who knows? You’ll never know unless you try, that’s for damned sure.”

Kirk stared, his jaw set so tightly that his cheekbones ached. Finally, he sucked in his cheeks and said, thinly, “We’ll talk about this another time, Doctor.”

“Sure.” McCoy turned away. “Whatever you say, Jim.”

The Captain waited a moment, granite-shouldered and smoldering, and when Bones failed to turn back to the room or speak again, he pivoted on his heel and stalked out.

That was the last time they tried social drinks in the Doctor’s office.

You remember what I said to you on Federation Day? Only too well, but he’s not sure why Bones is bringing it up again now. Things get said, things get retracted. You get past them or you don’t, and if you don’t... you manage. You find your workaround, and you get on with the job. Things change, that’s just how life goes.

He turns from the stars and begins the trek back home.

~*~

The ship’s chronometer is cycling them down the last few minutes to midnight and his head is heavy with fatigue, dragging a wide yawn from his jaw as he darkens his living quarters and crosses to his bunk. He kicks off his boots and lowers himself onto the edge of his mattress, scrubbing a weary hand over his face in an effort to muster up the energy he needs to go to bed, and for a moment he just sits there, staring vacantly into space, wondering vaguely if he’ll remember how to sleep in a room that doesn’t constantly hum with motion. His eyes fix on the entrance to the head and a tiny prickle of sadness worries its way across his ribcage and into his throat. That’s when his cabin door buzzes.

It won’t be Bones. That leaves only one other person on the ship who’s likely to be banging on the Captain’s door at 0001 hours on Christmas morning, and he’s genuinely not sure he’s equipped to deal with this right now. For a long, mutinous moment he wonders if the world would really end if he just turned off the light and went to sleep - even a *Vulcan* is going to get the hint eventually - but that’s not how this works. Not even at midnight. *Especially* not at midnight.

He takes a deep breath and crosses his quarters, keeping the lights on low to make a point, and opens the door. “Mr. Spock,” he says, without surprise. “What can I do for you?”

Spock glances into the dimly-lit room and back to Kirk, who is still dressed from the party. He says, “Am I disturbing you, Captain?”

Kirk gives in. “Not at all. Come in.”

Nevertheless, there is a small hesitation before his First steps across the threshold, and a fractional flinch as the door swishes closed behind him. Kirk wonders abstractedly when they were last in his quarters, just the two of them, without Scotty or Bones or a host of departmental heads to legitimize the meeting. But he knows the answer to that question and abruptly dismisses it, crossing to stand in front of his desk as Spock makes his way to the center of the room, arms folded stiffly behind his back.

Kirk says, “What’s on your mind, Commander?”

“I have,” says Spock, and his hands disengage from their habitual clasp and swing awkwardly to his front, “A gift for you, Captain.” A beat. “As is consistent with your homeworld’s mid-winter celebrations.”

It’s a blunt, rectangular package, folded in a length of heavy brown cloth, and Kirk feels something twist in his gut as Spock extends it towards him. The Captain stares at the parcel for a second, then lifts his eyes to his First. Quietly, he says, “I haven’t got you anything, I’m afraid...”

“That is appropriate,” says Spock. “This is not a Vulcan festival.”

That’s never stopped them in the past, nor has the fact that Vulcans don’t typically exchange gifts as part of their traditional ceremonies, but Kirk says nothing. There’s an awkward little dance as he takes a step towards Spock and Spock takes a step towards him, then both cede passage to the other, and finally they settle on a graceless half-shuffle that meets at the mid-point between them. Spock fixes his eyes on the parcel as he presses it into Kirk’s hands, then secures his arms safely behind his back again and drops a restless gaze towards the floor while the Captain peels back the fabric to reveal the gift within.

It’s a picture, face down in his hands and shadowed in the half-light, but he recognizes it immediately as he turns the frame upwards. Paper and ink, perhaps, or charcoal; mounted against a dark hardwood that’s been lacquered to a high shine by hundreds of years of care, with a brass plaque inlaid into the frame inscribing a familiar name in curling calligraphy:

Kirk feels his throat constrict. He traces a hand over the chill glass of the front pane, as though his fingers can brush the ancient timbers of a ship long lost to posterity, and looks up into the inscrutable face of his First Officer. “Thank you,” he says softly.

“I regret that I was unable to source the replica that you and Doctor McCoy sought,” says Spock. His eyes do not waver from their rigid contemplation of the deck. “However, the merchant assured me that this would be an adequate substitute.”

“It’s...” says Kirk. He clears his throat. “...more than adequate, Spock. It’s perfect.” His gaze drops back to the safety of the picture and he says again, “Thank you.”

In his peripheral vision, he sees Spock nod once, then turn on his heel. There’s a moment where Kirk could speak, if his brain could fix on the right words, but it’s gone in half a second, and his First is already moving towards the door. As it slides open, he hesitates on the threshold and the moment is back, buzzing in the air like a high-pitched whine. And there’s tiny hesitation, almost imperceptible, as though Spock is also searching for what to say; as though there’s anything else *to* say. Then it’s past, and he simply says, quietly, “Goodnight, Jim.”

Kirk sucks in a breath, drags his eyes upwards. “Goodnight, Spock,” he says, but he’s already gone.

Chapter End Notes

K/S meta is relentlessly awesome and I don’t think I ever met one I didn’t like, but special mention has to go here to bigmamag’s [analysis of The Motion Picture novelization](#). It’s all kinds of magnificent and has been a major influence in terms of driving the character development in this chapter and those that follow.

The lines of Shakespeare are from *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act IV, Scene 2. (Favorite. Play. Ever.)

Chapter 16

Emotional attachment to other sentient beings is not logical, but, as a vestigial remnant of the evolutionarily advantageous herding instinct, it is inevitable - like the Human appendix or the Vulcan *harr-hinektra*: useful once, but now redundant. Emotional attachment to spaces and objects is unconscionable. *Home* is an exercise in the abstract: it is not a single, reifiable quantity. It denotes possession, not substance, not place. *Home* is a sentimental construct, designed to create an illusion of constancy in ill-adaptive minds. It describes a notion, not a physical, definable space. Shelter and security are necessary; *home* is not.

It is not logical to experience regret, sharp and visceral as a wire garotte, as he regards the room that has been his for almost a decade, stripped of what has made it familiar and rendered null, featureless. The sense of loss is absolutely without justification. Nevertheless, it's a relief to feel the door slide shut behind him as he leaves for the final time, as though he's cauterizing a wound. A violent flare of unrestrained emotion and then it's done, and this part of his life is behind him. He takes a moment in the silence of the corridor, where a dusky shadow on the opposite wall - almost imperceptible, but remarkably resistant to three years of the maintenance crew's most strenuous efforts - describes the passage and abrupt halt of a bowl of plomeek soup.

He straightens his dress tunic, brushes a fleck of lint from the hem, checks the polish of his boots. Swallows a lungful of plasticky, recycled air, and rolls his shoulders back. He's ready. And yet it takes him another 24.7 seconds before his legs animate sufficiently to lift his left foot into its first step along the corridor and away from the closed door behind him.

Spock is neither obtuse nor is he self-deluded, and he knows he is not as he was five years ago. Sometimes he compares the man he has become against the man he used to be and he can find virtually no points of continuity - it's as though that younger Spock simply ceased to be, and if he didn't know that it was a gentle, leisurely evolution, three quarters complete before he was aware it had started at all, then the end result might be more disturbing to his sense of himself. His younger self would not have spent 31 minutes and 14 seconds of his morning routine sitting cross-legged on the deck and committing to memory the frequency of the engine's hum as it skitters through the metal skeleton of the ship, he's sure of that. His younger self would not have been obliged to settle a spike of illogical fury at the thought of sleeping tonight in an unfamiliar bed in a room that is certain to be at least five degrees too cold. And his younger self would absolutely not have spent the last days of the mission ignoring the pervasive cloud of pre-emptive loneliness that hovers over every thought and every action. His younger self would have actively welcomed the prospect of solitude. He wonders if he'll be able to reclaim a measure of his earlier self-sufficiency now that he has the opportunity to practice the art of autonomy once again, and is obliged to suppress a sudden swell of anxiety at the unwelcome thought that collegiality might be similar to a one-way valve: the decision to embrace it may well be irreversible.

It happened so slowly that there was no opportunity to resist until long after the damage was done.

Like a micro-tear in the hull plating, trickling invisible lines of weakness that crumple only when pressure is applied to exactly the right point, so was the discovery that he'd changed. During the first, difficult weeks of Kirk's captaincy, it was challenge enough to make it through their shared shifts with his controls in place, and there was a period during which he seriously thought about transferring to another ship. The *Intrepid* had been actively courting him for some time, even after his promotion to First Officer on the *Enterprise*, and, if there had never been sufficient cause to consider the offer in the past, the substitution of Captain Kirk for Captain Pike was almost enough to change his mind. It wasn't that he felt any particular affection for Pike - more the fact that he was a knowable quantity: thoughtful, reserved, and self-contained. Whether the comfortable distance between them was out of courtesy or preference was hardly important: what mattered was the work and the intellectual challenge, and there was satisfaction to be found in the knowledge that his abilities were recognized and his difference was less important than his proven competence. And then Kirk exploded onto the ship with that particular arrogance that is the unconscious by-product of aesthetically-pleasing features, innate charm, and an incisive mind, and Spock's repulsion was more than just instinct, it was self-preservation. One thing Spock has learned in this gradual segue between selves is that there is practically no corner of the psyche that is safe from the solicitous ministrations of James T Kirk. It seems strange now to think that there was a time when this idea was intolerable.

He halts outside the turbolift and lengthens his slackening spine, sucks in a breath. He is quietly gathering his thoughts when sudden footsteps to his right twist his head in the direction of the sound, and it's half a second before his brain registers a voice, *sotto voce* and struggling to restrain its frustration. It's another split second before recognition prickles an acid-wash of adrenaline through his chest.

"I *know* that, Bones!" hisses Kirk, in the tone that Spock has privately cataloged as *Dealing With McCoy (Vexatious)*. "But it's not that -"

The abrupt catch at the end of the sentence, as of a breath sharply drawn and aborted midway, tells Spock, who has turned his gaze deckwards and fixed on a patch of fraying carpet, that not only has he been seen, but that his presence is an unpleasant surprise. However, interpersonal protocol demands he look up, and - probably - pretend he hasn't heard.

"Doctor," says Spock. And then, "...Captain."

McCoy, predictably, recovers first. "Damn it, man!" he sputters. "What d'you think you're doin', sneakin' up on people like that?"

There is no answer to that, so Spock raises an eyebrow and folds his hands behind his back. Kirk forces a smile.

“Ignore him, Spock,” he says, but something in his eyes doesn’t match his tone, and they certainly don’t match his expression. “He’s just cranky because *he’s* going to be on the other end of a Starfleet medical tomorrow.” There is a pause, two seconds too long to be comfortable. “Are you on your way back to the bridge?”

It is seven forty-eight pm. They are due to dock in a little under three hours. There is certainly nowhere else on the ship that Spock is likely to be headed. He says, “Yes, Captain.”

“Good,” says Kirk. He opens his mouth, takes a breath, closes it again. A beat. “Good,” he says again.

In his peripheral vision, McCoy rolls his eyes and rocks on his heels.

“Captain,” says Spock.

A gentle *whoosh* announces the arrival of the turbolift, and the doors disgorge a soft puff of warm air, dancing with the scent of the ship. Spock stands back to let the Captain and the CMO enter, then steps inside and pivots on his heel to face the doors as they slide shut in front of him. Behind him, Kirk gently clears his throat, but Spock does not turn around.

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The Captain strides onto the bridge at a purposeful clip, a study in focused dispassion that, once upon a time, would have fooled Spock completely. As his First hesitates on the upper tier, Kirk crosses to the command chair, where Lieutenant Palmer is waiting with a handover brief and a carefully blank expression, and Spock watches him shrug off the blanket of melancholy that hangs over the assembled company - the reverent hush of the newly-bereaved - with his trademark hundred-watt grin. It eases something in the air, loosens some metaphorical pressure valve, and hesitant smiles begin to dot the crowd: reticent and conflicted, but washed with the warmth of homecoming. McCoy slides into place beside Spock, and he can feel the Doctor’s eyes on the side of his head even as he keeps his own facing resolutely forwards; he can feel their relentless scrutiny, as though he’s being weighed and measured. And then there is a gentle sigh, and Spock knows: he’s not the only person who read the flash of quiet desolation beneath the Captain’s flawless veneer.

“Yup,” says McCoy softly, and there’s no response to that.

Kirk glances sharply up towards them, like a hound that's caught a scent, and he raises his eyebrows in an unspoken question. McCoy offers an expansive shrug and there's a moment when it looks as though the Captain will press the issue; certainly, his eyes don't leave the Doctor's as he says, curtly, "Mr. Spock, are you joining us?"

Spock inclines his head and casts a wistful glance towards the science console, where Afaeaki is engaged in routine scanner measurements - the sort of thing that needs to be done and doesn't need to be done by the First Officer, and which effectively precludes his station as a point of refuge. With an air of resignation, he peels away from the turbolift and crosses to the Captain's chair, where he folds his hands behind his back and fixes his stare on the viewscreen.

"Dropping out of warp, sir," says Sulu from the helm.

"Jupiter station hailing, sir," adds Uhura quietly.

"Very good, Lieutenant," says Kirk briskly, and if there is the slightest hesitation before he speaks, he covers it seamlessly. "Transfer navigational co-ordinates and cross-reference. Mr. Sulu, three quarter impulse. Bring her in slowly. Let's not get her scratched up before we have to hand over the keys."

"Yes, sir," says Sulu with a wide grin, and Spock cannot help but wonder how anyone fails to hear the fracture beneath the Captain's easy words.

Kirk leans back in his chair and slings an elbow up on the arm rest. "Lieutenant Uhura, get me a shipwide frequency," he says, and Spock glances back towards McCoy, whose brow has furrowed and whose eyes are hooded.

"Frequency open," says Uhura.

There's a hesitation, and for a moment Spock wonders if he has changed his mind, but no: that's not the sort of man that James Kirk is.

"This is the Captain speaking," he says lightly - same insouciant charm, same warm, smooth tones. "Ladies and gentlemen, we've just passed Jupiter. We're almost home. In a little over three hours, we'll dock at Starfleet Orbital Headquarters and begin our disembarkation procedures. We'll all be sleeping under the Terran sky tonight." He pauses, ostensibly to gather his thoughts, but the break is too long, too sharp, too painful. Spock's hands coil around themselves, fingers tightening their

grip. Kirk says, “These past five years have been the proudest of all my years in Starfleet. Together, we have pushed back against the limits of Human knowledge. We have contacted new civilizations across the galaxy. We have watched history being made before our very eyes. It has been my honor and my privilege to serve with this fine and dedicated crew. No Captain ever commanded finer. Bonds of friendship have been forged aboard this ship that no span of distance or time can break.” He stops, glances down at the floor, then decisively back up again. “Let us take a moment to remember our friends and colleagues who gave their lives in search of knowledge and peace.”

Kirk’s gaze is steady, fixed on the viewscreen ahead, where Sol is an effervescent bubble of light in the middle of a sea of blackness, haphazardly pockmarked by the faded background glow of her distant sisters. In the heavy, cloying silence, McCoy steps quietly forward to stand on the other side of the command chair. Spock registers his presence in his peripheral vision, but does not glance sideways.

Kirk says, softly, “We will honor their memories by upholding the values that they lived for. These coming weeks will see us go our separate ways - some of us will transfer to new commands; some of us will be moving through the ranks to well-deserved promotions. Some of us will scatter across the galaxy and some of us will be setting down roots in our home soils. No matter what the future holds, it’s built upon our collective past, and I’m proud to have spent these years with the best crew in Starfleet. Thank you all. Kirk out.”

There is a moment of silence. At the navigation console, Chekov turns his head back towards the Captain and opens his mouth, drawing an uncertain breath, but Kirk cuts him off.

“Steady as she goes, Mr. Chekov,” he says quietly, and Chekov nods.

“Aye, sir,” he says.

~*~

The black miles slide past, like bolts of oiled satin. Spock is reminded of the journeys of his childhood, of the vertiginous list of the cabin as the engines clambered down the octaves to impulse and the sudden flare of delight behind his mother’s eyes; of hours spent by her side on the observation deck, watching in silent contemplation as her homeworld inched closer. He’s seen a similar reverence light the Captain’s face a hundred times before and mistaken it for the thrill of discovery - that powerful thirst for knowledge that drives him like a second heartbeat - and what Spock has never realized before now is that it’s actually driven by the very same longing he remembers in Amanda’s eyes. For Kirk, the journey *is* home. It’s where he belongs. The planet gliding into view in silvery grays and iridescent green - like the wings of a butterfly - is just a part of the fabric of what has made him; it has no hold on him anymore.

He wonders if anyone else has realized this.

The Captain is seated in his command chair, the central axis around which swirls a tidal pool of frenetic activity. Unobserved, Spock watches from behind the shelter of a well-placed PADD, watching the lines of his face as he scans a rapid-fire battery of reports, watching his eyes as he lifts them to greet another trickle of departmental heads as they filter in from the restless turbolift, watching the ready grin that fails to light him from within. On the viewscreen, the arid bulk of Luna has all but occluded the earthrise and, dotted around her louring, black outline, glimmer the pinprick floodlights of the orbital drydocks, *Enterprise's* cradle and her cage for the next eighteen months. Spock watches him quietly as Uhura clears her throat - a small noise, unobtrusive, but enough to wash a sudden silence over the sibilant rush of voices - and so he sees the sudden flash of grief slacken the Captain's features for half a second as she says, gently, "Captain, Centroplex is hailing us."

Kirk shoots a lightening glance towards the science console, too quickly for Spock to look away. Their eyes lock and Kirk's darken for a moment, fixing and holding his First for a second too long, and then the faintest of smiles tugs at the corner of his lips and he turns over his shoulder towards his Communications Officer. "Thank you, Lieutenant," he says. "Open a channel."

"Channel open, sir."

The Captain straightens in his chair, spine lengthening, body poised as though he's expecting a blow. "This is Captain Kirk of the *USS Enterprise*," he says: calmly, clearly. "Requesting permission to dock."

"*USS Enterprise*, this is Starfleet Orbital Headquarters," says a disembodied voice, and even at this distance, her smile lights up the air. "Permission granted. Welcome home, *Enterprise*."

At the helm, Sulu lets loose a joyful whoop, which prompts surprised laughter and an answering holler from Chekov, and suddenly the bridge is alive with applause and cheers and handshakes. "All right," says Kirk indulgently, but he's barely audible over the jubilation. "All right, everyone," he says again, louder. "Let's bring her safely into drydock before we break out the champagne." His eyes find Spock's again in the melee, and they linger for a moment before he slides them across to the viewscreen.

"Centroplex hailing again, sir," says Uhura. A beat, then: "It's Admiral Nogura, sir."

And it's only because Spock is watching already that he sees the Captain press his eyes shut for a second and breathe deeply before he speaks. "On screen, Lieutenant," says Kirk.

"Attention, all hands," snaps Spock, and the laughter abruptly dies as two dozen spines quickly straighten, two dozen sets of shoulders are squared, two dozen faces are wiped clean of all expression. The screen lights up.

"Kirk," says Nogura warmly. "Welcome home. We have quite the reception for you, I'm afraid."

The Captain laughs his easy laugh. "Thank you, sir," he says. "I suspected as much."

The Head of Starfleet Command has never beamed a personal greeting into the bridge of any returning starship on which Spock has previously served, but, then again, he's never previously served on any mission quite like this.

"Nothing gets past you, Kirk," says Nogura with a wide smile. His age is difficult to guess, but Spock knows he is grandfather at least - possibly a great-grandfather - and his air of paternal camaraderie is something that Spock does not entirely trust. "I thought I'd get in ahead of the rabble." He glances to his left, where a familiar face is glaring in the general direction of the bridge. "You know Admiral Komack, of course." A nod towards the figures on either side of the Admiral. "And Vice-Admiral Fitzpatrick. And I believe you've met Vice-Admiral Ciana - you'll be attached to her office during *Enterprise's* refit. I don't think you've been introduced to Admiral Bernstein - she was serving on Antares until six weeks ago. We'll be joining you for the press conference this afternoon."

"Ah," says Kirk, with remarkable calm. "There's going to be a press conference."

Nogura smiles, all fatherly charm. "It won't take long. An hour or so, no more. We'll be expecting Commander Spock as well."

Spock raises an eyebrow as Kirk flashes a glance in his direction, but aborts the gesture before it meets his eyes. "Sir, if you'll forgive me, I think it would be better..."

"I understand, Kirk, but we've got an opportunity and I don't intend to waste it." Nogura's eyes narrow and for a moment the politician creeps out from behind the mask. He says, "You heard about the attack on Ajilon Prime last month? There was another on Archanis IV two days ago.

We're a little short on good publicity at the moment, Kirk."

"We've limited the numbers to the major broadcasters only," says Ciana smoothly. Annoyance flashes behind Nogura's eyes for an unguarded second before he schools his features back to *genial old man*. She gives no sign of having noticed. "Fleet business only; no personal questions. I've worked with most of them before - they know how far they can push it."

A smile slides across the Captain's face. He says, "I appreciate that, ma'am."

Ciana answers with a smile of her own, and its effect is transformative. She is, by Human standards, extremely attractive: petite and blonde-haired, fine-boned, with bright, intelligent eyes, but when she smiles, it's as though a light goes on beneath her skin, bathing her in a warm, sunshine glow. It is, Spock realizes suddenly, exactly the same smile as Kirk's.

"Excellent," says Nogura now, and his own affable grin skulks in the shadows like a minor satellite. "I don't need to tell you how important this mission has been for Starfleet - scientifically *and* politically. You've done us proud, Commodore."

The Captain's expression flash-freezes. He covers it quickly. "I wasn't aware that had been ratified yet, sir."

"Formalities." Nogura waves an airy hand. "The kind of public adulation you've got right now, Kirk, I wouldn't be surprised if the admiralty tried to give you *my* job. Ahahaha."

"Ahahaha," echoes Kirk, and is very nearly convincing. "I'm honored, sir."

A dull *thung* rattles the ship's hull and scatters itself across the skeletal network of decks and bulkheads as the vast arms of Spacedock 17 reach out and fix *Enterprise* in their grasp, and an illogical wisp of sadness ghosts through Spock's belly because they have docked now, and he didn't get to watch the final moments of their journey play out against the black canvass of space.

Nogura says, "The honor's ours, Kirk. I'll see you on the other side, eh?" And he rolls his eyes and laughs.

"Yes, sir," says Kirk.

Nogura nods once, and the screen blanks. Kirk stares at it for a moment in silence, his face blank, his eyes unreadable. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he says. “We’re home.”

~*~

Disembarkation follows ancient Terran naval protocol. Lieutenant Friedrikson won First Kiss, so she’s first to board the fleet of transport shuttles that swoop in from the syrupy blackness like a flock of silver birds, spiriting the crew from the belly of the ship in excitable fifties until only the senior command remains. Kirk stands in the center of his bridge, hands clasped behind his back and an amiable smile on his face as Uhura confirms the exodus with Starfleet HQ and the Captain gives the order that empties his ship. They depart formally - straight-backed salutes and handshakes, even the Doctor - and Kirk receives it as it’s offered, but, as they’re turning to leave for the transporter room, he says, “Take good care of her, Scotty.”

Uhura’s eyes mist abruptly, as do - Spock would swear - McCoy’s. Scotty nods solemnly and says, “Aye, sir.”

“Thank you,” says Kirk. “All of you.” He stops, clears his throat. “Drinks are on me, once the circus leaves town.”

“Huh,” says McCoy but his eyeroll lacks its customary choler. “That’ll be the day.”

“Thank you, sir,” says Uhura softly.

Sulu nods. “Thank you, sir,” he says.

“Thank you, sir,” says Chekov.

“Aye,” says Scotty. “Thank you, Captain.”

McCoy clears his throat and offers a final, gruff *thanks*. “See you planetside, Captain,” he adds. “Don’t leave it too long - ‘fore the admiralty gets wind of that bottle of Romulan Ale you never saw in my liquor cabinet.” He glances up. “Spock, you didn’t hear that.”

Spock raises an eyebrow and the Captain laughs, McCoy grouses, Scotty looks askance, Uhura smiles... and for a second, time seems to freeze-frame, capturing a moment like so many others. And then a soft *whoosh hiss* announces the turbolift's arrival, and they file inside, and McCoy raises a hand in farewell as the door closes. And suddenly the bridge is empty but for the Captain and his First, and there's nothing but the ponderous silence of a space that used to be full of noise.

After a moment Kirk glances up, raises his eyebrows and forces his mouth into a tight smile. He paces to the command chair and stands behind it, hands rested on the back of the seat, gripping a little too hard.

"Well," he says.

It will take perhaps two minutes for the senior crew to reach the transporter room, perhaps another two or three for the observation of final protocols. Then they will beam down in reverse order of rank - perhaps ninety seconds apiece, with perhaps another twenty between individuals for calibration and buffering... with no allowances for contingency, there are ten minutes to pass on the bridge before they get their final orders to disembark. Spock is suddenly, acutely aware of the absence of *anything* else to do.

He takes a deep breath, realizes midway that he can't think of anything to say, and settles for, "Captain."

Kirk's eyes are fixed on the viewscreen, staring out into the black expanse beyond Spacedock, lost in thought. There is a long, uncomfortable pause. "So..." he says presently. "You'll be staying in the Residences?"

"Yes," says Spock. The word disappears into the sucking silence, and he's aware that something else is required, but he cannot work out what it might be. In desperation, he tries, "And you?"

"Hmm? Oh. Yes," says Kirk vaguely. "I thought... It's only for eighteen months. The Residences will be comfortable enough."

The seconds lumber past as Spock searches the limits of his experience for a possible rejoinder. "Indeed," he says at last.

"They've put me in the Flag Officers' quarters," says Kirk suddenly. "I think..." He hesitates, then

waves a hand to dismiss the thought. The blanket of hush, disturbed by the sudden activity, resettles. “Never mind. It just seems... a little premature.”

Spock can feel the Captain’s restless energy from across the bridge; it’s the only evidence that time continues to move forward. Abruptly, Kirk breaks away from the command chair and wanders across the bridge in the direction of the engineering console. Spock watches him ascend the steps to the upper tier - slowly, as though he’s committing his progress to memory - and run a hand across the lifeless displays. “You’ll be in the Commissioned Officers’ quarters?” he says absently.

There’s something deeply disturbing about his manufactured composure. Spock says, “Yes, Captain,” and would elaborate if he could only work out how.

“We should...” says Kirk, and trails off. He tries again. “Who knows how long this will take? Perhaps we could get some dinner later. Perhaps... if it doesn’t go on too long.”

Spock opens his mouth to point out that it is already almost midnight, ship’s time, and that by the time the press conference is finished they will certainly be better advised to return immediately to their quarters and attempt to acclimatize themselves to Pacific Standard Time, but a tiny prickle of exasperated chagrin jabs a metaphorical finger into his windpipe before the words can form. Instead, he says, “That would be agreeable.”

Kirk glances up, and the naked surprise written into his expression makes it clear that he was expecting a refusal. “Oh?” he says. “Oh. Good. Well - maybe we could meet in the Presidio mess? If you’re not... if the conference isn’t too taxing.”

“That would be a sensible choice of venue.”

“Or,” says Kirk, as though his First hasn’t spoken, “Didn’t you mention a Vulcan restaurant in Fisherman’s Wharf? I seem to remember...”

“...I believe so...”

“...Yes, we were talking about the Academy, once, I’m sure, and I remember you said...”

The words trail into silence. Kirk clears his throat again.

He says, "Well. Depending on how long this takes, of course."

"Of course," says Spock.

"We're both likely to be tired."

"Ship's time is seven hours ahead of San Francisco," agrees Spock.

Kirk huffs a humorless laugh. "No doubt the admiralty will forget that."

"It may be less important than their other considerations."

Another little laugh, edging close to bitterness. "That's often the way." He turns on his heel and paces the length of the upper tier, stopping by the viewscreen, where he pivots on his heel so that he's facing his bridge. "Let's see how it goes," he says quietly.

"Yes, Captain," says Spock.

Abruptly, he turns again, spinning 180 degrees so that he's facing the stars. Spock sees his shoulders rise with an intake of breath, as though he's about to speak, and at that moment the Captain's communicator chirps. The shoulders sag again. In rear profile, Spock watches him lift a hand to his belt, unhook the device, flip it open. "Kirk here," he says.

"Captain Kirk, this is Vice Admiral Fitzpatrick," says a familiar voice. "Final disembarkation orders are given. You may leave the ship."

There's a beat, a second too long. Then Kirk says, "Acknowledged, sir. Kirk out," and snaps his communicator shut.

He folds his hands behind his back but makes no immediate effort to move. Spock hesitates by the science console as his Captain stands with his back to the bridge, gazing out at the tapestry of starlight dancing in the inky depths. There is something he ought to say, he's certain of it, but the

words will not come. And then Kirk gives a little sigh and turns, and his face is blank, composed, like a man going into battle. He says, "I've been meaning to ask, Mr. Spock - your new orders arrived last night."

Spock blinks. "Yes, Captain," he says.

"I didn't..." says Kirk. "I suppose... I could have asked, but I thought... I know you value your privacy."

It takes Spock a moment to hear the question buried beneath the pleasantries and only then does he see the darkness in the hazel eyes. He says, "A teaching assignment at the Academy." A beat. "In San Francisco."

"Ah." The expression does not change, though it's too rigid to be natural. And the eyes are quickly dropped. "So you'll be staying on Earth."

"Yes, Captain," says Spock again.

There is a long silence in which Kirk stares fixedly at a point in the far wall above the waiting turbolift. Spock centers himself so that he doesn't have to hear the unspoken words that hover between them.

Kirk says, without looking up, "Good. That's... good." A beat. "I imagine you'll make an excellent teacher, Mr. Spock."

"I undertook a number of teaching assignments upon graduation," says Spock.

"Of course. Yes," says Kirk. Abruptly, he looks up and his face is schooled into a careful, hollow-eyed smile. "Well. Let's get this over with."

Before Spock can answer, the Captain breaks from his station and crosses the bridge at an efficient, businesslike clip. But his hand reaches out for the command chair as he passes, and he gives it one final grip.

~*~

It is after 2100 hours PST when Spock finally presses his palm to the scanner beside the door to his new lodgings, which makes it the early hours of the morning in his current diurnal cycle. There is no longer anything to be gained in attempting a period of sleep, and he plans to rifle unceremoniously through his luggage for a firepot and a meditation mat and spend the rest of the night mending his shattered equilibrium. This is likely to take several hours.

Spock has never previously attended a *press conference*. It seems to him to be a uniquely Human affair. He was alarmed, therefore, to discover that the maelstrom that welcomed them off the *Enterprise*, all flashing lights and walls of shouted questions, was only a prelude to the main event.

He allows himself a moment to wonder if the Captain has returned to his quarters yet, and the habit of five years prickles a little thrill of unease at the likelihood that he has not. Spock has witnessed James Kirk, in the heat of chaos, pull unfathomable reserves of energy out of some indefatigable store that defies the limits of Human physiology, but this is not a battle; no lives are at stake, and, in the final analysis, he suspects that the Captain finds the entire exercise more than a little frivolous. He has never been a man for holocams and vacuous smiles, and the crowds rushed him almost before they'd finished rematerializing in the executive transporter room, shouting his name and clamoring for soundbites. The Captain is a diplomat, but this was not diplomacy; this was something else, something Spock is not certain he's able to name.

He is tired. More than that, he is disturbed and transplanted, and each state of mind feeds into the other.

Thank you, Commander, that's all we need from you, she said, and reached for the Captain's arm as though she's known him for many years. Perhaps she has. *I believe you've met Vice Admiral Ciana*, said Nogura on the bridge. It feels like another life, one that is fast receding into the middle distance, insubstantial as a whisper in a dark room.

Thank you, Commander, that's all we need from you. An abrupt dismissal; sudden closure, like a slamming door. An aide swooped in with an unctuous smile and a manifest disregard for Vulcan courtesies: *Commander Spock, if you'll follow me, I'll arrange a transport to your quarters - you must be tired after your day...* With a hand on his elbow, only inches separating their bodies, and Spock was obliged to step smartly out of the young man's personal space and answer that he would find his own way, thank you.

The weight of the *asenoï* brings it easily to hand, nestled into a corner of his trunk and wedged in place with a selection of heavy books. Three of them, he notes with a lurch of distress, were gifts from Kirk: *Moby Dick*, translated into Vulcan; a collection essays on warp core dynamics; and a biography of Brahms, purchased as an in-joke several weeks after Holberg 917G, with an inscription in the Captain's even, copperplate handwriting designed to dispel any lingering doubts his First might entertain about Kirk's continuing emotional health - *Because we know better, don't we? With thanks for everything, JTK*. Spock sets them carefully to one side and lights the firepot while he resumes his search for his mat.

Contrite smiles, endless offers of coffee, tea, fresh juice, water. Fewer than sixty-three percent of them knew better than to reach for his hand during introductions, and, in the end, he simply linked his fingers behind his back and nodded his greetings until whoever was on the other end of the extended arm got the message and withdrew. There were no apologies. No-one offered the *ta'al*.

Nogura stayed for the handshakes and the speeches. Later, there were Fitzpatrick and Bernstein and Ciana, and an endless swarm of acolytes, hovering on the edges of the room, ready to be summoned with a wave. *I'm very much looking forward to the opportunity to work with Captain Kirk*, said Admiral Ciana. *He'll be an invaluable addition to our department*. A self-deprecating eyeroll over the heads of two reporters from somewhere on Luna while they were busily scrolling through their PADDs during a conversational lull, and there was that sunshine smile again, flashed haphazardly as though she was unaware of its effect. *Enjoy it while you can, Captain*, she said quietly - at least she didn't call him *Commodore*. *This is the most excitement we're likely to see in Operations this side of a Klingon invasion*.

And the Captain laughed politely: *I'm very glad to hear it, ma'am. I believe I've seen enough excitement for two lifetimes*.

Ha! You'll have to tell me about it some time.

I'd be glad to. But I'm not much of a storyteller.

Somehow, I doubt that...

The meditation mat has insinuated itself somewhere beyond the reach of questing Vulcan fingers and he's too tired to spend any more time searching. Spock almost makes a mental note to speak to whomever packed his luggage, before he remembers that, whoever it was, they've scattered between the cracks of this sprawling city, and they're under someone else's command by now. The floor is wood-effect boards, covered with a thin, utilitarian rug emblazoned with the Starfleet crest, and it will suffice for his current needs. He lowers himself onto the unyielding surface, feeling every nerve protest, and crosses his legs before him, resting his hands lightly on his knees and breathing deeply of unfamiliar air.

Home is an exercise in the abstract: it is not a single, reifiable quantity. It denotes possession, not substance, not place. *Home* is a sentimental construct, designed to create an illusion of constancy in ill-adaptive minds. *Home* is where he can find shelter; it matters not at all which stars prick the sky beyond his window, or that the room is five degrees too cold, or that it fails to vibrate a tinny hum on the very edge of hearing.

It is certainly not logical to hate a room for the fact that it is not on a starship, or because its bathroom has only a single door.

Chapter 17

Chapter 16

Kirk is inside his new quarters for all of 45 seconds before he decides to take the admiralty up on their offer of pre-assignment leave.

It's well after midnight. San Francisco's January air is heavy in his chest, thick with the scent of moisture, and cold in the way that seeps through Human skin and settles into the bones beneath. His head is muzzy with lack of sleep and Starfleet-issue bourbon, and his face aches from hours of relentless smiling. His legs are leaden and sluggish, as though he's walking through soup, and he slumps against his door as it slides shut behind him, closing his eyes before they have time to take in the contours of his living space, bathed in the chilly white moonlight of a clear winter's night.

Kirk toes off his boots and kicks them across his unfamiliar carpet. They skitter off into the shadowy depths and fail to strike an opposite wall; fail to connect with any other solid object, in fact, in a way that describes the dimensions of the room all too clearly in relation to, say, the stateroom of a Constitution-class starship. This is when he realizes he's not getting any sleep tonight.

He turned his back for 30 seconds, to answer a question from Admiral Fitzpatrick, and then 30 seconds became two minutes, became five, became ten, and when he turned around again, Spock was gone. Ciana was apologetic: *I guess he just seemed really uncomfortable. Seemed kind of insensitive to keep him here. It's you they want, anyway, Captain.* And he had to smile and make some self-deprecating comment, the kind of fawning politesse that he abhors, and she laughed and rolled her eyes, and he'd swear she was just a little bit disappointed that he thought she'd be impressed by 'Fleet diplomacy. And Spock was still gone, to God knows where, and they didn't even say goodbye.

Five years of friendship, and they didn't even say goodbye. He's not sure where that leaves them. He's not actually sure he wants to know.

His overnight bag is untouched and sitting on his unfamiliar bed. Kirk grabs it and slings it over his shoulder, retrieves his discarded boots, and walks straight back out the door.

~*~

Iowa is the obvious choice, and he dismisses it immediately. He doesn't want *home*. *Home* is a reminder that he's tethered to this soil, and the thought of it tightens his chest and constricts his throat, as though the past has thrown a thick blanket over him that cuts out the light and the air. In his mind's eye, the undulating oceans of featureless prairie telescope into infinity and he feels himself being sucked into the loamy farmlands, pinned to the cornfields and staring impotently up into the endless night sky. So instead he buys a ticket on the red-eye to Boise, jamming himself into a corner of the airtram behind an elderly woman who smells of peppermints and rosewater, and a young, bucolic couple with a sleeping toddler drooling a dark, damp patch on the woman's shoulder. Kirk pillows his arm against the window, pulling his overcoat tightly around his dress golds to shield them from curious eyes, and manages to snatch forty-five minutes of fractured sleep.

It's still dark when the tram's sudden descent shocks him out of a twilight daze halfway between oblivion and drowsy wakefulness, and he blunders into consciousness with a sickly lurch. The moon always seems three times bigger in the Idaho sky, and it casts a milky shimmer over the thick winter snows that cover the Rockies. Like a tumbling waterfall of white, they drift down the mountains and over the city itself, hanging in the trees and on the rooftops and, this early in the day, in pristine sheaths on the sidewalks, glowing pools of orangey-yellow beneath the streetlamps.

The frigid air hits him like a wall of ice as the doors hiss open, and Kirk suddenly realizes that he's scarcely dressed for a Californian mid-winter, let alone the glacial grip of Idaho in January. He burrows into his coat as the frozen wind sneaks through his cuffs and his collar, and crosses the concourse to the soundproof booths, where he flips open his communicator with fingers that have turned a worrying shade of lilac.

It's 0230 hours on a Thursday morning. He's expecting an answering service, or at the very least a lack of response. So it's something of a shock when Admiral Ciana answers with a sleepy, "Yuh. Kirk. What can I do for you?"

He hesitates. "Admiral - my apologies. I was planning to leave a message."

"Well, you got me. What's on your mind, Captain?"

Now, *there's* a question she doesn't want an answer to. He says, "I... it seems a little foolish, now that I'm talking to you, ma'am. It could have waited until morning."

“I think you’ll find it *is* morning,” she says, and he can hear a smile trickling through the fatigue. “Don’t worry about it, Kirk. I was awake anyway. You might as well just spit it out.”

“I was just... It was a courtesy call, ma’am. To let you know I’ve taken the leave you offered. I’m in Idaho now.”

She laughs softly. “Didn’t waste much time, huh? Did we spook you that bad?”

“No, ma’am,” he answers automatically. But he can’t think how to finish the sentence in a way that doesn’t contradict himself, and doesn’t mention Spock.

There’s a pause, during which she’s clearly waiting for him to speak. Then she says, “I think that’s a good idea, Kirk. I do. This is... it’s gonna take some getting used to, I get that.” A beat. “You know, for what it’s worth, I really *am* looking forward to working with you. I’ll see you Monday morning, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Now, for God’s sake, go get some rest. You think I don’t know you’re running seven hours ahead of us? No - wait. Mountain Time, right? So you lost another hour. Sleep - that’s an order, Kirk.”

He grins. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t ‘yes, ma’am’ me with a tone that says you’re planning on ignoring me,” she says, but he can hear her answering smile.

“No, ma’am,” he says.

~*~

He rents a car from an all-night place he remembers from a trip he took with Sam during Spring Break his second year at the Academy, and sprawls on the tattered leatherette seats as it carries

him into the belly of the mountains. The sky above sparkles with the effervescent sheen of a frozen winter's night, and, as he glides out of the haze of city light, it's possible to pick out the relentless glint of industry in the dark vaults above: a beacon flash from the orbital dockyards, a silvery streak against the black depths, a sudden flare as distant metal catches the trailing starlight. Kirk trains his eyes earthwards and watches the play of shadows on snowy branches instead.

The farm was his uncle's, before he moved offworld, and, when he died, it passed to Kirk's father. Kirk remembers him only vaguely as an indistinct shock of brownish hair, an easy laugh, and a ready supply of the kind of candy that forever captures the hearts of small boys; in his mind's eye, his uncle has *become* the house he left them. It's more tangible than the man himself. When his parents are on Earth, they spend their weekends here, and, during their long absences, a woman comes up from the local village to air the place and to keep the pipes from freezing. So it's chilled but not derelict when he opens the door: the damp scent of snow fills the cavernous main room, but there's ashes from a recent fire in the grating, the drapes are drawn, and the environmental controls spring to life at a single, spoken command. They stutter once - it's the middle of nowhere, after all - but bounce back online, and Kirk can feel the air begin to defrost around him, tugging the perfume of warming wood from the walls.

He grabs a synthesized mug of coffee in the kitchen, and hoists his bag over one shoulder as he climbs the narrow staircase. The back of his eyes has begun to hum a keening, background ache that gouges little tendrils of pain when he glances to either side, and his muscles feel stringy and elastic with fatigue. Dawn comes late in the midwinter mountains and the sun is still buried behind the looming rocky crags; he ought to take his CO's advice and scrape a little downtime out of what's left of the night. The cloistered air of his bedroom has heated more quickly than the open, communal spaces below and it blasts a soporific lullaby as he opens the door to find the lights on low and a lavender-scented comforter, hand-stitched and fraying with age, cast across the wide bunk.

Kirk switches off his communicator, kicks off his boots, and climbs, fully-clothed, beneath the sheets.

~*~

He doesn't dream. At least, not that night.

Rather, his body plunges him into a syrupy black coma that freezes him in place until it has taken what it needs, and then it wakes him up with a grumbling stomach and an electric jolt of poorly-defined panic. Thin, white sunlight curls around the edges of the drapes - floral; he can't imagine whose choice they might have been in a family of men headed by a matriarch with decidedly unfloral leanings - and the bedclothes are barely disturbed around him. Kirk sits up, slowly, and the

creaking protest along every inch of muscle confirms his suspicion that he's scarcely moved in - he glances at the chronometer - eleven hours. *Eleven* hours? It's been a long time since he's had the opportunity to just sleep until he's done with sleeping. The angry ache beneath his ribs gives a violent twist.

He hasn't washed in over thirty-six hours; hasn't eaten in nearly twenty-four, aside from canapes fashioned from four parts air to one part cobweb, or ingredients of similar nutritional value. There's no food in the kitchen, but the synthesizer's programming is attuned to the Kirk family's collective palate and there's no CMO *here* to bellyache about red meats and saturated fats and cholesterol, so he orders up a stack of silver dollar pancakes with syrup, hash browns and bacon, and a pot of hot coffee to replace the frigid mug sitting untouched by his bedside. While the aged machine has a think about how to do that, and in what order these things ought to be produced, Kirk takes himself off to the shower and washes the memory of space out of his hair and off of his skin in a steady jet of steaming water that's just the right side of scalding.

There are things that need to be done. There is a protocol for returning home after a long period of absence, punctuated by brief, infrequent calls on the shaky subspace lines reserved for personal communications. The last time he saw his parents was in the medical examiner's office on Starbase 12, where they met the *Enterprise* to take custody of their grandson and the bodies of their eldest son and his wife; the last time he spoke to his mother was easily six months ago, maybe more. He's been gone for five years, but he hasn't disappeared from the historical record: there are friends with whom he ought to reconnect, places where he ought to show his face, familial expectations that must be met. The thought of these things sends a fresh wave of fatigue crashing through his endocrine system, and he buries it with coffee as he gazes idly out of the picture window and into the near horizon.

He's not prepared for the memories that assault him from every corner of his recollection, with every footstep and every glance and every unguarded moment. He ought to be safe from them here, and yet the Human brain is subtle and recondite, and it finds prompts in the least likely cues. The shade of refracted light off a crystal decanter sparks a thought-ricochet that spirals relentlessly into a quiet evening in his quarters between missions: Bones and Kirk and a bottle of decent brandy, and the warm rush of pleasure that follows Spock's unexpected arrival. The faintest trace of ozone on the sharp winter air and he's suddenly back in the bowels of the *Enterprise*, crawling through a Jeffries tube behind an agitated Scotsman and tailed by a Vulcan whose copious intellectual gifts incorporate a savant-like ability to calculate probabilities of success and failure, and absolutely no grasp whatsoever of when it's appropriate to communicate these things to his colleagues. Even the chatter of winter birdsong outside the windows throws him headlong into recollections of a dozen, two dozen planets where the air was similar, the plant life familiar, and the sunlight fell in the same spectrum - and yet subtly, exquisitely different, enough to keep the fires of discovery burning in his belly. His old life is everywhere, trailing him like a restless ghost. He wonders if this is how it's going to be, now.

So he throws himself into physical labor in an effort to settle the uneasy shadows in his mind. There is a small pile of wood by the fireplace and a larger stack under a tarpaulin in the woodshed, but winter is long in the Rockies, and one thing that will always be necessary is firewood. And

there's an instant, gratifying catharsis in swinging an ax and shattering pieces of trees: it's the kind of mindless, repetitive activity that shuts down exterior thought and allows him to exist only in this moment. Snow litters the ground around him, curling damp tendrils of cold through the soles of his Starfleet-issue boots and pooling a trailing seam of meltwater up the leg of his jeans, but he quickly works up enough of a sweat to throw off his jacket, then roll up his sleeves. Swing and *crack* - splinters of wood exploding as the ax falls, shattering the log as it strikes. Swing and *crack* - frustration riding a tidal wave of kinetic energy along his arms, discharging in a blaze of focused destruction. Swing and *crack* - a myriad poisonous little hurts erupting, fracturing, purging. Swing and *crack*. Swing and *crack*. Swing and *crack*.

When the early evening wraps fingers of nebulous gloom around the yard, Kirk tosses the ax to one side, grabs a handful of snow-scented, chilled kindling, and carries it indoors to the fireplace. His shoulders flare burning streaks of pain down his back and arms, and his hands are raw and scoured beneath his heavy gloves, but the dull weight of fatigue has settled into his skull, clouding out the turbulent buzz of disquiet. He scrapes the ashes from the grate and builds a stack of tinder and narrow shards of firewood, pinned in place with dry logs from the hearth, and leaves it to catch while he showers off the afternoon's exertions. When he pads back into the darkened room, it's bathed only in the warm yellow glow of the flickering firelight, shadows skulking on the edges of the den and dancing up the walls. He pours a drink from the liquor cabinet - Kirk's penchant for fine whiskies is his father's genetic legacy, and the decanters are always well-stocked - and carries it with him to the fireside without bothering to turn on the lights. This is one of the simple pleasures in life: to sit in front of a healthy blaze fashioned from one's own exertions, and for a moment he allows his eyes to unfocus as they settle on the coruscating flames.

Spock.

It ambushes him out of nowhere, startling but not unexpected. Not really. The knowledge that he's been waiting for the word to verbalize itself in the savage quiet is quickly followed by a perverse sort of relief, as though the struggle to contain it is more difficult, in the final analysis, than simply letting it happen. Unleashed, memories charge at him in a rush of words and voices: warm glances from the science console; the pleasure of an unexpected brush of long fingers against his arm; the glint of quiet triumph as his First moves his knight into the killing position against the Captain's king. He remembers pacing in Spock's quarters in the hours after they warped away from Neural, arguing with him about his decision to arm Tyree's people against the men of Apella's village and their Klingon weapons. Arguing *at* him, rather; Spock was still weak from his injuries and sat quietly at his desk, hands steepled in front of him, pretending he wasn't exhausted or exasperated, while Kirk raged out his ambivalence in restless movement and unfocused anger.

Jim, he said at last, is this an attempt to convince me? Or yourself?

This was long before The Sneeze, of course. Long before that hopeless hunger had burrowed into Kirk's gut and started the process of unravelling the rare and unanticipated intimacy between them. Long before a series of poor decisions led to precipitous actions that led to him turning over his shoulder into a sea of unfamiliar faces to scan for the one that mattered, and finding he'd left before

they could say goodbye.

Kirk is not a man to waste time on regrets. There is so much that he would have done differently, had he only had the foresight to understand where this would inexorably lead, but self-reproach is pointless now. What he remembers instead is that those quiet words, spoken softly but with that presence Spock has when something is important to him, softened the edges of Kirk's private register of remorse and moved them past the Captain's impotent anger at the way things sometimes are. And they segued into gentler things, reminiscences of Lieutenant Kirk's first sojourn amongst the hill people, and the winters there that reminded him of Idaho, a place that Spock had never visited.

I'll make you a deal, Commander, said Kirk, and grinned. *Keep me alive for the next three years, and I'll show you the Rockies when we get back to Earth.*

And of course Spock protested that he needed no vacationary incentive in order to perform his duty to the best of his ability, of *course* he did; it was part of the dance and part of the reason Kirk suggested it in the first place. It was an opening into that place they inhabited when the conversation flowed easily between them, and it was still a new place, and it hadn't lost any of the sheen of novelty or the visceral thrill of amazement.

Kirk wonders now if he meant what he said, and suspects that he did. It's easy to mean these things, though, when there's never much chance of the favor ever being called, but that's not it. Or not all of it, at least. Part of him wanted, even then, to bring his friend to this place, if only for the light that he gets in his eyes when he's trying to pretend that Vulcans don't waste time getting excited about aesthetic beauty. The Sneeze was when Kirk realized what he felt, but it must have been building even then.

The memory swims before his mind's eye in the flickering firelight; becomes a pale face beneath a trellis of roses under the milky light of T'Khut, becomes a sudden spike of electricity in the air, then and now. It becomes the taste of copper and spice, of cool flesh pressed up against Kirk's. Becomes fingers grabbing fistfuls of his hair and an urgent tongue twisting in his mouth, becomes an insistent hardness writhing against his own.

In the semi-darkness, Kirk reaches beneath his robe and curls one hand around himself, as images of Spock hover behind his closed eyes.

Chapter 18

Despite the admiralty's jocular warnings about the unpredictability of life in Operations and Tactical Command, core hours are weekdays, 0800 to 1800, and Kirk hasn't had a Monday-to-Friday job in... actually, he's *never* had a Monday-to-Friday job. Shift patterns have occasionally fallen that way, but never on purpose. It feels... wrong, as though he's trying to fit into someone else's clothes.

His new department is housed in the Bozeman Center, which curls in a lazy arc around the shores of Horseshoe Bay, under the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge. Mist curls from the iron-gray waters, frosting the restless waves and climbing up the gentle slopes, shimmering in the weak morning sun and tangling around the dress-uniformed legs of a Commodore-in-waiting who's been absent just long enough to get utterly lost in the grounds of HQ. His new assignment badge is unfamiliar on his chest and keeps catching his eye unexpectedly, distracting him as he searches for his bearings, and in the end he startles a couple of passing cadets by barking an unnecessarily terse request for directions to an office that turns out to be located fifteen feet from where he's standing.

Not the most auspicious of starts, but it could be worse. Half a dozen memories bubble unbidden to the surface, chased by a merciless, *Do you remember the time...?* and for a moment, it's as though Spock is standing beside him; he can almost *feel* him there, and the sentence finishes itself: *do you remember the time we made First Contact on Gliese 581g and we got lost in the ceremonial Hall of Tunnels because their welcoming party assumed we'd be able to see in the dark too?* And he can see the quirked eyebrow and the gradual softening of features that signifies great amusement, tightly reigned, and he can hear the loaded, expressive, *Indeed*, punctuating a pause just long enough to imply a thousand censored thoughts. And he can see himself turn into that emotionally ambiguous scrutiny, grin spread wide; he can feel his chest expand with the intake of breath that carries the opening salvo in a companionable war of words, that leads to the complicated semantic dance which summons that very specific rush of joy to his chest, and the warmth, and the contentment...

Kirk shakes his head once, briskly, and the image fragments, scattering on the persistent breeze. He clears his throat and bends into the retinal scanner.

Xenorelations is a sprawling suite of offices on the first floor of the complex, centered around a large central cubicle farm in which a series of floor-to-ceiling computer screens scroll constant streams of operational updates. It's barely 0745, but already the main room is alive with frenetic, noisy industry. Yeomen crisscross the floor carrying bundles of PADDs or speaking animatedly into communicators; comscreens buzz a squalling background chatter from all corners of the galaxy in a bewildering variety of dialects; newsholos blare from the distant corners of the room; enlisted officers and NCOs bark barely-intelligible commands into terminals; and in the center of it, in front of the leviathan screens and framed by an ethereal halo of electric light, stands Admiral Ciana, scanning a PADD with an expression of focused concentration, while three separate Lieutenant Commanders have conversations at her.

Even in the midst of complicated, destructive chaos, with Ensigns yelling status updates over a general calamitous rattle of panic and confusion, some corner of Kirk's mind that was apparently designed for this specific purpose keeps - *kept* - a tally of who's on his bridge. It's an instinct, a sense that tells him who is where, what skills they have, and how quickly they can be pressed into urgent duty wherever they're needed. It also tells him when someone else arrives, so that he can perform the complex command arithmetic that moves a newcomer to where they need to be, or, alternatively, so that he can draw his phaser and shoot before any of his crew get attacked. Ciana has at least four different centers of attention right now - and those are the ones that he can see - but when Kirk moves into the lobby and folds his hands behind his back, she glances up and nods, and holds up a hand to let him know that she'll be with him shortly. This is when he knows that he can work with her.

Xenanthropology is unquestionably a vital component of Starfleet diplomacy, says Spock's voice out of nowhere, spiking through his memories from a half-forgotten conversation that happened six weeks into Kirk's command, when each day was still a battle of psychological attrition. Without study, there can be no understanding, and without understanding, there can be no accord. A significant pause, during which the Captain considered the merits versus repercussions of attempting to strangle a Vulcan. It is, however, a particularly Human trait to consider everything that is not Human "alien".

It stung at the time, because he was right, he knew he was right, and he knew that Kirk knew it too. And quite apart from the fact that there is a very specific and pernicious kind of sickly fury associated with the knowledge that one's nemesis has achieved and currently holds the moral high-ground, it stung because it was indicative of the circumstances on board his ship, and it was not the way Kirk wanted things to be. *Enterprise* was a Federation starship staffed almost exclusively by one race, and their token nod towards galactic diversity was struggling to hold his own in the face of a tidal wave of antipathy at best, resentment at worst. So the First Officer didn't exactly make it easy to like him. So the Captain himself wasn't precisely the face of Human-Vulcan shipboard harmony in those early days. The fact was that nobody was bending over backwards to panic about the intercultural disconnect, nobody found it unworthy of a ship whose mission was the establishment of friendly relations between the Federation and civilizations unknown; it hadn't even occurred to the powers that be to consider it an anomalous state of affairs. And it wasn't the way the Captain wanted things to be.

Kirk glances around the room as he waits. He counts four Andorians of various ranks; several Tellarites; a handful of Rigelians; and, twisting the angry ache against his ribs again, a Vulcan Commander, who steps out of one of the ring of offices surrounding the central atrium and disappears into the morass. He wonders absently how they've processed the *Xeno* part of the department in which they work.

"Kirk!" says Ciana cheerfully, snapping him out of his reverie as she strides towards him with a wide, open smile. She's small - a head shorter than Chekov, he guesses - but she moves with an assurance that camouflages her slight stature. At the press conference, she seemed to fill the space around her with a kind of luminescent energy, and the same radiance follows her now: an aura of

easy confidence that knocks her relative fragility so far down the list of things that anyone is likely to notice about her that it disappears over the horizon and into the vanishing point. He's known women like her before, and they were precisely the sort of person you don't want to cross, because they have assimilated their disadvantages under a general rubric of ruthless self-awareness, and have generally learned at least eight different ways to separate an attacker from his favorite body parts before he notices he's been hit.

He wishes he could remember where he's supposed to have met her.

Kirk meets her handshake and finds it unexpectedly firm, and she reaches up with her left hand to give his shoulder a companionable slap that's oddly disconcerting. "Welcome," she says. "Let me show you your office. You'll like it - it's got a view to die for, right out over the bay." She's talking as she walks, words thrown back over her shoulder as she dodges the throngs of bodies with practiced ease, and he finds himself falling into step behind her before he's aware that he's moving. He feels rather than sees the covert glances of the displaced multitudes as he follows in her wake, like a shuttlecraft caught in a tractor beam, and he studiously ignores them. "Can't see much on a day like this, of course, but when the fog clears, it's something else," she's saying. "Guy who had the office before you used to say it'd focus his mind when he needed to get a bunch of ideas straight - just staring out at the waves, letting everything settle. Tried it myself a couple times; all I saw was a bunch of water and some boats. To each their own, I guess. But it sure does take your breath away when the light's right. How was Idaho?"

He blinks, caught off-guard by the abrupt subject-change as she steps up to a door that, he cannot help but notice, has carefully omitted any mention of its occupant's rank from the title plaque. At a press of her hand, it slides open onto the room that will be his. "Fine, thank you," he says.

She gestures him inside. "You have family out that way?"

"No, ma'am," he says, and smiles tightly.

Kirk steps through the door, into air that's stale with several weeks' vacancy: that particular mix of someone else's smell, a lingering odor of cleaning products and air conditioning, and the musty scent of disuse. The lights snap on as the controls register their presence, and their glow falls on a utilitarian blend of desk, static terminal, a couple of chairs, and a small sofa. Three of the walls are painted in hardy, military grays, without ornament or personality, and the fourth is entirely windowed, facing out across the choppy waters of the bay. As Kirk's eyes catalog the space, Ciana crosses briskly to the glass, snapping a command that causes the darkened pane to de-shade and reveal its January panorama of windswept slate and steel. The sun is low on the horizon, struggling through the clouds and casting them in watery pinks, and the wintry sky huddles close to the hazy outline of the city, threatening rain. Perhaps it will be a view worth seeing when the summer raises a yellow Californian sun above the peninsula and paints the sea in all the rich shades of azure he remembers from his Academy days, but for now all he can think about is the fact that his former

office had a view, too, and it knocked seven bells out of this one.

He crosses to the desk and lays a hand on its surface, as still and untrembling as an object not subject to the vibrations of a ship at warp speed. It's cold beneath his skin and utterly alien, and Kirk tries to remember if he felt similarly transplanted the first time he set foot in his Captain's quarters. But his insubordinate brain, so quick to cast up unexpected images from his past at the faintest hint of a familiar smell or the syntax of a half-remembered conversation, refuses to supply an answer to that question. And it's only when the door slides softly shut behind him, cocooning them in sudden silence, that he realizes that Ciana is waiting for him to speak, and that the break in conversation has lingered too long to pass off as natural.

She's not stupid, nor is she obtuse. He's practiced at hiding his thoughts behind a diplomat's mask, but she's played the game for many years, and reading people is part of her job. As he blanks his face and turns into her scrutiny, he realizes abruptly that she's good enough at this that she's not going to break the ponderous hush until he does.

So he strings a smile across his lower face and says, "Thank you, ma'am. It's certainly an improvement on my last office at HQ."

Ciana's arms are folded in front of her chest and her face is drawn in quiet contemplation as she watches him. "That'd be back when you were a cadet, right?" she says.

He raises his eyebrows, drops them again in partial surrender. "That's right," he says. He tries the smile again. "I believe it was a five by eight drywall cubicle. In the library basement."

"Ha," she says. "Yeah. I remember those."

A beat: perfect, expectant silence. Bones would *love* this woman. Kirk says, "Well. I look forward to enjoying the view over the water as the seasons change."

The corners of her mouth twitch upwards into a faint smile, and he has the disarming sensation that she's come to some sort of conclusion, and that it might be a little more accurate than he would necessarily prefer.

"Yeah," she says. "Okay." Another small pause, too brief to analyze and too long to be accidental. Then she says, "Okay, I'll leave you to get your bearings, Captain. Introductions can wait." She waves a hand at his desk. "There's briefing notes on your terminal - take your time, read them

through. I got meetings all morning but come see me at 1100 hours, we can talk some more.”

Kirk nods. “Thank you, ma’am,” he says.

She purses her lips, drops her eyes to the floor before lifting them abruptly to fix him with an unreadable stare. “You’re gonna be damn good at this job, Captain Kirk,” she says quietly. “I fought hard to get you. It’s not...” She trails off, takes a breath. “It’s not starship command. But it *means* something. It’s important, what we do here. And it’s challenging, and it’s good work.”

He can hear the defensiveness in her tone and realizes, belatedly, that he’s pitched his approach all wrong. Eighty percent of the admiralty would have seen the mask and left it there. He’s not used to dealing with the other twenty.

Kirk says, “Ma’am - if I’ve given you the impression that...”

“No,” she says quickly. “You haven’t. You’re old school, Kirk - you have that smile, that work ethic. That commitment. ‘Fleet comes first.’” A grin suddenly blazes across her face, like the ignition of a small star in the washed out, watery morning gloom. “But mostly that smile.”

The grin is infectious; he can’t help but return it. But beneath it, her eyes are serious and he wonders if, maybe, she really does understand. He says, again, “Thank you, ma’am.”

Ciana shrugs. “I call it as I see it. You’re gonna be *damn* good at this, Kirk. Your insights, your experience? I have half a dozen projects sitting on my desk right now that I want to get your take on. This First Contact on 42 Draconis b, I think there are lessons to be learned from your experience with the Cheronites. And your crew has had closer contact with the Tholians than anyone else in the fleet. I can use that knowledge, Kirk. We need someone like you.”

She’s right. He’s been saying something similar for well over a decade now. He just didn’t think it would be *him*.

But he says, “I’ll be glad to do what I can.”

Her smile remains, but her eyes are sharp and they are relentless. She nods. “Good,” she says. A beat. Then she says again, “Good. Okay. I’ll leave you to read, Captain.” She nods a dismissal and turns to leave, but at the door, she hesitates.

“Kirk...” she says slowly, and the tone is that familiar blend of nonchalance and innocence that always precedes unwelcome news. “This is... I get that you hate these things. I do. But you had to have known there’d be publicity, right?”

Publicity. She means *more* publicity. He schools his expression and his voice, and he says, “I’d hoped to avoid it, but yes.”

“Brass are planning a ceremony. Kind of a welcome back for you and your crew.”

“A ticker tape parade,” he says flatly, and she huffs a quiet laugh.

“Nothing like that,” she says. “Promotions, honors, that kind of thing. Speeches. Cameras. You know, handshakes and backslaps. For everyone this time, not just you and Commander Spock.” A beat. “The whole crew.”

It’s never *the whole crew*, he knows from experience: four hundred people just don’t fit neatly onto a dais, and the public hunger isn’t for the chefs and the janitors and the warp mechanics, the people who actually make the whole damn thing logistically possible. But she’s never served on a starship. She doesn’t know how these things work.

So he says, “I’d recommended some of my senior staff for promotion...”

“Yeah, I don’t know.” She shakes her head. “That’s not my purview. But I’d be surprised if they weren’t ratified. Commander Spock...?”

“He doesn’t want a captaincy.”

“He doesn’t?” She raises her eyebrows. “Huh.”

The air of barely-concealed consternation irritates him suddenly, and, to cover it, he says, “I’ll be glad to take part in whatever the admiralty have planned.”

“I think it’ll be a good thing,” she says, and Kirk’s brain fills in the rest of the sentence: *it’ll be a good way to say goodbye.*

Unconsciously, his hand reaches up to touch his new assignment badge, and the unfamiliar contours drag him back into the moment. He says, “Any word on when it will be?”

“Soon,” she says. “You know, these things turn into a logistical nightmare; half the senior crew’s reassigned already, they have to get everyone back together again, not everyone can get back to HQ... Your Yeoman will schedule it for you. I just... wanted you to have a heads up.”

He purses his lips, flexes his hands. “I appreciate that, ma’am.”

“Okay.” She takes a breath. “I’ll leave you to settle in. Any problems, Lieutenant Brz’nk is the woman to ask - she knows these systems inside out.” The door swishes open and the wall of sound rushes through the gap. She grins. “Good to have you on board, Kirk.”

And then she’s gone. The silence closes in.

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Silence, it turns out, is something you have to practice. It’s like downtime, in that respect.

It’s not until he finds himself with armfuls of free time that he realizes that he hasn’t had any for the past five years. Off-duty time is not the same. In point of fact, there *is* no “off duty” on a starship, especially not for the Captain: a stolen hour at the chessboard or sharing a drink or curled around a book is just that - stolen. It’s precious because it can be snatched back at a second’s notice, no matter where you are or what you’re in the middle of. A gamma radiation burst doesn’t wait for you to wake up before it takes the aft shields offline and irradiates the left nacelle. Romulan Birds of Prey don’t check your schedule to find out if it’s convenient to mount an attack. Hostile alien parasites can and do send 70 percent of the crew to sickbay just as you’re about to sit down to your first meal in 36 hours. There are an almost infinite number of ways to die in deep space, and, on any given day, two dozen of them will try to happen. If you’re lucky, they’ll happen when you’re looking. Mostly, they wait until you relax.

Nor has he been alone, not really, since he took command. He could go to his quarters and shut the door, but, as often as not, there'd be a knock on it in an hour or so: Bones making sure he wasn't still working, Scotty with a new bottle of Scotch, Spock with some spurious query masquerading as work but transparently an effort to indulge in the science of camaraderie. Even at night, settling into sleep, there was the constant hum of the ship to remind him that she was there, the sound of voices, footsteps in corridors, continuous motion. It wasn't so much the sensation of constant companionship - that, he suspects, might have been cloying and invasive. It was more the sense that he existed in a nexus of collegiality, that there was always *someone* there if someone were ever needed. He hasn't been a stranger in a strange place for a long, long time.

He falls asleep the first night to the distant sounds of city life, but it's not the same. He feels no sense of connection to the far-off voices or to the traffic hum; he has no investment in any of it. On the second night, he cracks open a bottle of some expensive, exotic liqueur with a name he can barely read, let alone pronounce, for the simple fact that these things are available on Earth, as they are not in deep space. He carries it to the spreading window of his flag officer-grade apartment - an apartment, no less, when all he needed or wanted was a room in which to exist until they give him back his ship - and cradles it against his chest as the low winter sun sinks behind the Marin Headlands. He stands like this for hours, in silence, lost in thought.

In the mornings, he rises in the pre-dawn gray while the city sleeps around him, and makes his way across the Bridge in the wintry gloom. Sunrise lingers on the edge of the horizon, trailing long, chilly shadows from the hills above as he arrives at the Horseshoe Bay complex, where Ciana greets him with a smile that's a little too knowing for comfort. But the work is good; she wasn't lying when she said that it was both important and challenging. It takes a retuning of the circuitry of his brain that, he suspects, will be many months in truly establishing itself, but it's as close to exploring the boundaries of Federation space as he's likely to get while he's earthbound, and it is, after all, about time that someone was in charge of doing this *right*. There are, at any given moment, anywhere between fifty and two hundred likely-looking, inhabited systems in the Federal database that no-one's visited, and there are a staggering number of things that have to be considered before targeting any one of them for First Contact. It's very much like a game of chess - a question of moving resources into the right places to ensure that your queen advances, but that there's always a rook to back her up. It's about thinking twelve moves ahead; about the endgame and the most direct path through the labyrinth of maneuver and counter-maneuver. A binary system in Hydra has a pre-warp civilization that appears to be doing interesting things with temporal manipulation, if the tachyon emissions are to be believed, but it's close enough to the Romulan Neutral Zone that now might not be the time to drop in and say hi. There's at least one planet in 16 Cygni B that everyone's very excited about, and another two in 55 Cancri, but the former appears to be politically unstable, and there's reason to think that the latter system is not especially keen to welcome newcomers. It's all about pieces on an infinite chessboard: starships patrolling the edges of charted space, worlds that may or may not be ready for new friends, resources just begging to be tapped, history waiting to be made. On his recommendation, distant ships will set their course-headings, distant Captains will plan their opening words of welcome, distant protocols will be invoked. This was always one of his favorite parts of commanding the *Enterprise*, it's just that, now, he's the one pulling the strings that make the puppet dance.

On the third night, he flicks idly through the stations on his holovid while the setting sun gradually draws the shadows from the walls and darkens the room around him. Skipping through the news

channels, he catches his own name in a fragment of conversation and quickly switches it off, plunging the room into claustrophobic, sucking silence. Funny how, in his memory, San Francisco is always associated with the sound of birdsong. He lived here for three full years as a cadet, then on and off for over a decade; logically, there were long periods in which it *wasn't* summer, so why does his brain insist of categorizing these current circumstances as *wrong*?

Funny how, when he was surrounded by a vacuum, the air seemed less empty.

Kirk works late on the fourth night. And on the fifth, sixth and seventh. He stops counting after that.

The confirmation of his Commodore's stripes arrives on his terminal midway through his third week in Xenorelations, appended by a brief word of congratulations and a note to the effect that they'll be presented to him at a short ceremony to commemorate the safe return of the *USS Enterprise* following her historic five-year mission. He stares at the screen for a moment or two and, on impulse, comms his Yeoman and asks her to pull contact details for Lieutenant Commander Decker, currently serving as First Officer on board the *USS Hektor*. Kirk rattles off a long-overdue communique, congratulating him on a promotion that's already eight months old, and stutters over banalities while he tries to work out how to ask the question that's digging claws of cold panic into his brain: *How did your father convince the admiralty to let him have command of a starship after they'd promoted him to flag rank?*

Ciana pokes her head around Kirk's door as he's discontentedly scanning through his seventeenth draft. This, too, is something to be assimilated into his worldview: he's become entirely too accustomed to being the highest ranking officer in his working environment, and it's not easy to get used to the fact that his time now belongs to someone else.

"Kirk," she says, "Congratulations. I just heard."

He makes himself smile. "Thank you, Admiral."

"Well-deserved," she says. "Listen, I gotta be on Luna for a few days, until this thing with the New Humans blows over, but when I get back, drinks are on me, okay?" His face must register a complete absence of enthusiasm, because she laughs and says, "This is a *good* thing, Kirk. It's a promotion. It means you're doing something they like. You know that, right?"

There is no way to make her understand. On the ground, there are no strings attached to advancement through the ranks. He says, "Yes, ma'am." A beat. Something further is clearly expected. "I look forward to it."

There's a pause, just a shade too long, and when he looks up she's watching him carefully with eyes that, as ever, miss very little. "Okay, good," she says at last. "Maybe you can finally tell me some of those stories you don't know how to tell."

He laughs his diplomatic laugh. "I believe you'll have to make that an order, ma'am."

She laughs too, but carefully. "Maybe I will," she says, and ducks back out into the fray.

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That night, he comms his parents with the news, and is delighted to find them unavailable. Kirk leaves a message with a young Ensign in his father's office, who is uncomfortably effusive in her approbation, then signs off and quietly sips on unpronounceable liquor until he falls asleep in his chair.

The following night he gives in.

Senior officers' quarters are across a wide, tree-lined plaza to the back of his residential block, denuded of the ocean view afforded to the flag officers' apartments, and accessed by a meandering lane that leads to the Presidio complex and onwards to Academy HQ. If he walks out his front door and stands in the corridor outside, he can look directly into the upper windows of the fourth and fifth blocks; he can practically see, in his mind's eye, the view from the central courtyard that he knows from those interminable, planet-bound days before he took command. It's scarcely any distance at all, compared to what it could have been - less than a mile at the widest point, and yet it might as well be half the galaxy for all he knows how to bridge the gap.

They didn't say goodbye. Kirk has no idea what that means.

He rummages in his discarded uniform pants for his communicator and tosses it idly between his hands as he crosses back into the living area from the bedroom. The sun is setting again, streaking fiery crimson-orange across the bowl of the Pacific, and Luna skulks on the edges of the night sky, whispering of the worlds beyond. Kirk flips open the device and stares at it for a moment, as though it might lose patience with his procrastination and make the decision for him. He flips it shut.

It's not as though you can just call someone up to ask, *did I leave you, or did you leave me?*, even if those words have no deeper meaning or significance. It's not as though he has any clear idea of what to say or how to say it. It's not as though they haven't *tried* to make things right, and it just... hasn't happened. The pain beneath his ribs twists savagely, flaring a white hot streak behind his eyes before it drops abruptly into its habitual dull, background ache.

Enough. He reaches for his communicator. But he dials Bones.

"Just so's we're clear," says the gruff voice, without preamble, "I ain't callin' you Captain, or sir, or anythin' similar while we're grounded, Jim."

"I think you'll find," says Kirk, "That it's *Commodore* now, anyway, Bones."

There's a long silence. Kirk closes his eyes; *this* is what he needed. This reaction, right here. He needs someone else to understand.

"Huh," says Bones. "That so, Jim?"

"You heard about this shindig they're throwing for us all?"

"Heard a rumor," he says, in a tone that says he'd been banking on it vanishing into the ether.

"No such luck," says Kirk. "They'll announce it publicly during the ceremony. But it's effective immediately."

"God *damn*," snaps McCoy, with unexpected vitriol. A beat. Then: "What's the hobgoblin got to say about all of this?"

"Spock?" says Kirk, unnecessarily. As if there might be another hobgoblin, let alone one who might be expected to have an opinion on Kirk's promotion. "I don't... Why?"

"*Why?*" snaps Bones, and then there's a sigh. "Dammit, Jim..."

Kirk's not sure if he's been caught out, and he's not sure what, exactly, he might have been caught out *at*. So he says, carefully, "I could use a drink, Bones."

"You and me both," says McCoy wearily. "How 'bout some of that liquor you never saw in my quarters?"

"That contraband that you'd never dream of smuggling on board my ship?"

"That one," says Bones.

"If you're in possession of an illegal substance, Dr. McCoy, I'm afraid I'm going to have to confiscate it."

"Guess you might be needing my help with that, though."

"I guess so."

There's a pause. But Bones has never been much good at his voodoo mind tricks when he can't back them up with the stink eye, and he gives up after an abortive minute of waiting for Kirk to elaborate.

Instead, he says, "That mansion they got you in, Mr. Flag Officer - it got much of a view?"

Kirk glances out towards the shadowy spine of the Bridge, bisecting the rising moonlight on the choppy water as the Bay descends into twilight, and the looming headland beyond. "Some," he says.

"Huh," says Bones. "Can't hardly see the opposite wall from my window. You hostin'?"

Kirk grins. "You bring the liquor, I'll provide the scenery."

“Guess I’ll see you in ten, then, Jim,” says Bones. “McCoy out.”

He’s gone. The silence rushes in again as the line closes, ringing in Kirk’s ears in the sudden absence of sound. He flips the communicator closed and tosses it onto his desk, knuckles his hands on the chill, imitation-wood surface, takes a breath, closes his eyes.

On the wall above his head, hiding in the shadows, a ship called *Enterprize* drifts in an eternal breeze.

Chapter 19

Spock has never liked the cold, but there is something about winter that appeals to him, and there are worse places to enjoy it than San Francisco. The air is crisp and clear when the clouds roll back: crystalline, that very specific, piercing clarity that is obscured by the heat of a desert planet. It smells clean, as though the sky itself has been scrubbed to a high shine.

This year's cohort is like any other: ambitious, intelligent, and very young. There are the students whose promise is camouflaged by a crippling insecurity, and the students whose brilliance is all bluster and bravado. There are those for whom the work comes easily and those for whom each day is a patchwork of tiny victories; those who were born in the far reaches of the galaxy and those who have never left the Terran biosphere; those who are following a long line of adventurers and tacticians, and those who are following an undeniable lust for discovery. Some of them will have graduated by the time *Enterprise* shakes off her chains once more. He wonders if any of them will crew her.

He is used to being recognizable, set apart by difference or renown, and, if he's never managed to reconcile himself to this fact, he has learned to expect it. It's enough to erect some kind of shield against the naked staring and unwelcome familiarity that follows him like the wake of a ship. In each of his classes, there are cadets whose interest is not his knowledge, but Spock himself. Some of them are there because they want to be smarter than a man they've decided they know: as though the fact of his presence in the collective consciousness of the Federation irrefutably marks him as deficient; as though his current celebrity is indicative of artifice or error, and it's their duty to demonstrate this. They are the easiest to deal with: an unblinking stare is effective in 98.7% of cases, and the remainder are generally undone by theoretical physics. More disturbing are their opposite species: those whose adulation and uninterrogated enthusiasm have led them to a kind of hero-worship that creates him as omniscient, apodictic, infallible. He has no idea what to do with these people; the stare has no noticeable effect beyond a furious blush and a lowering of the eyes. He regards them with faint horror, and thinks, *if only you knew*.

Elsewhere, he's aware of a level of background hostility, and it is disconcerting at first, which surprises him. Hostility, after all, is nothing new: from a childhood spent between two cultures in which he does not belong, to an early adulthood spent consistently outmatching his peers in an academic institution with a long history of attracting the most gifted and the most ambitious, to a career that has described an unfailing upwards trajectory, even over men and women with several decades' experience and game-playing on him, Spock has had ample opportunity to accustom himself to the animosity of his peers. There is nothing threatening about it - generally, their antipathy is barely even consciously considered; simply an instinctive reaction born of his gifts and his cultural disinclination to profess false modesty. But he finds himself uneasy in these first weeks of his new assignment, and it takes him a few days to understand why. The knowledge, when it comes, is not precisely welcome: it obliges a sharp, painful review of his final five years on the *Enterprise*, and the ferocious determination of her Captain that respect was to be mutual, all-encompassing, and indeterminate. It obliges him to reflect once more on the fact that they have been each other's protectors for so long that Kirk's presence, and his regard, have insinuated themselves into the fabric of Spock's worldview, to the extent that their absence now - and the re-

encroachment of the ambient antagonism that had haunted his former self - is discordant, jarring.

He drifts, apart, in a bubble of difference, separated from the Human faculty by a wall that used to be impermeable, and he finds, eventually, that he prefers this. He is not interested in entertaining ghosts of his old life, and the comparisons are always unfavorable. Occasionally, he will overhear fragmentary references that rattle his shields and spit him out of his comfortable detachment: a glancing comment about the *Enterprise*, thrown carelessly between two cadets passing in the corridor; a flash of holovid footage of their difficult arrival in the Centroplex; casual conversation in the staff canteen about Kirk, about their mission, about the Captain's adventures in Xenorelations, about his face or his physique or his smile. On a long interstellar journey, the mind detaches during hours spent contemplating the unchanging starfield, and, starved for stimulation, any small discrepancy explodes into curiosity: a dust mote caught in the starlight; a stain on the console; a fraying thread on the cushion of the seat. So it is each time he hears the words *James* or *Kirk*: he is catapulted into vigilance, straining and hungry for information, and each time he has to hold himself back. Each time, he feels the words rise in his throat, clamoring for expression: *How is he? Is he contented? Is he well?*

It's not hard to restrain himself, not once the initial thrill of desire has died. He does not know these people. And, in any case, this is the way it must be.

This is the way it must be.

The work is not challenging, but it is satisfactory. As a member of the Faculty of Sciences, he is automatically allotted lab space on a rolling schedule that, he quickly discovers, is not immune to the lure of celebrity when apportioning extra time to various supplicants; as a Professor of Astrometrics, he has access to the vast sensor processing array in the Marin County campus, through which scientific chatter flows from outposts and starships in every sector of the galaxy, and which, on any given day, is actually slightly *more* reliable than Starfleet subspace transmission protocols. His A7 classification recommends him to a series of top-level consultancy projects designed to streamline the Starfleet cortex: to corral and pacify roiling, tumbling rivers of data, to make their duotronic capacity match their ambitions. It's not quasar-mapping or stellar gravimetrics, but it's sufficient, and, if it's not especially stimulating, neither is he bored. In the absence of any demands on his time beyond the pursuit and taming of knowledge, Spock decides that this is his chance to catch up on some of the more theoretical projects he'd sidelined on accepting promotion to First Officer seven years ago, and, on a good day, he is able to sublimate the discrepancy between *then* and *now* to a background haze of regret that can be easily walled away from conscious thought.

He thinks about the *Enterprise* often, but this is only to be expected.

In the evenings, he lights the *asanoi* as the sun disappears behind the horizon, and crouches, cross-legged, with his back to the window. As a younger man, he might have allowed the lengthening

shadows outside his apartment to catch at his thoughts and pull them down into the twilight world of the trance, but years spent in the black wastes of space have broken the habit, and, besides: Eridanus may not be at its brightest in the Terran sky this early into the year, but he knows it's there. So he arranges himself on the meditation mat so that his eyes fall on the blank wall of his quarters, or the flagstoned floor, or the hands folded in his lap, and he scrambles inside himself for peace.

This is the way it must be. *Kaiidth.*

Kaiidth.

This is the way it *must* be.

~*~

There are three other Vulcans on the Faculty: Saaral and T'Var in Warp Mechanics and Subspace Geometry respectively, and a quantum singularity physicist on secondment from the VSA. Mostly, they regard Spock with cool indifference, but faculty business occasionally creates situations from which neither party can extricate themselves without a serious breach of decorum. A joint early-morning lecture on relativistic conjunctions in warp particle transducers ought not to oblige either professor to engage in social niceties beyond greetings and parting salutations and, potentially, a request to pass the laser pointer, but serendipity has dictated that Spock's next port of call is the Marin County observatory, while Saaral is due in the engineering bay simulator in the adjacent building. A communal airshuttle ride looms large in their joint future, and telepathic contact is not necessary to determine the precise moment that Saaral understands this; it is only fractions of a second after the realization hits Spock like a direct phaser-blast to his equilibrium.

He folds his hands behind his back. Saaral folds his in front. Spock realizes, with weary resignation, that the opening honors will necessarily fall to him, by virtue of the fact that he is almost certainly better at this than his counterpart. It's either that or walk in silence to the airshuttle port, and stilted conversation is the lesser of two particularly malevolent evils. So he steels himself and goes for science; at least they have this in common.

"I found your application of H'Krzzk's Dynamic Particulation theory most interesting, *trensu*," he says as they fall into step together along an interminable corridor. "I believe the more promising students found your argument quite intriguing."

Saaral inclines his head. "I had the opportunity to observe the formation of the matrix during an ion storm while I was aboard the *Fai-tukh* in Torektra T'dahsu," he says. There is a long pause,

punctuated by the soft, even fall of twin pairs of feet along the empty floor. Presently, he adds, as if as an afterthought, “Your explanation of the polarity of plasma residue in a destabilized warp field was no doubt most illuminating to those less experienced members of the group.”

The barb is subtle, and so smoothly delivered that Spock is not entirely certain it is intended to insult. In his mind’s eye, Kirk’s shadow bristles by his side, spits diplomatic vituperation in a lightning-flash of vicarious offense, but Spock simply acknowledges the faint praise with a nod, and says, “Our collaboration has been productive, then.”

They pass out of the Laikan Center, through a high, arched entryway that leads into a damp courtyard. On the other side of the heat-field, the chilled winter air envelopes them like rushing water and Saaral sinks deeper into his thermal cloak.

“You are cold, *trensu?*” says Spock.

Saaral regards him levelly. “Constantly,” he says.

Perhaps it’s the affronted shade of his Captain; perhaps it’s Amanda’s genetic legacy, which makes its presence known at the least opportune moments, but some buried mischief makes Spock stand a little taller and say, “I am given to understand that acclimatization to the Terran weather is challenging to those who are not accustomed to a cooler climate.”

“Indeed,” says Saaral. “I wonder that you would choose to return, *trensu.*”

“I go where I am assigned,” says Spock mildly.

A loaded silence twists his head to towards his companion, and he finds that Saaral has quirked a quizzical eyebrow. “It was my understanding that you were offered the opportunity to lead the gravomanipulation trials on the Delta-03 science station,” he says.

Spock meets the stare with equanimity and raises an eyebrow of his own. “I was not aware that it was within my capacity to influence the admiralty’s decisions in this matter,” he says.

“Indeed,” says Saaral, but it is a moment before he looks away.

Spock's office is housed in the building to his left, up an impractical staircase that has all the traction of oil-slicked ice whenever the lightest of rainfalls dampens the soles of two dozen pairs of passing feet, and which is set into a glass atrium that sucks the limited heat out of the cavernous space on a dull February day. His dihydrogen conversion experiment is approaching completion, and Orbital Observation Station Epsilon Epsilon 74-C will achieve optimal alignment with the Megarhi system's central antimatter singularity at 1107 hours, but the thought crosses his mind that these are, perhaps, points worth conceding in favor of escaping his colleague's company for the immediate present.

So he says, "My apologies, *trensu*; I must return to my office momentarily." It's not a lie: he actually *must*, though it's disingenuous to pretend that there's anything waiting for him there that isn't the conspicuous absence of Saaral. "I do not wish to delay your arrival at the simulation facilities."

Saaral offers a patrician nod. "Your consideration is appreciated, *trensu*," he says, and Spock would almost swear that a shadow of manifest relief ghosts across his face. Spock raises a *ta'al*, and Saaral mirrors the gesture, before pulling his cloak a little tighter about himself and turning to leave. But he hesitates in the act of taking his first step.

"Ah," he says. "I believe I have observed the source of your diversion."

His diversion has an actual source? This is news to Spock. But he nods smoothly, as though he has expected some such statement from his companion, and follows his line of sight with interested eyes.

Ah.

~*~

McCoy has the beginnings of a beard, and it is presently stalled at that point between *neglect of personal hygiene* and *patchy crops of bristly fuzz*. Spock cannot imagine why the Doctor should choose to follow this path of personal grooming, but he has long since reconciled himself to the fact that many of McCoy's decisions defy Vulcan comprehension, and so he elects to say nothing as his erstwhile colleague follows him along the corridor to Spock's office, stroking unconsciously at his chin with a sound like rustling sandpaper. They have not spoken during the walk from the courtyard, beyond perfunctory greetings and McCoy's acerbic, *Got a minute?*

Of course, said Spock, since there really weren't many other options open to him at that point, though he suspects that this is an interview he would be better advised to avoid.

Spock unlocks the door and stands back to let the Doctor enter. It occurs to him that they've never really been alone on Spock's territory before, and McCoy is awkward, uneasy, as though the same thought is heavy in his mind. He steps inside, eyes swooping up to take in the high ceilings; the bare desk pushed to one corner of the narrow room to allow for a meditation mat and an *asanoi* in the other; the rain-swept, uncurtained windows. On the back wall, Spock has hung a large IDIC that he's had in storage for a number of years, waiting for such times as he might have space to display it again, but otherwise the room is unornamented.

He gestures to the single guest chair. "Please sit," he says. He's uncertain of the protocol, but something is clearly required. "Perhaps you would care for some tea?"

"Tea, huh?" says McCoy, and huffs an inexplicable laugh.

Perhaps not.

Spock moves around to his side of the desk and sits. McCoy follows his lead, pulling the spare seat back from the desk and lowering himself into it.

"Not gonna ask me why I'm here?" he says sourly.

"I assume you are preparing to tell me," says Spock.

McCoy shakes his head. "Goddamn, but you're one cold-blooded computer sometimes," he says.

Even allowing for the Doctor's typically circuitous conversational style, this seems incongruous. Spock waits a moment to see if an elaboration will be forthcoming. When it is apparent that it will not, he says, "I fail to see the connection."

"I show up here outta nowhere, and you don't even flinch," says McCoy, with a familiar fire in his eyes. "Damn it, man, we've got one person in common in the whole damn universe, it doesn't occur to you I might be here to tell you somethin's happened to him? Maybe he's lyin' injured somewhere - or worse?"

A flash-flood of cold fear washes down Spock's spine, but hot on its heels is the simple, illogical

idea - insupportable, but no less insistent - that nothing has happened to Kirk. This is not possible. Spock would *know*.

He raises an eyebrow. "Is Captain Kirk unwell?" he says.

"*Commodore* Kirk, you mean?" says McCoy. He shoots a sharp glare upwards, but turns it back down to his hands where they are folded in his lap, thumbs circling each other absently. He lets loose a long breath. "Well, that kinda depends on what you mean by 'unwell', doesn't it," he says. "Don't know as I've ever seen him in this shape before, Spock."

There's a naked emotion behind the Doctor's gruff words that Spock finds unsettling. Anger, he knows how to deal with. But this is not anger; at least, not *solely* anger.

He says, "But he is uninjured?"

"No, Spock, quit frettin'," says McCoy, and Spock blinks to clear the dust from that conversational hair-pin turn. From *cold-blooded computer* to *quit frettin'* in four sentences. This is a new record for the Doctor. "Guess you haven't been talkin' to him, then?" McCoy laughs humorlessly. "What am I sayin', of *course* you haven't been talkin' to him. Two of you've got this whole stupid, stubborn pride goin' on, and God forbid you should let *that* go, huh?"

Spock steepled his hands in front of him on the desk to buy himself a moment's composure. He is certain that McCoy doesn't *know* about the events on Vulcan, and he doesn't believe that he has guessed, but the Doctor is very definitely not stupid, regardless of what Spock might imply in the course of their retaliatory verbal gymnastics. It doesn't take a particularly incisive mind to see that Kirk has been... different... these past months, and a less gifted man than McCoy could infer that this is attributable, in some way, to Spock.

He says, "I am uncertain as to what you are suggesting, Doctor. Perhaps you could elaborate."

McCoy sighs. "He's... I don't know, Spock." A beat. "Truth is, I don't know. Some lights, he's the same old Jim Kirk; turn your head for a minute and... I don't know. The heart's gone out of him. And this goddamn promotion..."

They've put me in the Flag Officers' quarters, says the Captain's shadow. The words are steady but there is raw, unadulterated emotion behind the expressive eyes. At the time, Spock thinks it is sadness, but now, with the Doctor sitting, tangled in confusion and discomfort, across the desk

from him, he wonders. Could it have been - *fear*?

“It has been ratified,” says Spock. It’s not a question. Neither he nor, he suspects, Kirk expected that the admiralty would fail to follow through. It’s only that... it’s a step further away from the way things used to be; a reminder that the past is a river, forever flowing out of reach.

“Yup,” says McCoy slowly. He hesitates. “If they take that ship away from him, Spock...”

Spock says, “There are precedents. As recently as Commodore Decker, Starfleet has conferred starship command on the lower flag ranks...”

“Yeah, and look how *that* turned out,” says McCoy bitterly. “Doesn’t exactly inspire you with confidence that they’re plannin’ to try it again, does it? Spock,” he says, and leans forward, “You know him ‘bout as well as any other body alive right now. You see him behind a desk for the rest of his days? What d’you think that’ll do to him?”

Spock can imagine all too well what it would do to Kirk, and a sharp spike of pain stabs his chest. Mercurial hazel eyes dulled by apathy, athletic mind left to stagnate, the fire of command stripped and banked and left to eat out the heart of the greatest man he knows...

“Spock,” says McCoy. “Our boy’s in trouble.”

~*~

The fact of the matter is that, in the days after they warped out of orbit around his homeworld, Spock wrestled with a black and pervasive misery the like of which he has never known. The taste of his Captain lingered in his mouth, the scent of him lingered in his nose, and arousal was his constant companion, boiling deep below the surface in a place that his shields could not entirely reach. Meditation eluded him completely and sleep, never a particularly Vulcan refuge in any case, was beyond contemplation. Instead, hollowed out by darkness, he walked the ship like an automaton, mechanically performing his duties as though he was controlled from afar, and every second of every day was a perpetual fight to slough off the memories that choked him.

You may find that having is not so pleasing a thing after all as wanting, he said once upon a time,

in bitterness and disgust, to a man who thought he'd won something precious, and the words haunted him in those long and lonely days. Love, as it turns out, is one thing; it can be smothered and denied, sublimated to a persistent background ache, but it can be managed. *Requited* love, though, once abjured, is like a black hole in the center of one's self; to turn away from love that is returned, to casually deny it and watch the flare of bewildered hurt in the eyes of the one person he would protect above all others, is an act so unnatural that for several days he believed that he might very well become lost inside himself with the effort it took to suppress the raging torrent of distress.

They spoke very little in those days, and every time, every single time their eyes met, he read the question in Kirk's. Every time he was obliged to turn away, out of the glare of that sharp, burning sadness, and later, when the shadows had cleared enough to be able to function once again, Spock found that things were not as they had been. Time, perhaps, will patch over the cracks; time heals Human emotional wounds, and so, he suspects - he hopes - it will be for him. Time and distance are necessary, but the latter was unconscionable, even in those days when proximity was torture, and the former, it now appears, must be ceded as well.

He sits for a full four hours and 38 minutes on his meditation mat, staring resolutely into the flames of the *asenoï* as the city darkens behind him and Luna paints a silver-white window-square across the wall beyond, before he concedes defeat and allows his spine to slacken, his shoulders to slump forward, his head to loll towards his chest. He is worse than fatigued: he is exhausted, but the trance will not come. The firepot swirls heavy incense-smoke into the air of his narrow quarters in a manner that would certainly alarm the fire detection system, had it not been quietly reprogrammed by an A7 computer expert to ignore certain specific chemical compounds; the corridor beyond his doorway is quiet; the mat beneath his folded legs is neither too soft nor too hard; but still the trance will not come.

He stands and extinguishes the flames with a glass of water that hisses and pops on the superheated embers. His head aches and his muscles are tight from their hours of motionless contemplation as he crosses to the bed, lowers himself stiffly onto the comforter, and closes his eyes. It is not yet 2200 hours; perhaps sleep will find its own way to him if he lies quietly and runs through simple antimatter conversion equations. Perhaps a *kohl-tor* will materialize once he stops seeking it. Perhaps the darkness will soothe the ache behind his eyes.

V equals W cubed times C, where V equals Velocity, W equals Warp Speed and C equals the Speed of Light.

Energy In over Antiproton Mass equals C squared over H.

G equals one over the square root of one minus - parenthesis - V(E) over C - close parenthesis - squared...

But they're too familiar, too banal: they're not enough to prevent his his mind's eye from idly sketching in a background figure in command golds, leaning carelessly against the railing that brackets off the upper tier of the bridge. A grin, two parts indulgence to one part provocation, lights his face as he prepares to make some comment about his Science Officer's encyclopedic knowledge of warp core mechanics, and Spock turns over his shoulder into its radiant warmth, contentment coloring the air between them. The background chatter recedes, as it often does, and it's just them in their private world of companionable badinage, hazel eyes glinting with poorly-concealed amusement and reflected pleasure. And surprise: always a little bit of surprise, because it should never have been this easy. It should never have been possible for them to find this place where they slot together like two missing pieces of a puzzle...

Enough. Spock opens his eyes and the image scatters into the shadows.

He rises, with difficulty, and crosses in darkness to his office area, where a series of earthenware tea canisters are meticulously arranged on a shelf above the synthesizer. He selects *bar-kas* and opens the lid, releasing tumbling clouds of sharp, sweet perfume onto the air, as the synthesizer gently announces the production of a steaming mug of hot water. This is not how it ought to be done, of course; there ought to be a fire at least, an urn buried in its depths and allowed to boil slowly over many hours, then ladled into a waiting strainer filled with freshly ground powder and served to the clan in descending order of age, but he's one man, a long way from the planet of his birth, and he doesn't have any of those things here. He has a synthesizer and an earthenware pot, and a fire alarm system that's already on the lookout for any more funny business. Spock heaps a spoonful of the spice into the beaker and stirs: it's close enough.

You can't tell me you're any damn happier than he is, said McCoy, and Spock quirked an eyebrow.

I do not recall making any such claim, he said.

You know what I mean.

But no, in point of fact, Spock is not sure that he does. *Happiness* seems to him to be a volatile quantity - a zero-sum binary that necessarily devolves into *joy* and *not-joy*. Happiness is precipitous, like a sine wave whose amplitude is always either above or below the gradient. Spock has experienced *happiness* only once, and its absence was like a blow to the gut once it was removed: *contentment* seems to be the more sensible aspiration, a steady, maintainable state of satisfaction with the world and one's place in it. He considered explaining this to McCoy, and decided that the inevitable argument wasn't worth the effort. The Captain would understand.

The Captain *did* understand. *For the first time in my life, I was happy*, said Spock as they broke orbit around Omicron Ceti 3, and Kirk was very quiet for long moments after that, thoughtful eyes fixed on his First. McCoy broke the silence in the end with an irascible comment about grinning hobgoblins that provoked the anticipated response from his CO, and business as usual resumed with a convulsive jerk, but Spock was not surprised, later that evening, when the buzzer sounded at the door to his quarters.

Did I do you a disservice, Mr Spock? Kirk wanted to know. The Captain is rarely troubled by uncertainty, and he does not generally second-guess himself after a decision has been taken, but there was doubt in his eyes that night. *Should I have left you as you were? What right do I have to interfere in your happiness?*

And Spock could have pointed out that, in fact, he had *every* right, where that happiness threatened the safety of the ship or the integrity of the mission, but Kirk knew this, of course, and the question was redundant. It was logical to infer, therefore, that it was motivated by another concern, something unspoken. So he said, slowly, *You proceed from a false assumption, Captain. A questioning eyebrow erased a little of the apprehension in Kirk's face. You assume that 'happiness' is a state of mind to which I aspire.*

Surely every sentient being seeks happiness?

A beat. It was important to get this right. *Every sentient being seeks the absence of pain*, said Spock carefully. *The absence of pain is not 'happiness'. It is simply the absence of pain.*

A self-deprecating smile. *I would hope for more than simply 'the absence of pain' for you, my friend. But I believe I understand.*

There is an irony, of course, in the fact that there came a point where Kirk's very presence was enough to banish the absence of pain from Spock's consciousness, but this is not the Captain's fault. Pain, it seems, is the natural byproduct of strong emotions, happiness amongst them. The happiness Spock felt on Omicron Ceti 3 was artificial and easily reversed, but it was enough to create a wave cluster on the seismograph of his life; he would not choose to repeat the experience.

Leila teaches now at USF and guest lectures occasionally at the Academy on Exobiology in the Mira system. He has seen her name on teaching schedules, but their paths have yet to cross, and he has found himself hoping, rather self-consciously, that this does not change. Moreover, he suspects that she shares his opinion on this matter. The recollection of her open, smiling face, the scent of her skin, the soft press of her lips on his, is enough to shoot a momentary spike of white-hot shame through his cortex, and he cannot imagine any circumstances in which their conversation will be other than excruciating. The memories that her name engenders are heavily infused with remorse, but that sentiment does not attach to her. Rather, his regrets are saved for another part of the story

entirely.

The Vulcan never lived who had an ounce of integrity...

He remembers puzzlement, because this was not how the Captain thought. Even when they existed in a barely-civil haze of antagonism, it was *Spock* that was its focus, not his collective culture.

You're a traitor from a race of traitors, disloyal to the core...

And here he was truly confused. *Disingenuous*, he'd heard his people called. *Slippery*, even, or *supercilious*. But no-one had ever suggested that a Vulcan couldn't be trusted. Loyalty was prized highly among every clan on his planet; so deeply ingrained into the cultural psyche, in fact, that it had become an aphorism among the worlds of the Federation.

...rotten like the rest of your subhuman race...

His race had never classified itself in relation to Humanity. If anything, they rated Humanity against themselves. It made no sense to call them *subhuman*, because *human* had no relevance to the construction of Vulcanness.

And you've got the gall to make love to that girl!

Make love? They had not made love. They had kissed, and she had run her hands over his clothed body, stroking, caressing, trailing a tidal wave of pleasure beneath the tips of her fingers as she explored his contours. He had pressed the length of himself along the length of her, pinning her to the warm grass with his weight and tasting her unfamiliar flavors, twisting his tongue against hers and clutching her small, warm body against his. She had straddled him, rocking provocatively against his sensitized groin as her knees gripped his hips and her hands clutched at his chest, and he had thrust up against her, helpless in his need, and she had whispered, *Not here. Later*. And now, suddenly, snatched from the hazy clouds of illusion and transplanted into the sharp, white light of the transporter room, he realized, with a rush of ice-cold clarity, that there couldn't be any *later*. He could not touch her like that. He could not make love to her; not *later*, not ever. Reason had slipped from his disconnected grasp, and he had forgotten the simple, biological fact of the matter. His mother's face, stripped white with camouflaged pain, swam dizzily before his eyes, and the dream was suddenly, abruptly, over.

That's enough, he said.

Does she know what she's getting, Spock? A carcass full of memory banks, who should be squatting on a mushroom instead of passing himself off as a man? Ugly, poisonous words, designed to wound. Spock saw the moment that the Captain realized that he'd hit home, but he thought it was the invective that hurt him, not the sudden, horrified thrill of understanding as he realized what had almost done. You belong in a circus, Spock, not a starship - right next to the dog-faced boy...

He *cannot* do what McCoy wants him to do. This is the way it must be: for the Captain's sake, and also for Spock's. If it were only his own desire that must be contained, then perhaps it might be possible, but that fiction was laid to rest in a rose-scented garden under the milky light of The Watcher, and he is certain he cannot turn away a third time from the answering hunger in those eyes. He is *certain* of it.

He sips at his tea.

Chapter 20

Ciana returns from Luna in a dark mood that she contains for the duration of an interminable debriefing session with her Chiefs of Staff, and it's only when she glances up as they're about to file out of her office, with a terse, "Kirk - you got a minute?" that he realizes anything is wrong.

He turns in the doorway, eyebrow raised in mild surprise. "Of course," he says, and closes the door.

Her office hugs a curving exterior wall of the complex, stretching lazily along the perimeter in a wide, windowed arc that captures a panoramic view of the Bridge and the slate-blue waters of the Pacific beyond. Three hefty floor-to-ceiling bookshelves bracket her desk where it sits along the far wall and are, as he was delighted to note during their first briefing, healthily stocked with old-fashioned, paper-and-ink books. Mostly, they are old technical manuals and collections of star charts, but he also caught a glimpse of Tacitus, Sun Tzu, Nietzsche, Caesar's *Civil Wars*, and, incongruously, *Pride and Prejudice*. He's planning to ask her about that some day, if he can ever work out how. In front of the window, a selection of potted plants drink the sharp, clear winter sunlight and lead towards the long briefing desk that takes up the bottom two thirds of the room, where Ciana sits amongst an impressive pile of PADDs.

Kirk pulls back his recently-vacated chair, but she gets to her feet as he sits, pacing abstractedly towards the window. She stops by the glass, and, without turning, she says, "Draconis is off, Kirk. I got word late last night."

The Draconis project was approved months ago, while he was still on the far side of Federation space, and is well into the final stages of planning; Kirk was about forty-eight hours away from ordering the *USS Pegasus* to set a course-heading for the system. Even given the necessary fluidity of day-to-day policy-making in questions of fleet deployment, this is as close as anything gets to being set in stone. He was not expecting that to change.

He folds his hands on the table in front of him. "I see," he says.

Ciana runs a hand across her eyes, takes a deep breath, releases it. "I've been in conference calls with the admiralty since 0430," she says. "It just... it can't be done."

"I understood that the admiralty were enthusiastic about the project," says Kirk. "What's changed their minds?"

Now she turns back towards the room, and he can see the fatigue in her face as she crosses to the long table. She slides back into her chair and folds her hands in front of her, mirroring his gesture. “Information received from Starbase 19,” she says. “There’s been...some trouble verifying it.”

“In what sense?”

“In the sense that the Starbase is not currently responding to hails.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “How long since they went dark?”

“Luna Command received scattered com chatter around thirty-six hours ago, nothing since. It’s heavily corrupted, but it appears to be reporting a series of attacks in the sector.”

“Attacks? By whom?”

“That’s an excellent question. The *Alliance* and the *Concordat* have been mobilized, but it’ll be at least seventy-two hours before they’re in visual range. And even then...” She glances up, eyes hooded. “There’s been no distress call. There’s just... silence.”

“Were Luna able to determine any details about the attacks from the com chatter?”

She shakes her head. “There was something about Androchus IX, a series of stardates, something that sounds like *explosion* or *expulsion*; the data’s almost unreadable. They mention the Draconis system specifically, but it’s impossible to make out the context. Given the circumstances, though, First Contact’s off the cards for the foreseeable future.”

He can’t argue with that. It’s actively disturbing to think about how close he came to ordering a science vessel with limited weapons capability, crewed by men and women with virtually no combat experience, into a potential warzone. This, *this* is the problem with being earthbound: there is, quite simply, no way to know what’s going on out there. He’s reliant on other people’s eyes and ears; dependent on them knowing where to look.

Kirk says, “The *Alliance* is currently stationed at Utopia Planitia?”

Ciana nods. “She took some damage during the skirmish in the Andromache system; she was scheduled to be out of drydock tomorrow.”

“I can rendezvous with her by 2200 hours if I leave right away,” he says. “I’d like to join their Tactical Ops team on the mission...”

But she’s already shaking her head. “No way,” she says. “I can’t authorize that, Kirk.”

He tries again: “Xeno ought to have a presence on this mission, ma'am...”

“Why?”

It’s a good question. He didn’t honestly expect her not to ask. But he doesn’t have an answer, beyond the fact that he needs to *do* something, and sitting in a series of boardrooms and talking energetically about strategy doesn’t count. He says, “Ma'am, at present we have no idea what we’re dealing with. This is potentially a First Contact scenario with a hostile species...”

“Exactly. A *hostile* species. They’re not exactly going to roll out the welcome wagon, Kirk; they’re going to shoot first and *maybe* hang around afterwards to see if there’s an interesting DNA signature smeared across the debris.”

“Nevertheless, Federation charters specify a clear command protocol in the event of...”

“Kirk!” she snaps, and throws her arms wide. “Believe me, if it’s who I think it is, we know these guys of old.” Abruptly, she pushes back her chair and paces across the room to her desk. He recognizes the gesture; it’s exactly what he would have done in the circumstances. She says, “You think if I thought there was even a *chance* that...” A beat. “I’ve been doing this job a long time, Kirk. This isn’t a new civilization showing us its teeth. I’d swear on my oath to Starfleet, this has *Klingon* stamped all over it.”

Kirk feels his eyebrows graze his hairline. “If the Klingons have waged an unprovoked attack on...”

“Yeah, it’s not exactly a popular theory at HQ,” she says. She lowers herself onto her desk, leaning heavily on her arms, and her shoulders droop. She sighs. “But it fits.”

“The Starbase is close to the Neutral Zone...”

“Not so close that you’d expect them to get territorial. Relations have been good - well, not *bad*. That counts as good, most days.”

Kirk twists his lips wryly. “I have some experience of the subtleties of the Federation’s relations with the Empire,” he says.

Ciana grins, but it’s flaccid with fatigue. “So I hear,” she says. She lifts both hands to her face, pressing the balls into the corners of her eyes, and the trace amusement fades. “This is what I know,” she says. “About six weeks ago, a party of Mallamusian traders came through the sector, docked with Starbase 19 for twenty-four hours. Commodore Hansen cleared it with HQ in advance; they came to me and wanted to know how that was likely to play on Q’onoS, given the ongoing tensions between Mallamus and the Empire. For the record, I said no, no way, not worth it. Mallamus will get over it; Q’onoS, not so much. But they were trading in high-grade iridium, there’d been a series of debris strikes on the outer hull of the Starbase, a couple of minor breaches that were going to get major in a hurry if they didn’t do something fast; they needed repairs.” She shrugs. “HQ made a call. I don’t know, maybe I would have done the same. But it *had* to have got back to the High Council. There’s no way they were happy about it.”

“You think they’re returning a political slight?”

She glances up. “You know Klingon psychology as well as anyone, Kirk. You tell me how pissed a Klingon has to get before they start shooting up all round them.”

He acknowledges the truth of that with a twitch of his eyebrows and a deep breath. “Still - to risk an open breach of the Organian treaty...”

She nods. “That’s what HQ are saying. I get where they’re coming from. If the Klingons up and blew a Starbase out of Federation space, unprovoked - well, that’s a nightmare nobody wants. It’s *bad*; it’s worse than bad. It’s war, and this time we’ve got the Organians watching, and who even knows what happens if they decide they’re getting involved again?”

“With all due respect, ma’am, if the Empire has attacked a Starfleet facility then the Organian treaty is null. We can’t ignore an act of war simply because it’s politically inconvenient!”

She purses her lips. “That’s... more or less what I said.”

He looks up. She half-smiles. He says, “More or less?”

“I may have been a little less elegant.”

Another time, he might have returned her smile, but he can feel a restless energy firing his bones from the inside out and it has nowhere to go. He knows she sees it; worse, he thinks she shares it, but she’s played her hand too soon, and she knows it. On the *Enterprise*, on the edges of charted space and sheltered by distance, there are always possibilities. But on Earth...

Kirk steeple his hands in front of him; stares at the points of his fingers. He’s shackled and bound, tethered and clipped, while a political *danse macabre* unfolds in the skies above. He says, “The com chatter mentioned Androchus and Draconis...?”

“Yeah.” She slides off the table, lifts a stylus, tosses it absently in her hands. “I don’t know. Maybe... maybe it’s nothing. Maybe it’s corrupted, maybe it’s spliced in from another transmission; it could be a goddamn stellar weather forecast for all I know. The *Tajarhi* was en route to a training exercise around Androchus II; there were preliminary plans to scout for a science outpost near the poles on XIV. I don’t know. The only link I can make is to the Starbase.” A beat. “But I really think I’m right about this, Kirk.”

The thing is, he does too. And he’s stuck on Earth making friendship bracelets and inspirational posters. He says, “I’d like to know what the *Alliance* and the *Concordat* report back, ma'am. If that’s possible.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Sure,” she says. “I’ll let you know as soon as I hear.”

Seventy-two hours. Seventy-two hours until he finds out if he very nearly sent two hundred anthropologists, linguists and diplomats onto a battlefield by accident. “Thank you, ma'am,” he says.

Ciana nods. “I have a meeting with Tactics and Deployment at 1300,” she says. “I’ll want you with me for that.”

From nowhere, Bones’ voice slices through his consciousness, heavy with Romulan Ale: *Yeah,*

and how many meals have you skipped these past weeks, Jim? Man's skin's not s'posed to be that shade of gray... He says, "I had a lunchtime with Admiral Kurylenko. I can postpone it."

"That the Augusta project? I'll com him this afternoon." She stretches her arms behind her head, closes her eyes. He wonders when she last slept. "I guess we need to start pushing 47 Aeolus C pretty hard now that Draconis is out. You got some time to talk it through this evening? I don't know about you, but I could use a drink." One eye opens. "And I still owe you a round, Commodore."

He'd been vaguely hoping she'd forgotten about that. For a woman whose job is about eighty percent reading people, she's proving remarkably oblivious to his ambivalent attitude towards his commodore's stripes. And it's hard to remember why it's diplomatically important to establish an embassy on the southern continent of 47 Aeolus C when there's a very real possibility that an atrocity just happened, that a couple of hundred men and women just died for no good reason. There's no way to define the symbiosis that exists between all deep space travelers - it's the sense of *there but for the grace of God* that binds them; the fact that it's all too easy to imagine oneself in another man's shoes - but there's also no way to explain it to someone who's never lived with the knowledge that they're no more than one bad decision away from disaster. Kirk considers lying, considers prevarication, considers the possibility that either of these things will be effective. On the one hand, she is neither Spock nor Leonard McCoy, but, on the other, he's not entirely sure how far *her* network of spies stretches.

Carefully, he tries deflective concern: "If you're referring to my promotion, ma'am, that can wait for another time. You must be tired after your trip..."

Ciana sputters laughter. Of all her possible responses, *amusement* wasn't high up on his list, and he's not prepared for it.

"What are you, my mother, Kirk?" she says amiably. "If you don't want to have a drink, don't have a drink, it's fine. But I've pulled longer stretches than this before; I'm not gonna fall over in a faint."

Well, there's no way out of it *now*, not without admitting that, no, no, he does not want to have a drink; he does not want to have to figure out the politics of what *a drink* might mean, or what he wants it to mean, or why he doesn't know the answer to that. He wants to get on his damn ship and streak Warp 7 across the sector to the hole in the sky where a starbase used to be, and, if there's nothing there to save, then he wants to make sure that whoever did it isn't in any kind of position to be doing it again. But she's watching him carefully now with dancing eyes that are uncomfortably astute in their scrutiny, and in a moment the silence is going to cross the temporal line into *unnatural*, which gives him less than two seconds to determine his response. He's not sure if she's really good at the intricacies of manipulation or really bad at linguistic politics, but he suspects the former. Bones would *adore* this woman.

So he purses his lips into a smile and says, “Well, you’d have to ask my CO if I’m free, ma’am. But I dare say I could use a drink by the end of today, too.”

She grins. “I hear your CO’s pretty easygoing, Kirk. How’s 8:30? I know a place off Divisadero that the cadets haven’t found yet.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I don’t believe there’s a bar in this city that the cadets haven’t found, ma’am.”

Ciana laughs again, a flash-bomb of color in the gray air. “There’s three, I think. Maybe just two now,” she says. “This is one of them. Flag officers gotta show up every couple of nights to scare off any of the junior ranks that get brave or stupid; it’s kind of a civic duty. You don’t strike me as the type to shirk your duty, Kirk.”

“No, ma’am,” he says.

“That’s what I thought,” she says cheerfully. “I’ll have my Yeoman com you with the address. Meantime, we got work to do.”

She smacks the desk once with the flat of her hand - a decisive, conclusive gesture - using it as leverage to get her moving as she turns and strides quickly to the other side. Her terminal is idling but springs to life at a brusque command, and her eyes scroll down the screen as she says, “Yeah... Intelligence in Sector 4412 is maybe fourteen, fifteen days old; if 19 is gone, it’s a game-changer, we’ll need to revisit. Let’s start by mapping current colonial and planetary allegiances around Aeolus. I’ll get Berniere and Travis from Astrometrics, you pull your team together and meet me back here in, say, thirty minutes?” She glances up, all business once again, but her eyes sparkle. “Some time today, Kirk? I gotta be out of here for drinks at 8:30...”

He pushes his chair back and gets to his feet. “Yes, ma’am,” he says.

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Across the sculpted-steel waters, the Presidio Headquarters stands as the gateway to the heavens. At this distance, the swoop and fall of airtrams above the high central complex is like the circling,

billowing flight of gulls over the Bay, coasting on unpredictable winter thermals. Buried inside the tritanium-blue walls, glinting lethargically in the diffuse morning sun, the massive transporter array sucks men and women through the earth's atmosphere; if he closes his eyes, he can feel that moment of weightlessness as the center of him dissolves, that lurch and the sensation of infinite expansion, infinite possibility. Somewhere up there, above the blanket of feathery stratocumulus, a battery of starships hover in the endless night, waiting to receive their atomized Human cargo.

But not him.

Kirk turns back to the room, barking a sharp command to the window sensors, which darken submissively. A pile of unconsidered tapes rebuke him from both sides of his desk: a myriad uncharted worlds waiting for his consideration, worlds that he will never see. There are reports that need to be written and they can't *be* written until he's scanned every file, evaluated and cross-referenced, calculated, considered and intuited his way through the data contained within that rainbow-colored mountain, but that requires a very specific sort of focus, and his brain has gone off on a tangent from which it is stubbornly resisting all his efforts at redirection. The near-miss of the Draconis mission haunts his resolution, wraps little nagging tendrils of doubt in a chokehold around his prefrontal cortex. He's due in the Centroplex at 0900 tomorrow to meet with two Vice Admirals and another Commodore - men who think that the Luna run counts as space travel - to discuss the possibility of opening up Sector 77125-C to exploratory probes, and all he can think about is the fact that he does not, cannot, know what's out there, establish what's safe, decide what's worth the risk, from behind a desk in Horseshoe Bay.

But what's he supposed to do? He's tried; he's asked the question, he's made the request, and it's been denied. The pieces shift on an infinite chessboard while he watches through a telescope from a distant mountain top and tries to make sense of what he's seeing, but what can he do? The stars are out of bounds for now. His ship is up there, a transporter ride away, but she's hobbled like her Captain. And even if the *Enterprise* wasn't currently resting in fifteen separate pieces in an orbital drydock, it's not as though he could just swipe the keys and make off with her to the other side of the galaxy. He's never had cause to ponder the consequences of hijacking a starship, but he's pretty sure you don't get to keep it when you're finished. Subspace distortions hide a multitude of sins, but it's slightly harder to pull off a flexible approach to the interpretation of a direct order when it's been delivered in person, straight from the mouth of one's Commanding Officer.

There's a limit to what he's prepared to risk. There has to be.

He crosses to his desk, lifts a tape, tosses it between his hands, slides it into the reader. The terminal screen sparks to life but he turns away even before it can ask its innocuous, mundane questions about what he'd like to do next, because isn't that a good question? He'd swear sometimes that, somewhere in the bowels of the cortex, there's a tech with a keen sense of dramatic irony busily programming *pathetic fallacy* into the Starfleet OS.

Once upon a time, he'd have been delighted with this observation, primarily because Spock would be at his side, or at least close enough to fetch in a hurry, and it would be the perfect antidote to a moment when nothing in particular was happening, everything was functioning as it should, and there was time to remember what it felt like to catch your breath. It's exactly the sort of observation that would earn an eyebrow and a look of fabricated consternation as his First pretended not to understand that he was being baited, and the Captain pretended not to understand that he was being humored.

Now the First is a Professor and the Captain's a Commodore. The ship is in pieces and Kirk's planet-bound and feeling like he's lost his right arm. Nothing stays the same. But it *can't*, that's not the way the universe works: stasis is the end state, it's the ultimate by-product of entropy; life is all chaos and motion. This restless energy, this sense of powerlessness, like the world has exploded beneath his feet, this will ease in time. It's just going to take some time, that's all.

You look like you don't know whether to scratch your watch or wind your butt, Jim, says Bones' voice suddenly, struggling up from scattered memories of their abortive mid-week social effort, to worry its way into Kirk's consciousness. Echo-Bones waves a bottle of something blue in front of Kirk's mind's eye. *Lucky for you, I got a prescription for that.*

It's not that the evening was a failure, only that Kirk suspects it might have been a tactical error. What he needs right now is a clean break from his old life, and his friend trails far too many ghosts in his wake. Plus, the Doctor has a habit of reading between the lines, whether or not there are lines to be read between, and it was obvious before he'd even shrugged off his coat that the invitation itself had caused him to draw a few conclusions.

Seen much of the old place since you been back? he said as he crossed to the center of the living quarters, worrying at the stopper of the bottle.

Practically all the old haunts, said Kirk with a self-deprecating smile.

McCoy picked up his cue. *Ha!* he said. *I bet. Library, simulation rooms and labs, huh?*

Something like that.

Got you in a fancy office, I guess?

Fancier than Starfleet Medical Offices, put it that way.

A huffed laugh. *That ain't hard. A beat. Bet this is the first time you've left it in three weeks, too.*

He can imagine his friend's face if he knew about tonight's excursion, but he suspects that he won't tell Bones about his adventures in cadet-free drinking establishments, and he's not entirely sure why.

Saw Frank Abrams last week. And Kirk's back was up, because he knew, he knew where it was leading. But he raised an interrogative eyebrow just the same, tried to keep his face neutral.

Fractured his collarbone in the zero-g spacewalk sim - damn fool's got no business in command track, you ask me, but, hell, no-one ever does.

He's a gifted engineer.

Don't mean he's fit to run an auxcom. Man'd fall over his own toes if there was nothin' else to walk into. A beat. And then the segue: Said to give you his regards.

That was decent of him.

Funny, huh?

With resignation: *What's that?*

Spend all that time with folks, feels like that's your whole world, your whole life. Gets so's you can't imagine what it'll be like when they ain't there. And then... gone. Scattered to the winds.

That's the service, Bones.

Yup. He grinned. 'Cept when a man's got a bottle of Romulan Ale in his possession. Funny how a thing like that makes an old country doctor stick out in his CO's memory.

Kirk loosed a quiet laugh. *That sounds about right.*

Bones raised his glass, lifted it to his lips, swallowed a gulp. A grimace carried it down his throat, and for a moment they sat in silence, staring out into the shadows on the bay. And then, softly, he said, *Guess the hobgoblin's kinda short on illicit liquor, huh, Jim?*

Anger flared, and Kirk felt his face tighten. *I've been busy*, he said, and he knew it wasn't an answer.

Yup, said the Doctor. Another beat, heavy with words unspoken. *You got a talent for that.*

Kirk blinks away images of an evening that was unsatisfactory on a number of levels, and, with weary resignation, turns back to his terminal. *When's the last time you spoke to him?* echo-Bones wants to know, and Kirk wants to say that it works both ways; that his communicator hasn't exactly been wearing out its warranty these past weeks. That he's not the only one who made a choice; that he's not precisely a difficult man to find. But it's easier, much easier, to bury it in work, to bark a command and watch through disinterested eyes as the screen scrolls rapidly through the half-dozen starcharts appended to the latest briefing from Operational Command. There's a binary system in 12139 whose primary civilization are friends of Federal friends. There are three occupied planets in a system in Lyra, two of which are warp-capable - which rather begs the question as to what's happened to the third, and why no-one from the other two has been tempted to crash the party with a keg or two, so to speak. There's a quotidian Sol-type star in the Archanis sector with one solitary planet; an ice-world in Vega with a deuterium-rich moon; an orbital colony around a gas giant in Sector F-C-31. Someone with a flare for the poetic has designated the single-planet system Eremitis, the hermit, and the name intrigues him; it's the kind of histrionics that advises against assigning first year cadets to routine starmapping. He scans the file briefly: an unremarkable world orbiting an unremarkable star, but maybe that's what the Vulcans once said about Earth. Maybe that's exactly the sort of place they should be targeting: a civilization that's ready to reach out there, made hungry by mediocrity. He files it away in his *Possible* folder, and then, suddenly, he realizes why it caught his eye.

You heard about the attack on Ajilon Prime last month? says Nogura's voice, beaming into his ship, eating up those final moments, when what he really wanted to do was sit in his chair and grip the arms as tightly as he could. *There was another on Archanis IV two days ago...*

Kirk leans forward in his seat. "Computer, call up recent files on the Archanis sector," he says.

The computer balks. "Over eighteen million entries," it says reproachfully. "Please narrow search parameters."

The data's heavily corrupted, said Ciana, *but it appears to be reporting a series of attacks in the sector.*

“Look for reports of attacks in the region of Archanis Prime,” says Kirk. “Narrow to an eight week window, ending January 12th.”

“Three entries found,” says the computer.

“On screen,” says Kirk.

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Ciana is late arriving, but, then again, so is Kirk. Her Yeoman comes him late in the evening, startling him out of his reverie and causing him to notice, for the first time, that the sun has set long enough ago for night to have settled comfortably into his office, and it is now so dark that he can't see anything beyond the sickly white glow of his terminal screen.

“She's been delayed in DC, sir,” says Martinez. “Says to pass on her apologies and tell you she'll be there by 2100 hours at the latest.”

Kirk accepts the regrets with patience and understanding, then signs off smoothly and bolts for the door.

It's a small, elegant bar, most likely cadet-free by virtue of its price rather than its obscurity, but mention of Ciana's name gets him shown to a secluded table near the piano - which is, mercifully, unoccupied at present - and the obsequious attentions of a young Andorian waiter who evidently pays too much attention to the news. Kirk orders a Scotch and makes sure the table is credited to *his* account; it may irritate his CO and it may not, but his ego demands it. And he got here first, after all.

She arrives at 2115, unruffled but apologetic. “Damn it,” she says, with a flash of that smile that lights her from the inside out, “Not much of a hostess, huh? The transporters on the Hill went offline just as I was getting ready to leave; I had to come back by airtram. Thanks for waiting.”

She has swapped her uniform for a simple black dress that neither clings to her figure nor ignores it, and her hair, which she habitually wears scraped into a loose knot at the back of her head, falls freely over her shoulders. He knows from her files that she's a few years older than him, which

places her in her early forties, but, relaxed and easy in herself in the soft light, smiling her thanks to the waiter as he places a drink in front of her, she looks younger.

“Scotch man, huh?” she says, raising her glass. Ice cubes clink in the amber liquid. “You have excellent taste, Kirk. Although I prefer Highland Park myself.” She knocks the glass against his. “Here’s to Starfleet’s newest Commodore.”

He tries to strip his face of expression, to fix his smile in place and return her toast. It nearly works. It would work, he’s certain, with every other CO he’s ever had. Bones would *worship* this woman.

Ciana lowers her glass and drops her eyes to the table, but he’s been working with her for a number of weeks now, and he knows better than to think that he’s in the clear. So he’s ready for her when she glances up a moment later and fixes him with a stare that dares him to look away.

She says, “Whatever you’re thinking, Kirk... It’s not the end. Brass aren’t stupid. They’re not going to take her away from you.”

The angry ache twists viciously, searing a burning pain up the back of his throat. He says, with difficulty, “I wish I had your confidence, ma’am.”

“Lori,” she says. He raises an eyebrow and she shakes her head. “We’re off the clock. You can go back to ‘ma’am’ tomorrow.”

Call me Jim, Spock... It doesn’t exactly alleviate the pain beneath his ribs. Kirk takes a gulp from his drink, buying himself the time he needs to settle the ghosts inside.

“Lori, then,” he says, and smiles.

She’s nobody’s fool, and her answering smile is qualified by wry amusement. “You’re like a tiger in a cage, Kirk,” she says.

“Jim.”

The smile flares brightly. “All right: Jim. I knew we’d never be able to keep you; a man like you

doesn't belong behind a desk. Nogura's many things but *obtuse* was never one of them." She takes a sip from her drink, inclines her head. "He needs you where you are right now, for whatever reason, but you work better for him in the air. Trust me on this. Meantime, I can use you." A grin, and her eyes sparkle. "Though if you could try not to make it look so much like Purgatory, I'd appreciate it."

He laughs and she joins in easily. "I don't see it as Purgatory," he says, but she shakes her head.

"Yeah. You do," she says. She shrugs, leaning back in her chair. "It's fine. Maybe I'd be the same, in your position." Gently: "Must feel like they're shutting out the sun."

He huffs a quiet laugh, but the words settle into his soul like drifting snow. He finds that there's no answer to that, so he looks up, meets her eye, twists the corners of his lips into a rueful smile.

"You just..." she says, and hesitates. "I just feel like you could use a friend, Jim."

He opens his mouth to tell her that he *has* friends, but then he wonders. Where are they, exactly? All these people, surrogate family, people he thought were woven so completely into the fabric of his life, and it turns out they lift right out, like water from a jug. Bones' words echo in his head - *scattered to the winds* - and the angry ache twists viciously, slicing against the tender skin beneath his ribs. He covers it with a smile.

"That's command for you," he says, and, if he can't quite erase the bitterness from his tone, her soft eyes tell him that she's understood.

"That's the life we chose," she agrees.

He glances up at her, and for the first time, he understands that she's hiding a few bruises of her own. Somewhere down the line, someone's told her to make an impossible choice, too, and she's buried it with duty and kept moving on, because that's what you do. It's the life they chose.

He says, quietly, "You never wanted a deep space assignment?"

"Sure I did." She doesn't look away, not quite, but her eyes turn skittish. She purses her lips. "Didn't work out that way. There's still time, though. I won't get a ship now, but... you know." A beat. "There's still time."

“Where would you go? If they gave you your ship?”

A faint smile tugs at the edges of her mouth. “I don’t know. You tell me, Jim - you’re the expert. Where’s good, this time of year?”

A thousand images rush him; a hundred worlds, skies in every color of the spectrum. Trees so tall they block out the sun; crystalline lakes of frozen ammonia glinting silver in the starlight; mountains that sing in the restless evening breeze. He says, “The best places are the ones we haven’t found yet.”

“Spoken like a true explorer.” She takes a sudden, deep breath, as though she’s chasing shadows from her mind. “A man like that can’t be chained to the ground. Nogura knows that as well as anyone. You’ll get her back, Jim.” Ciana extends her arm, ice clinking softly against the glass in her hand, and she raises an eyebrow in open challenge. “So can we please, for the love of God, drink to your stripes now? Instead of the sackcloth and ashes?”

Her hair falls around her face, framing eyes soft with mischievous amusement, lips curling slowly as she waits to see how he’ll respond. Kirk watches her, feeling oddly disjointed; he’s never seen her out of uniform, never separated her from the job, from the duty, from the protocol. He’s never noticed that her skin is so smooth that light reflects off it like moonlight on marble, or that her voice is like warm honey, or that her fingers are long and graceful, that they grip her glass with the lightest, most elegant touch. He’s never noticed any of this because he’s become accustomed to standing apart, at command distance; to the fact that he outranks everyone else on board his ship. There’s always been a wall there, surrounding him and holding him separate. And only one person has ever breached that, and look how that turned out.

Yes. Look how that turned out.

Her hand is extended across the table, drink canted towards him, light glinting off the surface of the liquid. Maybe it’s time to let go.

He raises his glass, tilts it towards hers, feels it connect. Crystal chimes gently against crystal; it feels like a betrayal.

It's after midnight when he gets back to his apartment, whisky washing a comfortable river of warmth through his veins and smoothing over the stress-fractures in his soul, and he's tired: that deep-in-the-bones fatigue that settles lead into the muscles and fog behind the eyes. The evening has been pleasant, but it has been long: a sequence of prevarications and obfuscations that have grown steadily more acrobatic as the hours ticked by, and he's no longer certain where the boundaries lie between them. Sure, she's Lori tonight, but tomorrow she's his CO again; the woman whose job it is to keep him pinned and acquiescent, and three hours in his company have certainly confirmed what she must have suspected: he's fighting a battle against himself, and she's going to have to do what she can to contain that.

You know, they told me I wouldn't be able to handle you, she said, somewhere into the third round of drinks. Neither of them was drunk; he suspects she's as careful about that as he is, and this intrigues him. But she was softened, hazy around the edges, and so was he. *When I wanted you in Xenos. That's what they said.*

He doesn't know how he was supposed to react to that, but he settled for giving her his best diplomat's smile, the one that uses all of the advantages bestowed upon him by nature. *I think you'll find my reputation is exaggerated*, he said, and she laughed.

Damn, I hope not, she said.

Was it an opening? It's hard to be certain. Take away command protocol and it's not even a question, but the service complicates things, coats the wheels of flirtation with spines and jagged edges. If anyone has cause to know this, it's him.

Kirk shucks his overcoat and lets it fall onto the squat, utilitarian chair by the door, whose sole function is to act as the receptacle for the deposit of recently-shucked overcoats; toes off his boots and kicks them out of the entryway; crosses to the window without calling for the lights. The stars glisten in the dark crystal sky, the high blue shimmer of a winter's night, punctuated by staccato comet-trails of air-traffic crossing the thermosphere, and he watches them with unseeing eyes.

Does he want it to have been an opening? He's not sure he even knows anymore.

He ought to go to bed. It's been a long day and a longer night, and tomorrow it starts all over again: endlessly rolling a boulder uphill, with nothing to show for it but a path worn gradually into the rock. He ought to go to bed, but behind the fog of whisky and tiredness, his thoughts chatter restlessly and won't be settled, and the prospect of staring at his ceiling while the sky gradually

turns gray doesn't exactly fill him with enthusiasm. So he turns from the window, back to his darkened room, back to his desk and his terminal, with the idea of report-writing his brain into submission, and this is when he notices that the screen, pointed into the moonlight, is faintly lit behind the reflected sheen.

He has a message.

Chapter 21

It's a bright late-winter morning - crisp and clear, with pale yellow sunlight pouring unfiltered from an almost cloudless sky. Long years' experience have taught Spock better than to think that the gray February drizzle is in retreat just yet, but there's a whisper of spring in the sharp, cool air, like a preview of the coming attraction. It's the sort of day that scatters the shadows in his mind.

It has been a singularly unproductive morning and he's glad to leave the cloistered silence of his office, where a blank terminal screen glares at him in mute reproach. It's early yet, even for the leisurely pace that he sets, the better to savor the feel of the cool sun on his skin and the fresh ocean scent that hangs on the chilly breeze, but there comes a certain point at which the waiting becomes bigger than the event itself, and he'd like to maintain an air of abstract neutrality if at all possible. Besides which, if he's learned anything at all these past five years, it is this: Kirk is rarely late.

He falls quietly into step behind a group of cadets as they pass through the central plaza around which the Academy rises in irregular spikes and blocks, and out into the sculpted greenery of the Presidio in winter. A winding path meanders up a gentle slope towards the crest of the hill, and, as he ascends, he can see the sparkling azure of the Bay peeking through the willows and dogwoods. As he moves onto the central thoroughfare, ground transport glides quietly past him along the wide road to his left, air trams worry at the tops of ancient, towering oaks as they swim on the thermals above, and the background noise is sucked into the vacuum of the forest and scattered amongst the trees. Spock burrows a little deeper into his coat and follows the convergence of traffic into the wide quadrangle that leads up to the towering base of Starfleet's Terran command.

The central atrium is alive with a thousand flowing currents of bodies, filtering carelessly through the security fields at the portico and moving with purpose towards uncountable destinations. Noise dampeners scattered liberally above the crowds keep the general din within bearable limits, but, if there is any mechanism by which personal space can be maintained while moving from point A to point B inside the continuous maelstrom of multitudes, Spock has not yet learned it. He avoids this place whenever he can.

They have arranged to meet in the lobby of the eastern wing, where Operational Tactics have their offices, and where Kirk has spent the morning buried in a series of meetings. Security is tighter here, and the crowds begin to thin as Spock moves further along the series of winding corridors, through bright, glass-fronted atria that open onto the Bay and onto the city, past a gaggle of excitable schoolchildren that represent half a dozen Federation planets - Starfleet children, he supposes, and remembers his own frustrating days of Terran education while his father was posted on Earth - and into the pleasant, airy foyer of the Phoenix Building. Climb high enough through the floors of this rarified ivory tower and Nogura himself can be found, when he's on Earth, installed in a sprawling suite of offices that scrape the skies above, but Spock's destination is the bright, bubbling fountain set into a light well in the middle of the floor, bathed in anemic sunlight, and

flanked by one Commodore and his commanding officer.

The rush of emotion that assaults him is both unexpected and unnerving. Spock has spent some considerable time this morning attempting to prepare for this meeting, and he was certain - or, at least, as certain as he could be - that his controls were sufficient. But as Kirk, deep in conversation with Ciana, catches sight of Spock's arrival in his peripheral vision and turns over his shoulder, as the momentary shock of recognition segues into a slow, naked smile, Spock is forced to reflect on the fact that, realistically, he was *never* going to be ready for this.

“Spock!” says Kirk warmly, and raises a hand in greeting.

Some lights, he's the same old Jim Kirk, says McCoy's voice suddenly, slicing mercilessly across the remnants of Spock's ragged composure. *Turn your head for a minute and... I don't know*. He didn't understand it at the time, but this is not unusual, so he filed it away under *McCoy: Poetic Idiom*, and concentrated on meeting the Doctor's objections. But now, as he crosses the floor to his erstwhile CO, he can see that McCoy was not wrong. Turn one way, and it's the Captain he's always known: luminous, lit from within by unflinching brilliance, wearing command as though it had been created specifically for him, easy in his skin. Turn the other, and he's... different. The eyes have dulled. The sheen has rubbed off his skin. He looks tired, older. Diminished.

Caged. The word slides into place like a key into an obstinate lock as he closes the final footsteps between them and folds his hands safely behind his back. It's not logical, but it fits too neatly to dislodge it from its hold.

“Captain,” he says.

“Commodore,” says Kirk, with a self-deprecating grin that lances icy shame into Spock's belly. The first word they've spoken in weeks, and it's wrong. But Kirk only quirks an eyebrow, open-faced and unabashed, and Spock understands that the correction was not a reproach, but, perhaps, a kind of exorcism. *Mock it with me*, says Kirk's expression, but how can he do that?

He inclines his head. “Commodore,” he says and, in the depths of Kirk's eyes, a small flame dies.

But he smiles. It's not the smile he typically turns on Spock, but it's passable. He says, “It's good to see you, my friend.”

Spock is not certain that he can answer in kind. So he simply says, “Indeed,” and understands that

it's so far from adequate that he might have been better to say nothing at all.

Kirk's smile wilts a little, but he buries it in formality, taking a step back and twisting his pose so that their circle accommodates his companion. "You remember Admiral Ciana?" he says.

"Vice Admiral," she says. Her voice is light, but her smile is unreadable. "Commodore Kirk has a habit of promoting me in introductions. We met at the press conference," she adds, and raises a *ta'al*.

"Of course," says Spock, and mirrors the gesture.

Her eyes are placid but impenetrable. She says, "I'm sorry we didn't get more time to talk that night. I think Xeno could learn a lot from you, Commander. There's a couple of projects on the books right now that I'd love to have you consult on." She smiles, but her eyes dart, almost imperceptibly, towards Kirk. He doesn't notice.

Spock does. He also sees the brief flash of poorly-concealed consternation that ghosts across the Commodore's face as the Admiral's words register.

"Indeed," says Spock carefully. "I am at Starfleet's disposal."

"If you're busy..." says Kirk, quickly, and something shifts in Ciana's expression: a tiny note of understanding, as though he's answered a question that she hasn't asked. And then he visibly catches himself and schools his expression into complacency.

"Of course. The Torelius VII project," he says. "Although, perhaps Commander Spock's clearance level..."

"He has clearance," says Ciana mildly. Spock's eyebrow lifts of its own accord, but he can't deny it: he has access to Starfleet's central cortex. It's possible his clearance actually *exceeds* Kirk's at present. He opens his mouth to speak, and then thinks better of it: Ciana has probably drawn enough conclusions for one day, and he's not even sure what they are.

She smiles pleasantly. "I gotta get back to the office," she says. "Gentlemen. Enjoy your lunch."

“Ma’am,” says Kirk, and pivots on his heel, turning to watch her leave as she gathers a PADD to her chest and steps smartly away from them. She crosses the floor at an efficient, confident clip, and disappears into the mouth of one of the network of corridors that feeds into the wide atrium.

Kirk releases a breath. He says, without looking around, “Let’s eat.”

~*~

Kirk has arranged for an aircar to take them into the city. “I prefer to avoid the Officer’s Mess,” he says, and the wry curl of his lips is explanation enough for Spock.

They walk in silence along the corridor that leads to the departure lot. Spock keeps his hands folded behind his back and Kirk, after a moment’s hesitation, follows suit. On the edge of his eyeline, Spock sees his companion shoot a lightning glance in his direction as he clears his throat.

“So,” says Kirk, with resolution. “How have you been?”

“I am well,” says Spock, and wishes he could establish safe ground on which to elaborate on those three syllables.

Kirk nods. “Good,” he says. Quiet footfall carries them forward another few paces. “Good.”

“And you?” says Spock, and hopes that the desperate grappling for words is not evident in his tone.

“Hmm? Oh,” says Kirk. “You know. Good. Fine.” A beat. “You know.”

No, in point of fact, Spock does *not* know, and he is positive that “fine” is not the word he would have chosen if he did. If there is a way to say this, however, without devolving them into a conversation that can only end in anger and recrimination, he has no idea what it might be.

They walk on.

~*~

Admiral Ciana has recommended a restaurant in The Embarcadero, on the waterfront, that serves a range of Federal cuisines. A Lieutenant in their section apparently speaks very highly of it, and he ought to know, Kirk assures him: he trained on Beta Aquillae and spent his first four years' service on Andor. The rear balcony is open onto the ocean, but the heat shields drain the bite and the energy from the salty breeze, and the sun, now that it is no longer required to compete with the winter air, is pleasantly warm on his face as they are shown to a secluded table in the corner. Gulls whirl and swoop across the channel, riding the thermals above Yerba Buena Island and plummeting into the silvery waters, crying their mournful song on the wind, but the restaurant itself is bathed in the tranquil hush of the hour before the lunchtime rush. Spock lowers himself into his bayside seat and concentrates on re-establishing his controls as the waiter busies himself with pouring iced water from a condensation-frosted jug.

Kirk leans back in his chair and folds his hands on the table in front of him. His face is impassive, but he regards Spock with an unsettling gaze, and a kind of restive energy worries at the air around him, like a tightly-wound clockwork toy waiting to be set loose.

He says, "I was surprised to get your message."

Spock raises an eyebrow, though he was, in fact, surprised that he sent it. He says, "As I understand it, it is acceptable for former colleagues to communicate in this way."

Kirk purses his lips. "Communication tends to run a little longer than two lines, even between former colleagues," he says. And if there's a slight emphasis on *colleagues*, Spock chooses not to hear it.

There's no point in protesting that he's been raised to value efficiency over eloquence, or that a two-line communique between erstwhile co-workers, on his homeworld, might well read as quite the scandalous display of emotional excess. The fact is, he's not on his homeworld, and Kirk is not Vulcan. Spock knew that the note was unfit for purpose and he sent it anyway, for one very simple reason: he could not work out what else to write.

Commodore Kirk, greetings - I have received word of your promotion. I therefore request a meeting with you at your earliest convenience to offer my congratulations. Regards, Commander

Spock, Starfleet Academy.

He does not need to conjure the shade of Amanda Grayson to shake a reproachful head at the stark, clinical words in order to understand that they're woefully inadequate. He's reasonably certain that his acceptance to the VSA was couched in warmer phraseology.

"Our respective positions have changed," he says. "I was uncertain of the protocol in addressing a personal message to a flag officer." It's not a *complete* lie. It occurred to him, in the same moment that he knew it would never occur to Kirk.

His companion huffs a humorless laugh that's transparently on the wrong side of bitter. "You haven't broken any rules, if that's what you're worried about," he says.

"It is not," says Spock. Across the table, an eyebrow quirks in manifest disbelief. Spock ignores it. "Nevertheless," he says mildly, "You were surprised?"

"I was," says Kirk. He sips from his glass. "The timing was a little... convenient." A beat. He looks up, meeting Spock's gaze from beneath hooded brows. "Did Bones put you up to it?"

The question is not unexpected, and Spock has spent some time considering his response. Lying is unlikely to be effective, given that Kirk is not stupid, but the unexpurgated truth is hardly appropriate either. So he says, "It is true that Doctor McCoy made the suggestion..." Kirk shakes his head with a smile that lacks even the most cursory trace of amusement. "However," adds Spock, "The decision was mine."

"I'd hardly call it a *decision* if it was coerced," says Kirk.

"I was not coerced."

"No?" Both eyebrows arc so high they're almost vertical. "Then why now?"

That's an excellent question. The truthful answer is that, before McCoy's visit, it was possible to willfully misunderstand everything he knew about his Captain and the likelihood of his ability to settle into this new life he's been handed. It was possible to refuse to examine too closely the heart of the man he knows as well as he knows himself, and to pretend that what he needs is the same as what Kirk needs; that the Captain will slide into his gilded cage with a philosophical smile and

never glance back over his shoulder to the way things used to be. The Doctor exploded that comfortable mirage with a single, short sentence - *Never known you to turn your back on him when he needed you, Spock* - and the refuge was gone. All those questions that he hasn't asked have come back to mock him, because he understands now that the reason he hasn't asked them is because he already knew the answer.

But to acknowledge this is to confirm everything that Kirk has decided he knows, written fiercely into the rigid lines of anger and resentment that set his jaw and darken his eyes. Kirk has decided that Spock is here because McCoy has browbeaten him into a pity-visit, and that's one way of looking at it, certainly, but it's a distortion. He doesn't think the Commodore is in the mood for semantics, however.

So he says, "The Doctor's visit confirmed my resolve." It's nearly true. It unpicked his decision to stay away, but this was very much a *decision* and not a choice. "My communication with you was based both on his recommendation and my own inclination."

Kirk stares at him for a long moment. "I don't understand you, Spock," he says softly.

Spock raises an eyebrow, and says, as complaisantly as he can, "Then perhaps I might suggest that very little has changed."

There's a moment where it could go either way. Anger flashes behind Kirk's eyes and darkens his face and Spock steels himself for an explosion, but the truth is, he's not sure himself if his words were intended to provoke or to break the tension in the air. Then, abruptly, the taut lines of fury soften, and the Commodore lets loose a small laugh. It's hardly the poster-child for Human ebullience, but it's a *real* laugh at least.

He says, "Perhaps you're right."

It's possible that there's a war behind the words; that something has had to be leashed in order to allow them to be spoken. Spock's skills have improved, largely thanks to five years' experience of reading the colorful emotional nuances of the man across the table, but this is a whole new level of fluency. He says, carefully, "I am here of my own volition, Jim."

Kirk glances up, so abruptly that Spock believes he has inadvertently caused offense and scours his words for signs of double-meaning or transgression. But the Commodore smiles. It's slow, hesitant, and, though it meets his eyes, it doesn't quite warm them: an uncertain gesture with a wealth of injury behind it. But it's a smile.

Kirk meets and holds Spock's gaze, and he says, "So am I."

~*~

They talk pleasantly over an appetizer of Rigelian *vil klor*, carefully picking their way around conversational potholes while the barriers slowly recede. Spock outlines his dihydrogen experiments, and Kirk remembers their infancy on board the *Enterprise* in a series of abandoned, half-formed hypotheses that showed early promise and then failed to develop. Kirk talks about the newfound appreciation he's been forced to acquire for some of the more spectacularly incomprehensible mission objectives that found their way to his bridge from time to time; he spent seven hours in the Centroplex last week, he says, in meetings that redefined his understanding of the phrase *circular logic*. A little of the old fire creeps back into his eyes as he talks, and it takes Spock a moment to realize that it comes from the memory of stepping outside the atmosphere of his native planet.

"I don't hate it," he says as their main course arrives: *vash g'ralth* for Spock, *klitanta s'mun* for Kirk. If the Commodore's choice of a Vulcan meal is significant, neither of them has commented on it. "It's not what I would have chosen, but it's not so bad. I think I've even gotten used to hearing my name on the holos every five minutes. Although," he adds with a wry smile, "I won't be sorry when they lose interest."

A little over five months ago, Spock remembers hearing a rumor that Kirk was the favorite to be named as commander of the *Archimedes* on her launch. But the *Archimedes* set her first course heading for the Borgolis Nebula four weeks ago, under Captain Flaherty, and Kirk is crouched instead inside a husk of discontented frustration on the shores of San Francisco Bay. It has taken Spock some time to understand, and the knowledge was not precisely welcome when it arrived, but he thinks he can perceive the logic behind the decision: hero-worship and the cult of stardom have conspired to make Kirk too valuable a commodity to spend in the wastes of space. Starfleet needs him earthbound for now, until the novelty wears off.

He thinks he's beginning to understand McCoy's perpetual belligerence.

He says, "I have found the continued interest... unexpected."

A gentle laugh. "Have you? I wish I could say the same. Nogura's far too clever to let this go to

waste.”

“I cannot concur with his logic,” says Spock.

The edges of Kirk’s lips curl upwards, but the gesture could hardly be called a smile. He says, “I agree, but that’s the circus for you. It worked for me, for a while, and now...” A deep breath, eyebrows arched in philosophical surrender. “Now I’m working for it.”

Spock inclines his head. “It is in situations such as this,” he says, “That I am reminded of the Terran cultural hegemony in matters of Starfleet Command.”

Kirk grins. “Let’s not start *that* again,” he says.

“My point is simply that it is illogical to overlook merit and aptitude in favor of less pertinent considerations.”

His friend glances down, worries with his fork at a cube of *vish-hela*. “I prefer not to dwell on it,” he says.

“As you wish,” says Spock.

“That’s just it,” says Kirk. The tone is pleasant, but there’s an edge to it now. “It’s not ‘as I wish’. It’s just the way things are.”

That was really very much Spock’s point, but there’s a momentum building again across the table; he can feel it in the air, like the static build-up that precedes a lightning strike, and he decides to let it slide.

So he says, “That is my understanding of the situation.”

Kirk rolls his eyes. “That’s a politician’s answer.”

An eyebrow arcs. “You would prefer a different response?”

“*Spock.*” It’s a noise of exasperation, haphazardly shaped around his name. “Is it what I would have chosen? No. No, of course it’s not.” A beat. “It’s not starship command,” he says coldly. “But it’s good work. It’s *good* work, and I’m proud of it.”

“Naturally,” says Spock.

Kirk’s eyes narrow. “What should I have done, Spock?” he says. “Resigned? Turned my back on the only career I’ve ever known - the only career I’ve ever *wanted*? Walked away from *any* chance of ever standing on that bridge again?”

No, McCoy was *not* wrong. Another crack worries its way across Spock’s fragmenting shields; this is going to take *hours* of meditation tonight.

“Jim,” he says, “I have made no such suggestion.”

The anger breaks, like clouds chased by the wind, and it leaves the eyes exposed for one empty, desolate second. Then the shutters swing down and the moment is gone. Kirk shakes his head.

“You’re right,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“There is no offense where none is taken,” says Spock, and a lopsided smile tugs on one side of his friend’s mouth.

Kirk says, “A likely story, Commander, but I have five years’ worth of evidence to the contrary to back me up.”

“I find this improbable.”

“I thought you might.”

There is no answer to that, so Spock allows one eyebrow to register his disdain and twirls pickled *mashya* strips around his fork. Kirk grins into his glass as he lifts it to his lips, ice cubes chattering

against each other on the agitated surface of the water. In the manufactured hush of the empty balcony, the sound is amplified; unnaturally loud.

“So, tell me, Mr Spock,” says the Commodore cheerfully as he replaces the beaker, water glistening on his upper lip. “Are you really going to consult with Xeno on Torelius VII?”

“Should the order be given,” says Spock. The eyebrow arcs again. “I would remind you, Jim: you are no longer the ranking officer in my immediate environment.”

As conversational gambits go, this one is riskier than common sense dictates, and he can feel a corresponding tension in his shoulders while he waits for Kirk’s reaction. There was a time when this kind of casual provocation would have been *de rigueur*, but the man in front of Spock is several shades removed from the captain he used to know; even the name has changed. Spock finds that he cannot confidently predict the likely response, and this is... disquieting.

But Kirk, after a moment’s hesitation, offers a wry smile and drops his eyes to his plate as he spears a stalk of *fori*. “Touché,” he says. It’s possible that the air hums with dissipating tension; it’s also possible that Spock is seeking evidence of something that isn’t there. “I won’t deny we could use your help. But I believe you’ll find it quite pedestrian.”

Spock considers the possibility of that descriptor applying to *any* assignment involving James T Kirk, and privately doubts it. But he says, “Every project encompasses elements of the banal.”

“I wouldn’t call any of our joint ventures ‘banal’,” says Kirk cheerfully.

“I do not believe,” says Spock, “That you would have expressed similar sentiments at the time. As I recall...”

Kirk rolls his eyes, but they’re dancing. “Not the Pompelius mission *again*.”

“...On several occasions, you expressed your dissatisfaction in the strongest and most unambiguous terms...”

“You’ll never let me forget this, will you?”

“...I believe ‘stultifyingly dull’ was your precise terminology.”

“Every single readout in the vicinity indicated that the ionic wave would bypass the system! And it *did*. Six weeks in orbit around an uninhabited world, protecting a communications array that was in no danger in the first place...”

“I do not comment on the validity or otherwise of the mission,” says Spock.

The corners of Kirk’s mouth twitch. “No. Nor did you at the time, I recall.”

“I was able to use the opportunity to take a number of intriguing gravitational measurements.”

“As ever,” says Kirk, “Our definitions of ‘intriguing’ do not concur. But then...” A beat. “You’re better at this than I am, Spock. I think if they assigned you to a six-by-six metal box, you’d spend your time calculating the combined ionic charge of the oxygen molecules in the air.”

His eyes drop, fixing on his plate, where his fork swirls abstract patterns in the *forati* sauce. Spock hesitates. He is not good at this.

Slowly, carefully, he says, “Such a project would be eminently unlikely to occupy the full eighteen months of our ground assignment, Jim.”

A snort of laughter escapes the downturned face, and Kirk lifts his eyes to meet Spock’s. “You’ll have to forgive my remedial grasp of particle physics, my friend,” he says.

“Naturally,” says Spock, which earns him a full-blown grin. It flares brightly but quickly burns itself out, like a star in supernova.

“Eighteen months,” says Kirk, and purses his lips in a moue. “It sounds longer every time I say it.”

“This is not logi...”

“I know it’s not logical. Allow me a little hyperbole for effect, will you?”

Spock inclines his head. "If I must."

Dryly: "You're too kind."

"Perhaps."

That trails a chuckle out of his companion, but it disperses quickly on the air and the momentary silence that follows in its wake is skittish, frayed around the edges, difficult to read. Kirk says, "I never gave much thought to this. Before. To... how it would be."

"I do not follow," says Spock, although he's fairly sure he does.

A brittle smile. "Earthbound. Grounded." He reaches for his glass, lifts it to his mouth, but before he sips he says, "You heard about Starbase 19?"

"I was asked to decipher part of the original message received by Luna Command," says Spock.

The grin returns abruptly, flushing momentary warmth into Kirk's eyes. "Of course you were," he says.

Spock acknowledges the gentle amusement with a patrician nod. "However," he says, "I have also been apprised of the situation in more general terms."

Kirk nods and the smile recedes, leaving him steel-eyed and serious. It's a gesture that Spock recognizes, this ability to switch from comrade to commander in a single breath. But for the fact that they are sitting in the early spring sunshine of a pleasant late-February morning, on the edge of San Francisco Bay with the Pacific stretched out and glistening at their feet and the keening of gulls piercing the sound dampening fields of the quiet restaurant, he might be staring down a red alert on the bridge of his ship. Turn your head one way, he's the same old Jim Kirk. Turn it another and he's... different.

Slowly, he says, "I never considered what it would be like to have to listen and do nothing." He looks up, and his eyes are locked down tight with that unflinching, dispassionate focus that has kept the *Enterprise* alive through more dangerous encounters than they had any right to survive.

“But sitting at a desk, knowing that there’s a situation, something to do - something that *needs* to be done, and I...” He trails off, frustration curling at the edges of his mouth. “You know what we’d have done, Spock. We’d have found some reason we ought to be the first responders, and they’d have let us, because they’d’ve known we were right. And it wouldn’t have taken us *seventy-two goddamn hours* to get there.”

There are many, many logical - and logistical - objections to everything Kirk has just said, but Spock says nothing. It seems to be the safest course of action.

“To watch and not act,” says the Commodore now. “It goes against every instinct. Everything I’ve ever sworn to uphold.”

The voice is soft but lifeless, as though a cold fury has raged and burned itself out and his words have been raked from the ashes. With rising alarm, Spock identifies contempt in the inanimate tone: disgust for the Captain-that-was who watches, impotently, from the sidelines. Carefully, he says, “Jim...”

But Kirk shakes his head. “I know, I know,” he says. “It’s hubris. It’s arrogance to think that *Enterprise* is the only ship in the fleet; that’s there’s anything we could have done that the *Concordat* and the *Alliance* won’t do. I know,” he says again, but discontent hangs heavy in his face, dragging at the corners of his mouth and darkening his eyes. “I just... I feel *useless*, Spock. And it’s making me jump at shadows.”

A beat. Spock waits, but, no, apparently this is one of those moments in which disclosure can only be achieved with further prompting. So he says, “I do not follow.”

Kirk circles his hands around his glass, tilting it towards him so that the water slices a diagonal line against the canted sides, ice cubes clinking a soft protest. “A theory I had,” he says, eyes unfocused, cast towards the mobile surface of the liquid. “I think... I thought I saw a connection. I don’t know. Maybe...” But the thought breaks off in a sharp intake of breath, and he amends it to another, quiet, “I don’t know.”

Reticence is, perhaps, understandable, but scarcely productive. Spock resists the urge to lament the Human propensity for equivocation, and instead says, as levelly as he can, “A theory concerning the attack on Starbase 19?”

Kirk purses his lips. “A theory concerning the com chatter received at Luna Command.”

An eyebrow quirks. “The message was largely unintelligible.”

“I know. I listened to it.” The Commodore glances up, the ghost of a grin playing across his face. “No doubt we have you to thank for the bits that bear any kind of a passing resemblance to Standard.”

Spock inclines his head. “They are few,” he says.

“I dare say they’d be fewer still without you,” says Kirk. “Still. What little information there is, it’s almost impossible to interpret. Admiral Ciana thought they were talking about a series of attacks in the sector,” he adds, and something about the casual tone with which he references his CO tightens the muscles across Spock’s shoulders and sets his teeth. But Kirk has cast his eyes back into his water glass; he doesn’t see the sudden tension in his companion’s posture, the constriction of his jaw, and Spock buries it before his friend can glance up. “It seems... plausible,” he says. “And I thought, *attacks* - like the attack on Ajillon Prime, like the one on Archanis IV. What if they were a part of the series? What if that’s what the Starbase was trying to communicate before they went dark?”

He meets Spock’s gaze and holds it, and his expression is scrupulously impassive, ambivalence erased behind a veneer of composure. But there’s something ever so slightly off-key about the air of scientific detachment, subtle but enough to advocate a closer look, to uncover the disquiet that peeks through the cracks. This is not idle speculation, but, rather, a confession of sorts, and Spock realizes that he has no idea how he ought to respond. It’s not that the data does not support the extrapolation, it’s only that it requires something of a semantic leap to arrive at Kirk’s hypothesis.

“It seems...” he says, slowly, and he searches for the right word, but several seconds of scouring his brain’s Standard databanks offers no better option than, “...tenuous.”

Kirk watches him thoughtfully for a long moment, eyes hooded and inscrutable, and Spock finds it impossible to determine, from that blank, taciturn stare, whether or not he’s made a tactical error. But then the Commodore huffs a quiet, rueful laugh and drops his gaze towards the table, where his hands worry at a stray thread on his napkin.

“Perhaps,” he says. A beat. “No. You’re right. I can’t connect the attacks to each other, let alone to a Federation Starbase. There are similarities, but why wouldn’t they be similar? Small, isolated communities in sparsely populated systems - of course they’re vulnerable to attack. It proves nothing.”

Kirk takes a deep breath and turns his head towards the water, staring absently over the gentle

wash of white-tipped waves against the leviathan struts of the Bay Bridge. His lips tighten, but otherwise he holds himself so still that it's possible to see the gentle pulse of his carotid artery under the straining skin of his neck. Softly, with difficulty, he says, "There's a part of me wonders..." A sigh. He tries again: "I wonder if I simply *wanted* to see more than there is, and I don't... I don't like that idea, Spock." Black eyes slide sideways to fix on his First with a dark, unreadable stare. "It disturbs me."

Spock steepled his hands and considers the tips of his fingers as he constructs a reply. Distress radiates across the table, like heat from a dying sun, and it strikes him that the confession has been drawn out of his friend like poison from a wound.

Carefully, he says, "Jim. It has not been my experience that you are prone to fabrication, regardless of circumstance."

Across the table, rigid eyebrows gently slope. It's a tiny gesture, but Spock knows his friend well enough to read conflicted relief behind it.

Kirk says, "I'm not sure I know what to think anymore." A beat. "I feel as though both hands are tied behind my back and I'm peering out from a crack beneath the prison door."

"It is my understanding," says Spock, "that captivity is often a question of perspective."

A diffident grin. "Metaphor, Mr Spock? I believe you're picking up bad habits on your Terran assignment."

"Nevertheless," says Spock. "These are the circumstances in which we find ourselves."

"*Kaiidth*?" says Kirk, which causes Spock's eyebrow to quirk of its own accord. Laughter sputters out of the Commodore; it lances something malignant in the air. "One day," he says, "It will cease to surprise you when I remember my vocab."

"No doubt," says Spock. "Perhaps that will be the day that you remember the lateral approximant on the central diphthong."

"You know, you've mentioned approximants several times in our practice sessions, and I'm still not sure I know what it means." He holds up a hand as Spock takes a breath to speak. "Nor am I

asking,” he says amiably. “I feel sure that some things are better left unsaid.”

Spock inclines his head. “*Kaiidth*,” he says, although he’s no longer certain they’re talking about pronunciation, or even about Starfleet.

“*Kaiidth*,” echoes Kirk quietly, and, in the depths of his eyes, something... fades.

A deep breath. Resolve drains the darkness from the Commodore’s face and he says, “Well. I guess there’s nothing to do but see what the *Alliance* and the *Concordat* report back. I’ve never been much good at waiting, though, if you recall.”

That’s not *quite* true: Spock has had several opportunities to observe the Captain engaged in an astonishingly disciplined game of political bluff-calling as circumstances dictate, but there’s a subtle difference between *biding time* and *idling*. He says, “If I may?”

Eyebrows arch in mild surprise. “I doubt I’m going to like this.”

Spock inclines his head non-committally. He says, “Whether or not there is a connection to be made between the attacks in the Ajillon and Archanis systems and the attack on Starbase 19, I cannot imagine any circumstances in which the Captain I have followed would be content to accept a judgment that did not accord with his own instinct.” He looks up, fixing his eyes on Kirk’s. “As your former First Officer, this remains my recommendation.”

Kirk purses his lips. “That... wasn’t quite what I was expecting.”

“Nevertheless...”

“Nevertheless,” says Kirk. “Circumstances are not quite what they were. I have no ship and no crew.”

Spock resists the urge to roll his eyes and tries again. “The Captain of the *Enterprise*...” he says, but his companion cuts him off.

“There *is* no Captain of the *Enterprise*,” says Kirk. The tone is gentle but inexorable. “There’s no

Enterprise at all just now, in fact.”

Neither statement is available to challenge on any logical grounds. The *Enterprise*'s commander is no longer of the rank of Captain; nor is the *Enterprise* currently, in any meaningful sense, the *Enterprise*. But the voice is strained, as though the lightness of tone is subject to the kind of tension that could put a dent in the hull of a starship. As though it's designed to mask the defeat that clouds a pair of hazel eyes that refuse to meet his companion's.

Spock revises his earlier estimate: hours of meditation will not suffice. He could spend all night cross-legged on the floor and have nothing to show for it tomorrow; this is going to take *days* to repair.

“I understand,” he says slowly, “That the purpose of the refit is to prepare *Enterprise* for increasingly distant exploratory missions. When the modifications are complete, I believe you will find that your crew will serve below a Commodore as willingly as they served below a Captain.”

Kirk smiles faintly, lets loose a soft laugh, but his gaze darts, unmistakably, to the new braids on his arm.

“We'll see,” he says. He glances up before Spock can reply, and his eyes spark with a kind of determined gaiety that effectively closes off any further discussion of those two words. “And you?” he says lightly. “Perhaps you'll find this teaching assignment of yours a little too comfortable to tempt you back into the privations of deep space.”

“The assignment is adequately stimulating,” says Spock. And then, because the fact of the gentle provocation is a helpful sign, he quirks an eyebrow and adds, “However, I would hardly call it ‘comfortable’.”

Another laugh, stronger this time. “Perhaps not. But you can't tell me that the new sensor processing array isn't quite the incentive, Science Officer.”

“It is impressive,” says Spock. “Though scarcely comparable to the observational possibilities inherent in deep space.”

“I think I'd rather conduct your stellar antimatter analysis from the safety of a Terran terminal screen,” says Kirk, with the conviction of a man who has cause to know exactly *why* this state of affairs is preferable.

Spock acknowledges the truth of this with a sideways nod. It turns out that the data is more robust, in any case, when the sensors responsible for its collection are not in imminent danger of being sucked past an event horizon whose boundaries turned out to be slightly more difficult to predict than anyone expected. He says, "Not every natural phenomenon is suitable for observation in the field."

Kirk smiles, eyes dancing with memory. "We seemed to have a talent for finding the ones that weren't," he says.

"I believe," says Spock, "That Doctor McCoy would agree with this assessment."

Kirk laughs. "Bones..." he says, but the thought goes nowhere, trailing off into silence. His smile slowly fades, dissolving like paper in water, and he turns his head out towards the Bay. He says, "How far can you see with these sensors of yours?"

"Data feeds from every sector in the quadrant in which Starfleet is able to maintain a presence."

"It's not quite the same, though, is it?"

No, it is not. But it's possible that, once again, they're not talking about the same thing. Spock says, "Observation is rarely as satisfactory as participation."

A rapid sideways glance tells him that Kirk has read the other meaning in his words. But he twists another smile out of his recalcitrant lips and says, "Think you could smuggle a Commodore into the imaging suite some time?"

Spock inclines his head. "I am bound to uphold any direct order from a ranking officer."

"Perhaps you could explain that to Bones some time," says Kirk amiably. "I don't believe he ever got that memo."

This is unquestionably true, but Spock can't bring himself to find that worthy of reproach just now. He says, "No doubt it will be critical to some element of your work that you examine sensor data from systems under your consideration."

“No doubt,” says Kirk.

“In such instance, I see no need to ‘smuggle’, Commodore.”

Kirk’s brow furrows at the mention of his title, but he covers it with a smile. “Excellent,” he says. “Perhaps you’ll be good enough to make some suggestions as to which areas of the quadrant I ought to look at.”

“That will be at your discretion,” says Spock.

The smile widens and reaches Kirk’s eyes. He says, “Show me somewhere we’ve never been.”

“As you wish,” says Spock.

Kirk breathes deeply, like a man waking from a long sleep, and leans back in his chair. He lifts his glass, tilts it towards Spock. “Here’s to making the best of things,” he says. And then, softly, so quietly that a Human might strain to hear it, he adds, “*Kaiidth*.”

Chapter 22

They part at Command HQ at Spock's request. An extra thirty seconds will carry them as far as the Academy, but Spock demurs - he wants to walk, he says, and there aren't really any convincing grounds on which to argue the point, so Kirk concedes.

However, his pride can't help but comment. "Afraid I'll show you up in front of all your learned friends?" he says with genuine grin, but he's not sure how much of the question is playful banter and how much of it is intended to bruise the flesh behind those immutable Vulcan shields. Spock, of course, does not react.

"On the contrary," he says, which is one of those phrases he uses that sounds like it means something until you pick it apart and find that there's nothing beneath the scrupulously-polished veneer. "I simply prefer to take advantage of the clement weather."

"Clement?" says Kirk, whose temperature gauge read forty degrees when he left his apartment this morning.

A patrician nod. "Comparatively speaking."

Kirk regards him levelly. "Comparatively? Compared to, say, a desert planet?"

"Compared to many of the winter days I passed in this city as a child," says his companion mildly.

Kirk knows when he's beaten. He grins. "Of course," he says. "I'll leave you to enjoy your clemency, Commander." Spock nods and begins to get to his feet, and Kirk adds, quickly, "Let's not leave it so long next time, though?"

It wasn't supposed to be a question. That hesitant note, the tone of manifest uncertainty: that wasn't supposed to be there. Moreover, it's useless to think that Spock won't notice; his hand has already frozen in the act of moving towards the door release. *Damn.*

Gently, Spock says, "Indeed."

Indeed? Indeed *yes* or indeed *no*? More to the point, which one of those means, *I am inclined to repeat this experience*? But Kirk has already given away more than he intended, and there's no way to ask the question now. So he simply says, "I've missed our talks."

Spock inclines his head. "As have I."

It's not an answer. But it's a start. Kirk smiles, considers raising the *ta'al*, scraps the idea before it's half-formed, and, before he can change his mind, reaches out and closes a hand around his friend's arm. He feels the flesh beneath his fingers freeze, muscles stiffening as though his touch is electric, as though it burns. But no fleeting ghost of distress passes across the impassive eyes; Spock makes no effort to pull himself free from the grip. He simply holds himself still until Kirk lets go.

"Until next time," says Kirk.

"Until then," says Spock.

~*~

Perhaps he has a point, though. It's cooler in Horseshoe Bay than on the Presidio, but the sky is visible above the clouds for the first time in forever and the air smells fresh, like distant rain and growing things. As Kirk follows the short path down the gentle slope that leads from the arrivals lot to the Bozeman Center, he can feel the morning's fug lifting from his soul like mist evaporating on the Bay. *Until then*, said Spock, and, if it wasn't exactly committal, neither was it dismissive. Kirk has plenty of reason to recognize a brush-off from his former First, and that wasn't it. It's possible this is going to be all right.

Xeno is currently cresting the clamorous peak of one of its daily cycles of meltdown and complicated recovery, and the lobby is a tide of moving bodies and noise and information. Kirk weaves through the crossfire with practiced ease, circling quickly around an Ensign with an armful of PADDs and paper heaped in a precarious tower that stretches from her belly to her chin, and glancing absently towards the screens in case they might hold any hint as to what's set off the current commotion. A frantic wave from the far corner draws his eye towards his Yeoman, one hand pressed to her earpiece as she carries on a conversation with persons unknown, the other fluttering insistently in the air above her head. Kirk smothers a grin and shoulders his way across the floor to her cubicle.

She's nodding along with her unseen speaker, although her terminal screen is blank and non-verbal cues are unlikely to pass successfully along an audio-only line. "Uh-huh, yup," she's saying. A glance up. "Lieutenant Commander, can you hold for just a moment? Thank you, ma'am." To Kirk, as she mutes the line: "Sir, the latest reports from OpTacs and Expansion are on your terminal. Commodore Kel needs to reschedule your 1500, but he says he's about forty-eight hours away from a green light on opening up Epsilon Delta Rho, which puts Barsamin IX back on the table. Also, sir, you might want to check the feeds from Sector 44C; there's been some chatter from the *Cincinnatus* indicating a possible outbreak of hostilities in 16 Cygni B. And Admiral Ciana wants to see you when you have a moment, sir - she's with Admirals Appiah and Bell just now, but she's due to finish at 1445."

It's always safest to wait a couple of seconds after Sanders stops speaking, just to be sure, but when nothing more is forthcoming, Kirk says, "Thank you, Yeoman."

"Thank you, sir," she says, and she's back to the Lieutenant Commander before she's drawn another breath, "Ma'am, thank you for holding - I can tell you that Xeno *does* hold the files for the settlement proposals, but I can't give you details of the precise location... Uh-huh... Yup, I understand that..."

She's not looking at him, so there's no point in hiding the buoyant grin that's struggling to break free across his face as he battles his way across the short space to the cool quiet of his office and lets the door slide shut on the tumult outside. He hasn't crossed this threshold yet today and the windows are still darkened from the night before, but they lighten with a gentle command, and the powder-blue and silver of the Bay beyond rush in to fill the room. Weak, low sunlight casts a pearlescent sheen on the glass, just enough to reflect the ghost of himself back at him, shaded in washed-out, ethereal grays against the San Francisco skyline, and he wonders, vaguely, what Spock saw when he looked at him this morning. He wonders if he's the same man that lost sight of his friend in a crowded room on a crowded night. He wonders if...

No. He's not going there. That door is closed.

Kirk crosses to his synthesizer and punches in the code for coffee: very hot and very strong. From this angle, it's possible to see that his terminal screen is tastefully but insistently blinking a summons, but he ignores it and turns back to the window. The work will wait for him; it's not as though anyone's life is dependent on Kirk's presence behind a computer screen in the next fifteen minutes. And how often does he get the chance to simply stand quietly in the early afternoon light and rifle through his thoughts? He feels as though he hasn't seen his native sun in too many years to count: other suns, a hundred others, but his own has been an afterthought at the very back of his head, dismissed when he considered it at all. And home is important. He said as much to Spock, once upon a time.

Maybe the meeting was a mistake. Damn it, there are a lot of ways in which it was *definitely* a mistake. For example, to pluck one particularly pertinent fact straight out of the air, there's the fact that the first thing - the *very first thing* - that registered in his mind when he turned over his shoulder and found his gaze locked with his erstwhile First Officer's, was a violent surge of attraction that clamped steel fingers around his chest like a vise. There is no getting away from this. That same buzz; the gently gnawing thrill that creates a kind of whisper inside his gut and sets his bones on edge; the kinetic disquiet that fires off little haphazard commands to all his motor receptors and forces him to vigorously repress the urge to fidget like a twelve-year-old boy outside the principal's office; the pooling warmth in his belly and the rushing tide of desire; all of this slammed into his central cortex like a Saladin-class starship at Warp 8 in the instant it took him to process the sight of Spock standing just across the lobby.

It's funny. He'd have sworn that drinks with Ciana in the Casa Lavanda was leading somewhere, but the next day they were right back to Kirk and *ma'am* and uniformed salutes. She's easy with him - open, kind, accommodating - but she's been easy with him since he started, and nothing has changed these past days. He looks at her sometimes, stolen glances in idle moments, and wonders if he's sorry he went home alone that night. There's no question that she's attractive, but is he attracted to her? Shouldn't he *know* if he is? They were talking this morning, half business, half pleasure, and he was watching the play of the unexpected sunlight on her skin, the way it drifted across her shifting face, the way it caught on the warmth of her smile and amplified it, and he could see that she was beautiful, but the knowledge was abstract, as though he was learning how to see it. And then he turned over his shoulder and saw a figure in science blues standing on the edge of the shadows, and there was nothing academic about it. Ciana is beautiful, but she's just... not Spock.

As if on cue, his door buzzes, and he knows by the way that it opens before he has a chance to call out a response - and by the way she seems to have made some kind of arcane art out of turning up as soon as he starts thinking about her - that it will be his CO.

"Hey," she says. "How was lunch?"

"Good," he says. "Your recommendation was excellent, thank you. I heard about 16 Cygni B."

"Ugh." She rolls her eyes. "It's a fiasco. How many times did you tell them? Maybe now they'll actually start *listening* to the guy they put in charge of making sure this kind of thing doesn't happen, but I guess I won't hold my breath."

Nor will Kirk. He says, "There's a chance our presence precipitated the outbreak..."

But Ciana shakes her head. "It's not an outbreak *per se*, more like a pissing contest got out of hand," she says. "It'll simmer down. The *Cincinnatus* is going to hang back and observe for a few

days, but this is their business, Kirk. Official line is we're staying out of it. They weren't ready."

He shrugs his eyebrows. "I believe that's what my report said."

"Yup, the one I saw sure read a lot like that." She sighs, crosses her arms. "Talking of reports," she says. "You won't believe what just landed on my desk."

Kirk looks up. "The *Concordat*?"

She nods - a sharp, utilitarian gesture. "You got a minute? You should really see this."

~*~

The image on the screen looks very much like a Federation starbase might look if someone turned out all the lights and left it suspended in space, black against black in the center of the void. Searchlights caress the edges, picking out blank viewing ports and airlocks, a shuttle bay with the doors firmly closed, escape pods in a neat circle, motionless and unchanging beneath the rhythmic sweep of a starship's unseeing eye.

"The grid was down for five days all in," says Ciana. Her voice is soft in the silence of the room. "Cold as Andor, but auxiliary power kept central life support running on the command floors; I guess everyone just kind of cosied up together in there and held tight."

Kirk's eyes widen. "There were survivors?"

Ciana smiles faintly. "Not just 'survivors'," she says. "No goddamn casualties. Not so much as a grazed knee, Kirk. Everyone made it."

He releases a breath, wonders where the sense of relief has gone. This ought to feel different. He says, "It... doesn't make any sense. What happened?"

“Damned if anyone knows,” says his CO. She sits back in her chair, stretches her arms above her head. The action pulls her tunic tight against her chest, and he carefully keeps his eyes averted from the outline of her figure. “There was no declaration of hostilities, no attack, nothing. Just - one minute, power, the next minute - darkness.”

“So it was - what? A burned-out *fuse*?”

“Uh-uh.” She shakes her head. “A burned-out fuse wouldn’t make the entire central cortex just... disappear.”

“*Disappear*?”

“It’s gone. Nothing but a whole bunch of trailing wires and a big goddamn hole in the middle of the duotronics floor. It’s why they couldn’t send out a distress beacon. They had enough power, but the subspace link was dead.”

“But... an operation like that takes... hours, certainly. At the very least. Someone must know who’s behind it.”

She shakes her head again. “They’ve got nothing. Commodore Hansen swears he saw no nearby vessels on any of the readout screens.”

“All that means is that the vessel that attacked them was cloaked.”

“Well, sure.”

“Which means that your theory about the Klingons...”

“Is just as plausible as any of maybe half a dozen other races out there, most of whom wouldn’t exactly be sorry to see Starfleet - or the Federation - take the occasional hit.”

Kirk gets halfway to opening his mouth to argue, but aborts the motion before he’s drawn breath. Because she’s right. The Federation exists in an uneasy equilibrium with a handful of other powers, known and half-known, and any one of them could have decided that this was the week to start re-

balancing the authority equation. And there's not one of them that can be safely accused, let alone set straight on the etiquette of galactic relations.

"It doesn't fit anymore," says Ciana now. "A retaliatory smackdown? *That* I can see. But this..."

No. It doesn't fit. "Someone on the Starbase must have seen *something*," he insists.

"They say no," she says.

Kirk throws up his hands, paces to the center of the room. "How is it possible," he snaps, "That the heart of a starbase can be cut out and not a single man or woman on board can say how it happened?"

"It was pitch black," Ciana points out mildly. "Life support was failing. They needed to get to the bridge before Hansen had to seal the lower decks. Whoever did this knew what they were doing. This wasn't a blood feud; this was calculated, planned."

A beat. "And the com chatter?"

Now Ciana rolls her eyes. "You ever meet Hansen?"

Kirk shakes his head. "No."

"I knew him at the Academy - he was an upperclassman my freshman year. Good guy to have at your side in a firefight, but..." She sighs. "Some ways, he's dumber than a bag of hammers, other ways he's so sharp you could cut yourself. And he knows how to play the game. He's set to look pretty damn stupid regardless; last thing he needs is to start looking paranoid too."

"He's *denying* the message?"

"He's denying our interpretation of it. He says they were reporting second-hand rumors, says that the word 'attack' was never in his original transmission. And he's right, or he could be - you've heard the tapes. There's no way to be sure." She looks up, shakes her head. "It's over, Kirk. We count this one as a win and move on. Nobody got hurt, nobody died. There'll be ripples. It'll be

investigated. But not by us.”

Kirk twists on his heel so that he’s facing out of the long, curved window. The sun scatters silver frosting on the surface of the bay, sculpted and chased by a brisk February wind. Spock will be back behind his desk at the Academy by now, buried in numbers, cocooned and oblivious and radiant with discovery. He feels closer than he has for weeks, maybe months, but Kirk needs him at his side right now. He thinks better when he’s there.

Slowly, he says, “Very well. You have my report.”

“Yeah,” she says, and he knows by her tone that she will disregard it. Not because she wants to, but because nobody died and so they count this as a win and move on.

“I take it this puts Draconis back on the table?”

She tilts her head, raises her eyebrows. “Maybe. We’ll see. Could be we’ve lost our window.”

“I’ll have Vasiliou pull together the original files, just in case.”

“Good idea.” She releases a breath, but the tone speaks of an unfinished thought. So it’s not entirely a surprise when she says, “Kirk…”

The trailing sentence. *Never* a good sign. He says, “Yes, ma’am?”

“That’s not the only news I got today.”

He blinks, sucks in a breath to cover the sudden spike of anxiety that pools deep in his belly like ice-water. An eyebrow quirks, and he says, more steadily than he feels, “No?”

“No.” Her brow furrows. “This welcome-home ceremony…”

The ceremony. The goddamn *ceremony*. He almost laughs out loud, so submerged is he by relief.

“Ah,” he says. “They haven’t forgotten.”

“You know brass,” she says. “They don’t let go when it’s something they want. Like a dog with a damn chew toy.”

He acknowledges the truth of that with a thin smile. “I take it they’ve set a date?”

“April 17th. Cochrane Day.” A beat. “I guess... Seems they liked the symbolism.”

Kirk sighs. But maybe it’s better, after all, to finally put this to rest. Cochrane Day is some seven weeks away yet, and every day he feels a little further removed from his old life. Maybe, by then, it’ll feel like it’s possible to say goodbye.

It also gives him an excuse to comm Spock. It could be that the ceremony has its compensations.

“A few hours of hand-shaking and smiling for the holocams,” he says. “I believe I’ll survive.”

She grins, but there’s an edge of relief to it. “I’d get you out of it if I could,” she says.

She would? That’s... unexpected. But he smiles and straightens his spine, and says, “Thank you, ma’am, but that won’t be necessary.”

Ciana’s lips curl upwards, but the look she trains on him is speculative. “Good,” she says. “Okay then. I’ll let you get back to work.”

Kirk nods. “Ma’am,” he says, and turns towards the door.

But he's restless, and *mundane* does not come easily when his mind is animated like this. In another life, he'd have handed the conn over to Chekov or Sulu and sought out Spock for a spot of long-term strategic planning, because strategy is infinitely less tedious when it's something you live and not just something you do. But the infinite variety of that other life was an artifact of distance and the autonomy it necessarily imposes; wired into the command network and readily available at the whim of the admiralty, it turns out that the collective inclination is to commit every tiny fluctuation of brain energy to written or verbal communication, and convention apparently dictates that every such missive requires a response, regardless of merit, relevance, or inclination. Kirk's screen is still blinking when he lets himself back into his office, like the pointed and relentless clearing of a duotronic throat, reminding him that he has - his brow furrows - *seventy-three* new messages since last night. It's amazing anything ever gets *done* in this place, the amount of time everyone spends sending messages to everyone else. At least seventy-two of them will be small roadblocks in the path of progress: gilded *no*'s or budget restrictions, or maybe just wasted time that could be spent in more productive pursuits. Maybe one of them will be a step forward, but that's a hell of a lot of back-steps to counter.

His coffee stands, tepid and disregarded, on the edge of his desk, and he pushes it irritably to one side as he lowers himself into his seat, considers dialing up a fresh cup, decides against it. Resignedly, he tells the computer to scroll through his mail, flicking disinterestedly past lines of blank, impersonal text, and the opening strands of an AV monolog or two, voices flaring and dying like blaring horns or crow-calls beneath his impatient skimming. He has half an idea what he's going to do even as he's pretending he doesn't, skipping irascibly from contact to contact as though each of them has personally offended him by not being from the one person he actually *wants* to hear from, but it's important, for some reason, to maintain this air of reserve. And there it is, buried beneath three days' worth of irrelevance: two lines of impersonal prose, remarkable only for the name attached and the cold rush of anxiety and elation that it shook out of his furiously scrambling brain on the night it arrived.

Two lines. *Two* lines. His eye scans them now quickly, quietly, almost against his will: *Commodore Kirk, greetings - I have received word of your promotion. I therefore request a meeting with you at your earliest convenience to offer my congratulations. Regards, Commander Spock, Starfleet Academy.* Kirk has no idea what he was expecting when he finally found the words to snap a terse command to the computer; he had half an idea that he'd scroll through thirty-some pages of incomprehensible equations only to discover, at the bottom, that the communication had been sent to the wrong person, so anything over and above that was a bonus. Poetry was never likely. But *Hello* might have been nice. Maybe, *How are you, Jim? Are you well? Are you content?*

...Is your work satisfactory? Would you wish for more, or simply greater variety? Are your associates tolerable or do they incite in you that cold fury that always made me raise one eyebrow in silent disapproval? Does your brain try to feel the motion of warp speed through the floor in idle moments? Does it seem as though you are sleepwalking through your days; have you drawn a mental calendar behind your eyelids that you check off every morning as soon as your brain achieves consciousness, just so that you can convince yourself you're twenty-four solar hours closer to release? Do you glance up from your desk after long periods of solitary industry because some part of you that wasn't paying attention thought it heard familiar footsteps outside the door?

Do you fail to glance up at the picture I gave you because every sight of it is a brand new wound cut deep into some part of you that feels as though it will never mend? Do you find yourself whispering little words in Vulcan when the strangest things remind you? Do you avoid looking at the night sky in case you remember which star is mine? Am I your constant companion, day and night; your conscience and your shadow? Am I the last face you see before you sleep?

Of course it said none of these things. It was from *Spock*. But the austere, indifferent missive - thirty blank, featureless words, words that would have been more at home on a subpoena or a planning application - was like an insult by proxy. Better to have sent nothing at all. He went to bed furious and stayed that way for almost forty-eight hours. But in the end... In the end, he guesses, he just missed his friend.

It was *good* to see him. And if nothing has changed in the weeks that they've been apart, if the thin flesh of his lips tingles just beneath the surface every time he remembers dark eyes canted upwards from hooded brows, cautiously distant across the table but unmistakably fixed on Kirk; if the recollection of corded muscles beneath science blues, rigid beneath a stolen touch, tugs incorrigible desire from the base of his spine to twist and pool in his groin; if the memory of his scent, unmistakable, warm, and exotic, persistently and inexorably drags his reverberating mind back to the milky light of an alien world suspended under unfamiliar skies and the press of coveted skin against skin... *kaiidth*. He'll manage.

His communicator is halfway across the table, lying where he tossed it haphazardly on his return from lunch. There are probably a million reasons not to do this, but one of the reasons he's the youngest flag officer in the fleet is because there's a corner of his brain that processes the *should nots* and filters out the ones that it makes more sense to ignore. The jury's still out on this particular decision, but it has the added advantage of being what he wants to do, and there's little enough of that in his life right now. He dials.

The pause that follows his opening hail is neither pronounced nor dismissive, but speaks very clearly of a consternated eyebrow. "Commodore?" says that familiar voice, and Kirk, because he is unobserved, sees no reason to leash the wide, delighted grin that spreads across his face.

"Spock," he says cheerfully. "How are you fixed for lunch again tomorrow? I have some news."

"Ah." Disembodied, it's impossible not to fill in the slow, elegant nod, the slant of his brows, the expressive shift of his eyes. "No doubt you are referring to the report from the *Concordat*."

He wasn't, of course, but it'll do. "How is it," says Kirk amiably, "That I outrank you now by two full grades, and I still have the impression that you got the news ahead of me?"

A small hesitation, and it occurs to Kirk that this momentary silence on an audio-only line is perhaps the aural equivalent of the smiles that never cross his friend's face. Then Spock says, "I was approached by Admiral Getz with an enquiry as to how much data might be recoverable from the Starbase's central cortex."

Kirk's brow furrows. "But the cortex is missing."

"Indeed," says Spock.

"How does he expect you to recover data from a cortex that isn't there?"

"This was, broadly speaking, my response to the Admiral." A beat. "However, I believe this answer came as a surprise."

Laughter surges, warm and irrepressible, from somewhere deep inside Kirk that had gotten used to being cold. He says, "So, how about it - lunch tomorrow? Your choice of venue."

"Tomorrow is difficult," says Spock. "However," he adds, as cold reality prepares to lance a spear right through the heart of a promising *until then*, "I believe that Wednesday would be suitable."

The smile stretches, threatens to engulf the lower half of his face. "Wednesday, then," says Kirk, and signs off.

Chapter 23

Time passes. Weeks melt into weeks as the sun gets yellower and the sky gets bluer. Kirk finds himself walking a little taller as the gathering spring sucks the damp chill out of the earth and the pressure in his chest releases, the angry ache dulling to a low, background keening that can be subsumed beneath the minutiae of daily life. 47 Aeolus C goes nowhere, but Draconis slides back onto the tracks of diplomacy as if it had never stalled, and Eremetis - an impulse-recommendation, prompted by nothing more substantive than the pseudo-Byronic appeal of its solitary moniker on a particularly bad day - turns out to be spectacularly promising on further investigation, and earns him a number of hearty backslaps and a fleeting reputation within the middle echelons of command as a kind of First Contact savant.

And Spock is there. He's there at a distance, and sometimes it's as though a wall separates them, barriers sliding readily into place with no warning, like a ship entering combat. But sometimes it's almost as it was before. Sometimes, they'll be walking side by side, chatting inconsequentially like they used to do, or sitting late into the night at Spock's desk - because they both prefer his office to Kirk's - or rediscovering a city that both of them used to know and then forgot, and Kirk will glance over and see *something* in those dark eyes, something that reminds him all over again that, whatever it was, he wasn't the only one who felt it. Kirk says nothing in these moments; just catches his breath and drops his gaze and waits for it to pass. This new entente of theirs feels... fragile. He has no desire to find out how much pressure it can take before it breaks.

His thirty-seventh birthday passes without incident. Bones is on Ganymede at a conference on blood disorders that he's been grouching about for weeks, as though his irritation might be in any way convincing to someone who's known him as long as Kirk, but he comms in the early morning with an irascible comment about the statistical likelihood of arterial plaque build-up in men approaching 40, and a somewhat contradictory promise to bring back a bottle of something highly flammable from Jovian duty-free. There is the customary communication from Kirk's parents, an unexpected note from a distant cousin whose name he barely remembers, but who clearly watches the holos, and, to his surprise and subdued delight, messages from Uhura and Scotty. Kirk spends a preoccupied journey into his office trying to remember if he even *knows* when either of their birthdays might be and hoping that he hasn't inadvertently missed one of them recently. Ciana says nothing, although she must have seen the date in his files, for which small mercy Kirk will be eternally grateful. Nor does he hear from Spock, beyond a perfunctory note wishing him increased prosperity commensurate with the completion of another year of his life and a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment consistent with Terran cultural tradition. The snort of uncontrollable laughter that escapes his former CO was, perhaps, not the note's intent, though it's impossible to be certain.

As the sun sets, he finds himself restless and wanders to his window to watch the day disappear in a blaze of coral and crimson. A year ago exactly, the only light outside his office was a smattering of silver pinpricks against an endless sea of black, and he was only one year on the wrong side of 35, with a lifetime of possibility spread before him like the open arms of the galaxy. Now he's suddenly a *man approaching 40* and the horizon has shifted, and though he *knows* that this is nothing more than a question of perspective - semantics at the very most - it feels... rooted. As though there's a truth here that goes deeper than numbers. This day last year, he was cresting the

top of a wave that had risen to incredible heights, but the months between have seen it break against the shore. And this was always going to happen, he's known that from the beginning - it's just that it feels as though it happened so *soon*.

It feels as though the past months have been a series of answers to questions that he didn't mean to ask. Look up from the command chair and feel a hooded gaze in the moments before your eyes confirm it, and there's possibility there; in a glance that lingers a moment too long; in the brush of long, musician's fingers against an arm wrapped in command-gold; in a continual, low-level battle to see who can risk the most to save the other. Chip away at layers of reticence, and there's promise there, bright and unexpected. Maybe it would have been better if it had stayed buried safely under fantasy - since he never really believed that there was a chance for anything more, surely it's better not to know that he was right? Confirmation rubs a little of the shine off memories that might otherwise have been warm and pleasant: the touch that could mean anything at all, the friendship that might be more, the hidden meaning in words that are never careless. If the answer was always going to be *no*, then maybe it would be better to have left it hanging, unspoken.

And then he remembers cool lips pressed without hesitation against his, the scent of skin and hair and fabric warmed by the relentless desert air, the taste of copper in his mouth... It's a *good* memory, and, if he thinks of it infrequently, that's only because it has the power, every time, to send him spiralling abruptly into desire and arousal, and there are very few places in his life right now where that sort of thing is anything other than embarrassing or inconvenient or both. If it's their only memory, then at least it's worthy of its disproportionately-elevated importance. So it's laced with threads of melancholy that tug a little tighter every time he stands next to his friend and thinks about what might have been. That will pass.

Everything passes, in the end. Including one's thirty-sixth year, and the day that heralds its end. The world keeps turning and the sun keeps rising, and the calendar in his head keeps counting down the days. Every setting sun is another day closer, and there's a kind of satisfaction in that.

Near the end of the month, Kirk's repeated requests bear fruit, and the interim report into the attack on Starbase 19 appears in his inbox, accompanied by an ill-tempered note from the Vice Admiral in charge of the investigating committee. It's an 8,000-word document, but so much of the material is redacted that sections of it resemble a Rorschach test, and what's left consists largely of several hundred different ways of saying *damned if we know*.

"What did you expect?" says Ciana when he voices his frustration. "They've got nothing to go on. And the prevailing suspicion is basically unprovable and beyond horrifying, so they're not going to make it official."

Kirk was not aware that any of the prevailing suspicions - a half-dozen races whose names are whispered sagely around the corridors of command with the horrified fascination of teenagers recounting urban legends around a campfire - were particularly plausible. But he says, "Can I ask

what's being done to verify their theory?"

His CO leans back in her chair, tilting her head so that she's looking directly into his face. "Let it go, Kirk," she says. "If this needs to come to Xeno, you better believe I'll make sure it does. Right now, there's nothing you or I can do."

Frustration pinches his lips and he sees it register behind her eyes, even as he tries to contain it. She takes a breath, drops her eyes.

"I get that this doesn't come easy to you," she says quietly. "But, Kirk... they're chasing ghosts."

She knows him better than to think it's enough. She has yet to underestimate him. And he knows her well enough to understand that the quiet assurance with which she's asking him to take a step back indicates her access to more information than she's able to share with him. In the quiet darkness of his office that night, Kirk sits with a cooling mug of coffee and scrolls through the monochrome strips of text and fat ribbons of black, scanning for any hidden nuance, any stray phrase or implication. Appended to the opening titles, in 48-point red lettering, is a stark note reminding the reader that the document in question holds classification level three, for all the secrets he could spill in any case from a document that takes such pains to say nothing at all. The Starfleet party line, fed to the holos by an admiral whose face is 98 percent smile, is that a coil malfunction within the central generator led to a catastrophic power failure that destroyed the central cortex beyond repair. Commodore Hansen is the 'Fleet hero who kept the residents safe until help arrived.

Ghosts, he thinks as he scans abstract patterns of black on white against the milky glow of his terminal screen. Smoke and mirrors. Chess. Roulette. An infinite jigsaw with no clues and no color but gray. Chinese whispers in a language he doesn't speak.

Investigations are ongoing, concludes the report. Kirk takes a gulp of lukewarm coffee and scrolls back to page one.

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Vulcans, as Spock will undoubtedly remind him if Kirk's baser nature gets the better of him and he

makes the half-dozen jokes that he wants to make, do not get *excited*. Nor do they experience fannish awe, which is certainly illogical, and probably emotional as well. But there's an uncommon glow to his friend's eyes as they exit the auditorium, and a relaxation of the muscles of his face which, while only *slightly* like a smile, might well qualify as near-hysteria on the streets of ShiKahr. Kirk knows he's grinning like a man with one too many Saurian brandies on board, but it's impossible to do otherwise as the spirited monolog that has accompanied them from their front-row seats, through the sparse crowd and out into the narrow quadrangle, enters its fourteenth consecutive minute and shows no sign of stopping. He can feel the weight of the past week's frustrations and compromises lifting from his shoulders as they walk, eased away by a relentless tide of infectious enthusiasm against which he has no defence. Kirk is certain that no-one else sees this side of Spock, and every time is a gift.

"However," says Spock, with a brief glance sideways as he's jostled by the rapid passage of a cadet who possibly didn't think *quite* so highly of T'Drega's seminar on the gluon signature of a hypothesized eleven dimensional warp bubble, "Should the Falstaff particle be observed in situ, this would open up several further avenues of investigation. It is possible, in fact, that the wormhole could be sufficiently stabilized that controlled, directed inter-dimensional travel might be achievable. Starfleet's own acceleration experiments are in their infancy, but the initial data would appear to correlate with T'Drega's posited mass transference field. As yet, it has only been possible to measure a seven-dimensional matrix, but if we are to believe..."

Starfleet's experiments, thinks Kirk. He'd be prepared to bet his Commodore's stripes that this is code for *Spock's Side-Project*, quite possibly set in motion one quiet Saturday afternoon while he was waiting for the computer to boot.

The day has been bright and dry and, though dusk has almost finished its lazy segue into night, the air still smells of sun-warmed sidewalks and basking leaves, even as the chill sea breeze rushes in to claim the darkness. Kirk carries his overcoat on his arm for now, but Spock is bundled tightly into his thick duffel, sinking into the brushed wool as though it's a forcefield to hold the cold at bay. This doesn't exactly mitigate the warm rush of affection that is massing and clamoring in Kirk's belly, and he has to leash the urge to reach out a comradely hand to his friend's elbow, as if the secret to keeping warm on a water-rich planet is the hesitant touch of a conflicted flag officer. So he folds his arms beneath the fabric that drapes them, and the sentiment finds its way out of him in a widening of his grin instead.

A raised eyebrow brings the lengthy exposition to an end, and the evening seems a little darker for it. "You are smiling," Spock points out.

"No," says Kirk lightly, which lacks finesse, because he *is*, but he's answering the covert accusation in those words, which no amount of logical reasoning will ever cause Spock to acknowledge. "Just a stray thought, Mr Spock," he adds. "Nothing more."

If Spock is feeling maligned, he will not hesitate to ask for Kirk's own opinion on the lecture; it's the kind of passive-aggressive logic-attack that has ever proved impervious to counter-maneuvers. That he doesn't is, perhaps, testament to the placatory qualities of higher theoretical physics and their effect on Vulcan forbearance, which something that the Captain of a multi-planetary crew either learns early in his tenure or else lives to regret. It's not that Kirk was averse to attending the symposium or that, left to his own devices, he might not have made his own way there - he has heard T'Drega speak before and, if her tone and inflection are something of a powerful sedative, her incisive mind and inspired theoretical conjunctions are like a scientific symphony that makes his brain buzz and raises goosebumps on his arms. It's more that there's a very specific kind of warm and comfortable joy to be had from the fact that Spock wants to be here, and that Kirk is doing something that brings that incandescent glow to his friend's eyes.

The urge to reach out, close the narrow gap between them with a casual press of fingers on rough wool, surges again, and Kirk grips his sleeves under cover of cloth.

They have reached the edge of the campus, emerging onto Fulton Street alongside the towering hulk of St Ignatius, whose ruined eastern bell tower stands out as a pointed reminder of the wars that almost tore the planet apart in centuries past. It would be logical to suggest flagging down a cab, sharing the short journey back to the Residences in easy conversation or companionable silence, but Kirk finds that he's unwilling to let the evening end just yet.

So he offers up an affable smile in the direction of a carefully expressionless face and says, "Plans, Mr Spock?"

An elegant nod. "I have none."

The answer jolts a pleasant shock in the depths of Kirk's stomach; he'd been expecting a rebuff. Hard on its heels is the realization that he hasn't got any further than the vague idea that it might be nice to do *something*, and that hazy suggestion doesn't really have anything concrete in terms of actual specifics to back it up. He glances along the street, hushed and lazy in the evening lull, and decides to come clean.

"Neither do I," he says. "What say we just walk and see where it takes us?"

They've done this before, along the unfamiliar streets of countless cities on countless worlds where Federation feet have never previously passed. Where security is not a concern, it's Kirk's preferred means of getting a take on a new people, and Spock has long since given up on his stone-faced disapproval; it's years since he's even called it illogical. As Spock inclines his head, soft-featured and genial, Kirk indulges, momentarily, that stifled desire to make contact, with the briefest touch of his fingers to his friend's elbow. It can masquerade as direction, a gentle instruction to follow his right turn and set off along the street that leads - he belatedly remembers -

towards Golden Gate Park and the Botanical Gardens, where a series of Xeno domes maintain a variety of temperatures that dance around Vulcan-normal. Spock betrays no reaction beyond an alteration of his course in line with his companion, so perhaps it's Kirk's imagination that conjures up a frisson of non-specific energy as his skin brushes wool, like a minor electric shock in the bones of his hands and the base of his spine. A rapid, hooded glance at his friend's face reveals nothing but imperturbable Vulcan calm. Kirk lets his hand fall away.

They move unhurriedly along the broad thoroughfare, and Kirk opts to shrug on his overcoat, less to counteract the cold than to allow him to fold his hands safely behind his back and out of temptation's way. The passage of infrequent cars disturbs the air overhead, and Kirk glances up to follow their path, eyes drawn inexorably upwards towards the reticent sparkle of early stars against the indigo sky. In his peripheral vision, he sees Spock's gaze follow and, abruptly, drop. It's on Kirk's lips to ask about the starfield painted across the Vulcan night, the one he stared at with unseeing eyes on an evening that they never acknowledge, but the words die before they can draw breath. There are things that can't be said and questions that can't be asked; it's just the way things are now.

So instead he says, "You were telling me about your acceleration experiments, I believe."

Spock offers the non-committal nod of a Vulcan who has realized that the mask has slipped and allowed a bright flash of unbridled enthusiasm to shine through. "I regret that they have proved unsatisfactory to date," he says. "While the Marin County array is undoubtedly the most suitable planetside facility in this sector, Terran conditions in general are not ideal for the formation of the Falstaff matrix."

"Ah." Kirk plasters a grin he doesn't feel across his face. "Might this be further evidence of Human inadequacy, Mr Spock?"

"On the contrary," says Spock, who does not even deign to raise an eyebrow at the tone, "The gravitational discrepancies that inhibit matricial formation are directly linked to the relative youth of your planet." A beat. "It seems... unreasonable... to hold Humanity accountable for this."

Kirk purses his lips. "That's... magnanimous of you," he says. Quiet footsteps carry them forward a few paces before he makes himself ask, "And where might you find your ideal conditions?"

There is a moment's silence. Then Spock says, "The ideal environment does not exist."

It's - possibly - an answer to the unasked question, the one that tries very hard not to wonder pointedly once again about what the hell someone like Spock is doing cooped up in academia when

at least ninety-seven percent of Federation Space would be more appropriate to his aptitudes and interests. But just in case it isn't, Kirk asks, "Presumably, some sort of offworld facility...?"

"It is conceivable that a deep space environment might be more suitable," says Spock slowly. And then he adds, "However, Starfleet's Terran facilities are immeasurably superior to those found in any field station."

Genuine delight, a mixture of amusement and creeping relief, lights the Commodore's smile. But he says, cheerfully, "I told you you'd get too comfortable in this teaching assignment of yours."

"Indeed," says Spock, which is neither a response nor an engagement with the manifest provocation embedded in the words. But it's not a denial either.

They cross the road at the intersection with Stanyan and skirt the border of Golden Gate Park. It's late for the dinner crowd and early for the theater crowd, but the thoroughfare is busy regardless: a constant stream of restless traffic that billows the cooling air and causes Spock to burrow more deeply into his coat. Kirk catches the subtle gesture in his peripheral vision and feels an inappropriate smile tug at his lips.

To cover it he says, lightly, "I guess we're going to the Park, then."

Spock inclines his head. "It would appear so."

A beat. "Is that all right with you?"

"I have no objection," says Spock mildly. Kirk glances at him, but he's scanning the street impassively, eyes canted towards the approaching greenery. "It has been my habit to make extensive use of the grounds whenever I have had occasion to spend any length of time in San Francisco."

A slow smile catches at the edge of Kirk's mouth. Funny how, even after five unbroken years of the man's company, it's still possible to come across these little morsels of brand new information, buried like hidden gems beneath the strata of familiarity. He says, "I didn't know that."

"There is no reason you should," says Spock, which sounds a lot like a barrier sliding into place. But the body language is wrong: he's not closed off or distant; there's nothing about his stance that

indicates the violation of a hidden boundary.

Kirk hesitates. “Perhaps not,” he says carefully. “It just... hadn’t occurred to me.” A covert glance sideways, and he risks a sly, “You. In the great Terran outdoors.” A beat. “Voluntarily.”

That earns him a full-scale facial lockdown, the one that firmly, and with great dignity, implies that the recipient has demonstrated illogic that’s facile even by Human standards. Kirk thinks of it as the McCoy Glare, in honor of its usual target.

Spock doesn’t sigh; not quite. But he says, “I believe I have expressed my appreciation of the natural sciences on several occasions.”

“You have,” says Kirk. Eyebrows arc in open-faced innocence. “I just thought you preferred to exercise that appreciation on planets where the moisture content was significantly lower.”

Spock acknowledges the truth of that with a small nod. “Nevertheless,” he says, “I find that there are many days on which the benefits outweigh the bodily discomfort.”

“I see.” Kirk purses his lips around the smile that rises relentlessly from some irrepressible spring of warmth deep inside him. “You’re an example to us all, Mr Spock,” he says, and enjoys the slow nod it earns him in return, as Spock manifestly tries to work out if he’s being serious and what the appropriate response might be either way. The urge to reach out, to close the distance between them, to make some small physical connection, surges again, and Kirk twists his fingers tightly around each other, anchoring them in place. He says, lightly, “Would it surprise you to learn that I used to spend half my free time in this park myself when I was a cadet?”

“It would not,” says Spock.

Kirk’s eyebrows achieve the diagonal. “Oh?”

“I see no reason to find it out of keeping with your character,” says Spock. “Confinement is not your natural state.”

“Ah,” says Kirk, and drops his head. He watches his footfall along the pavement for a moment - steady, measured paces in civilian shoes that make his feet look like they belong to someone else. He says, “You know... I haven’t been back once since we’ve been grounded.”

There's a short pause, a couple of seconds in which the absence of a response has time to become pronounced. Kirk looks up just as Spock breaks it with an even, all-purpose, "Indeed," but he's just in time to catch the sideways glance that accompanies it. It's brief, covert - furtive, even - and it completely repurposes those two syllables.

Bones would make some acerbic comment about the proximity of public gardens to a desk in 'Fleet Command, and the concomitant availability of the former to a man who spends every waking moment at the latter. Spock won't say that, and not only because he has cast-iron evidence of the fact that Kirk *does*, in fact, leave his office these days - and on a semi-regular basis, too. But, beyond the practicalities of the situation, Spock has always been able to hear the words that Kirk doesn't say, no matter how stridently he might protest emotional illiteracy. It makes it 100% harder to have an inconsequential conversation with him, but sometimes that's... not a bad thing.

They walk a while in silence. The street is busy, but the traffic stays above the high redwoods that fringe the road on either side, like nature's own sound-dampening field, and, through the thick brush, it's possible to see the glow of the Xenon domes in the near distance. The air is heavy with the scent of magnolia, drifting in waves along the narrow paths that lead through the trees. They turn off at random, setting out along a lamplit avenue edged with out-of-season hebe and budding mount vernon laurel, keeping easy time with the one solitary figure far ahead, shadowed by distance, with whom they share the road. Spock casts a scientist's eye over the foliage as they walk, and Kirk wonders if he's scanning it with his mother's voice in his head, or his father's. Son of Vulcan or son of Earth; maybe neither, after all.

Muted sounds of distant Human life filter through the copse, but on the path there's only the gentle clip of quiet footfall and the unseen industry of local fauna beneath the brush. Silence has never been a problem for them, but Kirk finds himself uneasy, in the absence of background noise, as though the hush presses in from all directions the longer it persists. He clears his throat experimentally, and it cuts through the oppressive quiet like a knife through cold butter. Spock glances sideways but says nothing, and Kirk finds himself wondering if his discomfort is as obvious as it feels.

He says, to cover it, "You know, I got another memo across my desk yesterday from Operational Command." A beat as he slides his eyes towards his companion to find, predictably, an eyebrow raised in polite enquiry. "Wanting to know why I wasn't recommending you for promotion."

It's almost certainly the wrong thing to say. He realizes this as the words escape, but, really, it was the memo or the weather, and he's not *that* desperate yet.

"Indeed?" says Spock, and it's hard to tell if that's an *Indeed, please elaborate*; an *Indeed, let's get this over with since you're evidently going to proceed whether or not I offer my explicit permission*

and it pleases me to pretend that I acquiesce; or possibly an *Indeed*, and do we really have to have *this conversation again*? The first interpretation suits Kirk best, so he takes it as his cue.

“The ceremony has them antsy,” he says with a wry smile. “I guess they think it looks strange. Most all of the senior crew are stepping up a grade. They believe it reflects poorly on Federal relations that the only non-Human member of the team isn’t adding to his stripes.”

There is a small pause - almost imperceptible, but Kirk has known Spock long enough to hear the equivocation buried in that slight hesitation. “I have never sought command,” says Spock.

He’s right, of course. He’s a scientist above all things; promotion is useful to him only inasmuch as it provides access to better computers. And for all the layers of himself that he’s gradually stripped away as friendship has grounded him more firmly in his sense of who he is, at a very fundamental level he understands neither Human nor Vulcan pack mentality. He cannot be what either people wants him to be, and he knows this, and part of him - the part that made Kirk fall in love so damn hard - has stopped trying. He *should* be a captain, for everything it represents, but it’s hollow ostentation; it would close off some essential part of him for the sake of a paper exercise in vainglory, and isn’t that, after all, what has Kirk tethered to a planet he’d thought he’d left behind?

He didn’t phrase his reply in quite those terms; ‘Fleet Command don’t tend to think in abstracts and actual people. Instead, he reiterated the results of the Captain and First Officer’s end of mission review meeting - and wasn’t *that* just four hours of painful reserve and excruciating conversational lulls - and restated his strong recommendation that Commander Spock be allowed to bypass the usual products of Human excitability. He hopes it will be enough.

“I know,” he says now. He tries a smile; it falls only slightly flat. “They’ll just have to think of some other way to venerate your efforts.”

Beside him, the temperature drops a couple of degrees. Kirk smothers a smile. Spock won’t go so far as to openly *disapprove* of the ceremony, but he’s made a couple of barbed comments about politically expedient ritual that are practically mutinous, coming from him. As they emerge from the redwood grove and circle around the Class P dome, which includes specimens from both Andor and Rigel X and therefore maintains an ambient environment that hovers in the mid-twenties and below, he says - not for the first time - “It is not logical to reward the performance of duty.”

Kirk huffs a quiet laugh. “You’ve been in the service long enough to know that’s not the way it works,” he says.

“I swore an oath to uphold Starfleet’s fundamental tenets and to abide by its regulations,” says

Spock stubbornly; or, at least, what counts for “stubbornly” in a tone that labors hard to excise all emotional nuance. “I have abided by that oath to the best of my ability. It is extraneous to unduly praise the exercise of my obligation.”

“Obligation?” says Kirk lightly. “Mr Spock, I’ve seen ‘the exercise of obligation’ in action more times than I care to count, and it bears no relation to your performance on the *Enterprise*. If anything, the opposite is true.”

“I see no reason to cast aspersions,” says Spock, with an imperious eyebrow that might, once upon a time, have been convincing. These days, it provokes an unfailing burst of cheerful laughter that carries them around the curve of the polar dome and into an intersection of temperate Terran-normal plantation.

“Look,” says Kirk, as they pass through dormant flower beds in every shade of green, nestled beneath the louring wall of static that separates the high-spectrum Class M dome from the rigors of north-Californian weather, “Neither one of us is happy with the situation, but it stands. We turn up, we shake hands, we pose for pictures. *That* is the performance of duty: hate it but do it anyway.” He grins. “No doubt you had cause enough to reflect on *that* while you served on my bridge.”

Spock’s eyebrows arch as he considers the question. “Never to this extent,” he says at last.

Laughter sputters out of his companion. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” says Kirk.

Spock inclines his head. “As you wish.”

Kirk shoots him a sideways grin, which Spock studiously ignores. ““Not quite so illogical as Starfleet Command’,” he says cheerfully. His skin tingles as the path leads them through the heat shields and into the dome. “That may be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me, Commander.”

This early into the year, the dome is at double strength and the temperature differential, as they emerge through the curtain of frustrated current - bubbling against every nerve like a shaken can of soda - is pronounced. Kirk sucks in a breath of heated air as sweat prickles uncomfortably beneath his shirt, and takes a moment to regret the impulse that made him shrug on an entirely superfluous coat. But a hooded glance towards Spock reveals a subtle relaxation of his shoulders: tension leaching from rigid muscles; a gentle easing of furrows in his brow; a small intake of breath which, in another man, might be a gesture of satisfaction. Kirk says nothing, and looks away before he can be seen.

The ground is uneven beneath their feet, desiccated by underground radiators that bleed the moisture from the soil and leave it cracked and friable, coated in a layer of fine, sandy dust. Paths feed into the dome from every direction, but the sculpted interior - high, looming rock formations shipped from distant worlds and fringed by irregular whorls of thick brush and straggly desert trees - locks the display ground into discrete sectors, divided by oxygen concentration, and linked by leaf-shrouded avenues that hide their occupants from sight. They strike out counter-clockwise for no other reason than that a flash of crimson glimpsed through the thick foliage to the left might be cadet reds, though it's equally possible that they are alone inside the warm cocoon of static and vaguely-confused verdure.

The air is thinner than Terran-normal in this section, subtly but palpably *wrong* in the Human chest. Kirk is aware of a tightness beneath his ribs as his lungs refuse to be persuaded that they're not slowly suffocating, and a gnawing buzz of muted anxiety from a disregarded section of his brain that remembers this sensation all too well. It doesn't help that he recognizes *alem-vedik* and *g'teth* between the spreading foliage, and he doesn't have to wonder too hard about where he might have learned the names of two desert-dwelling Vulcan plants. He clears his throat, a reflexive action designed to reset the sudden onset of inner chaos, and glances sideways at Spock. Fortunately, this gives him the opportunity to notice that, at some point along the path, the top two buttons of his companion's overcoat have found themselves undone.

Kirk buries the rush of amusement in an innocent arch of his eyebrows. "Acclimatizing, Mr Spock?" he says.

There is a short pause, as of a man who recognizes the tone and is considering his options. Presently, he settles for, "Somewhat."

A recalcitrant grin twitches one corner of the Commodore's mouth. "I'm glad to hear that," he says. "I was beginning to worry that our spring weather was getting the better of you."

An imperious brow scrapes Spock's hairline. "I believe it was the Terran author Mark Twain," he says, "Who wrote, 'The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco'."

The grin breaks free. Spock is almost certainly acutely aware that Kirk's fondness for classical literature does not extend to an encyclopedic knowledge of every word that ever fell from the pens of the authors in question, and there's simply no point in arguing with an eidetic memory. So instead, he says, "He should have tried Iowa."

Spock tilts his head, considering. "I understood the Iowan climate to be quite temperate."

“Did you?” Kirk laughs. “I guess that depends on who you ask.”

“I have only my mother’s opinion,” says Spock, in the careless manner of a man who has no cause to know that his words are significant. “She visited several years ago.”

Ah, Iowa. The remembered voice sinks like stone in Kirk’s belly, slicing through the ambient heat to trail tendrils of ice across his chest and down his spine. *I visited once when we were on Earth for several months...*

But Spock was not there for that conversation; he was indoors with his father, locked in a battle of vicious politesse. He has no way of knowing that this is information that Kirk already possesses; that circumstances since have conspired to make it one of the least significant features of that evening, buried close to the surface where it drifts, disregarded but not forgotten. Or that a throwaway reference now is enough to catapult his companion back into that gnawing desire that ate at his reason for a long time - many months - and then, later, at a tender place, just below his ribs.

Kirk freezes his hollow smile in place, a thin veneer of composure that resists him all the way; his cheeks are already protesting the strain. But he keeps his voice light, casual, and he says, “Then I’ll bet she didn’t visit in winter.”

“In August, I believe.” Spock glances sideways, but it’s impossible to tell if the gesture is meaningful; if it’s a response to some nuance imperfectly ironed out of the Commodore’s tone, or if he’s simply glancing sideways. “I was studying at the time and could not accompany her.”

They pass through a curtain of trailing *uxgarash* leaves that billow a wave of lemon-mint perfume into the stifling air, curling around the sharp, unmistakable scent of *birkeen*, *hla-meth*, a subtle undercurrent of *favinut* dancing on the thermals. *Waneti* weaves through the crawling shrubbery that fringes the path, and, ahead of them, as the path curves abruptly to the right around a monolithic pillar of *hishid-kov*, he thinks he sees the bright flare of *yelas* beneath an *in-du-ka*. The sense of temporal disjunction couldn’t be more pronounced. All that’s missing are the damn roses.

Kirk is aware that he’s been silent too long even before Spock half-turns a quizzical eyebrow over his shoulder, but he wants to make damn sure that none of the images clamoring for attention against the inside of his skull bleed their way into his response. His smile, he thinks, is wilting around the edges, so he forces both corners of his lips into position, and says, as nonchalantly as he can, “Well. I guess when one is used to Vulcan weather, 90 degrees might count as ‘temperate’.”

It’s not enough. He didn’t really expect it would be, but he gave it his best shot. Kirk can feel

Spock's evaluative stare even without looking, and, when he makes himself glance upwards it's to find dark eyes fixed on his, with an expression that would be unreadable if it wasn't for the fact that Kirk is expecting exactly what he sees there.

"Perhaps," says Spock carefully, though the man does *everything* carefully, so Kirk's not entirely sure what he's using as his basis for comparison. For a moment, it looks as though he'll add to this one, tightly-drawn, reluctant word and Kirk steels himself for an acknowledgment, a recognition that everything they say right now has a shadow-meaning, words buried beneath layers of semantics and double-think, equivocal and never quite in context. The knowledge flashes behind Spock's eyes - a fleeting moment of confession - and then it's gone, chased to the shadows by something that's part petition, part granite-faced obstinacy.

He nods, slowly, in response to a question Kirk hasn't asked. And Kirk realizes that this is as close as he's going to get: a tacit confirmation that Spock remembers too, that he thinks about it too, that he's read all of the sensory cues and that he is 100 percent aligned with where Kirk's memory has gotten itself snagged right now. And, hard on the heels of this understanding, comes the realization that everything, *everything*, depends on their joint ability to pretend not to know this.

A flash of pale skin, bleached white by the thin light of the Watcher, luminous against the creeping blackness of a desert night. He tastes of copper and pepper and heat, and the scent of him fills Kirk's lungs with every breath. His body is lean and hard and folded tightly against him as he presses them both into the wall, where affronted flowers protest the invasion in a cloud of heady, honey-sweet perfume...

It's a good memory. It's all they're likely to have, and so it will have to be sufficient to dampen down this spiralling need that pools in his belly and his groin, that tingles in the ends of fingers that simply want to reach forward and *claim* in the name of the vague sense of sadness and loss that burns the back of his throat. It's a *good* memory. And it only works if Spock remains within reach; cut him out of the equation, and it becomes the story of something precious gone forever. One day, he'll learn how to do this so well that it'll fade into the background and they'll simply *be*, without any need for repression or constraint. Not today, but one day.

So Kirk finds a smile from some hidden reserves of stubborn determination, and plasters it across his face. With a little bit of effort, he thinks he can make it meet his eyes. He smiles, and he turns it on Spock, and he says, "Undoubtedly, Mr Spock." A beat, but it's easier now that the decision has been made. "After fifteen minutes inside this dome, I think I'd find a 100-degree heatwave pleasantly refreshing by comparison."

"If you are uncomfortable..." says Spock, and a prickle of something dark and malignant worries itself into the hollow beneath Kirk's ribs.

But he takes a deep breath, which sears the inside of his nostrils and startles his lungs, and he says, "Perhaps a little. But it's nothing I can't handle." He steps back, gestures to the path spread out before them, twisting into the shadow of rock and greenery. "Shall we?" he says.

Chapter 24

Routine is useful. The universe is routine, and, where it isn't, there is always something to be learned. Chaos is simply a series of patterns that are not yet obvious, but it all devolves, eventually, into numeric predictability. Suns rise. Planets revolve. Fusion quietly eats out the heart of every star and electrons dance a perpetual waltz through the wastes of atomic space. It's not quite the same thing as rising every day at seven minutes to six and setting the synthesizer to a four minute cycle that allows adequate time beneath the sonics before repairing to a stool beneath the window for a nutritionally-balanced breakfast as the chronometer chimes the hour, but the principle is the same. Routine. It's the order beneath turmoil. It serves to iron out the glitches. It's a scientist's refuge.

He managed three hours and forty-four minutes of sleep last night, and a meditative trance that lasted for a further one hour, fourteen. On the whole, this is better than expected, although it's too early to tell if it's part of a general improvement or an anomaly caused by the erosion of his mind's resistance over the past few wakeful nights. Eventually, this will start to become a serious problem, but not yet: a certain amount of tolerance remains for now. A brief survey of his internal processes reveals sub-optimal functionality, but nothing to cause concern; he must simply endeavor to extend his afternoon meditations by approximately fifteen minutes, and this can be achieved in today's schedule.

Dawn is a thin line of gray on the horizon, chasing the late stars from the sky and staining the edges of low, wispy clouds in slate and silver. Spock sips from a glass of chilled water as he scrolls through his unread messages: a request for information from the leader of a research team on Epsilon Phi Pictoris; overnight readouts from the Marin County array; seven invitations to a variety of conferences, three of whom want him as their keynote speaker; an updated agenda for Friday's faculty meeting; and five memos marked *classified*, which will have to wait until he's in the office. There's a blanket request from a colleague to the entire department for cover for his two early seminars; a gaudy, flashing banner informing him that he could already be a winner (four lucky contestants have won the holiday of a lifetime); and two messages from Kirk, three hours apart, both sent from his office.

Spock steels himself, and opens the first.

Have you seen this? demands the text, exasperation so familiar he can almost hear the aggrieved tone clamoring for acknowledgment among the uniform black letters. *Ridiculous. What on earth will they come up with next?* Below it, Spock recognizes the grainy image of a spreading, orange-flowered shrub with which he has, regrettably, had the opportunity to become acquainted over the past two weeks, and which he hoped might pass Kirk by unnoticed. *Exterus Aurentiacofloris Enterprisii* is its newly-designated moniker; apparently, there was talk of naming it after Sulu, but the Lieutenant demurred.

It *is* ridiculous, certainly; not least because the inhabitants of the planet on which the seeds were gathered already have a name for the plant in question, and it has been studiously omitted in the scramble to confer glory in any manner possible. But it is, he supposes, no more ridiculous than the Human propensity for imposing their own designation on worlds that have been known as something entirely different to their native population for much longer than Earth has had the means to know that they existed. Possibly, his own people have something to answer for there. They ought to have insisted on T'Khasi at First Contact.

He voices a soft command to the computer, and Kirk's message closes. There's no real fire in it; more a sort of unfocused pique borne of the fact that he's had many years' distance separating him from the by-products of his brilliance, and cohabitation with them now does not come easily. Spock doesn't pretend to understand this determination to reverence and worship, but his Captain's reaction to it seems legitimate.

The second message was sent at 0008 hours, during the period in which Spock was, rather self-consciously, focusing on the darkness behind his eyelids in a manner that Amanda has always insisted will eventually induce sleep. *Message from Ciana*, it says brusquely. *Torelius meeting moved up to 12th. Can no longer attend (offworld 11th and 12th). Can you send your report to her, not me, please. See you later, yes? JTK.*

Fatigue weaves through the words like a heavy, sluggish river; it has always been Kirk's habit, when there is nobody on hand to correct his behavior, to over-exert himself and resist his body's rhythms, as though exhaustion were a symptom of a serious character flaw. Ciana, Spock suspects, is cut from the same cloth, and it seems likely that, together, they will inspire each other to feats of mental endurance that are entirely illogical and possibly dangerous.

See you later, yes? Spock sighs. Yes. Yes, because he can think of no valid reason to rescind the invitation, even if "invitation" hardly describes a throwaway comment exploded into overture and accepted with alacrity by an adventure-starved flag officer prepared to accept exploration-by-proxy as the nearest he can get to the stars right now. There are a number of very logical reasons why it's not a good idea to host an intimate evening in the observation array tonight, not least of which is the disquiet that has haunted Spock since their park-based expedition four nights previously, but none of them can be articulated without also giving voice to a series of events that they have tacitly agreed not to discuss. Certainly, it is unwise to spend time alone with his former Captain in an environment designed to mimic, as closely as possible, the conditions that brought them together in the first place. But Spock knows his friend: his first response to any vacillation now will be *why?*, and there is only one possible answer to that: *because if we are to continue, we cannot acknowledge what has happened.* Which, essentially, acknowledges what has happened, and defeats the purpose of the exercise.

He steeples his hands, elbows resting on the desk, and stares at the screen for a moment as he considers his reply. Then, with a sense of resignation, he instructs the computer to take a dictation.

“Commander Spock to Commodore James Kirk,” he says, watching the words flare into life across the stark white screen with the familiar thrill of distress that his adrenal gland dumps into his bloodstream every time he sees that name. “Messages noted, time and date recorded, with no comment offered on the lateness of the hour at which the latter was received. It is my understanding that the shrub in question is intended for use as decoration at the ceremony, scheduled for ten solar days from this date, at which the crew of the *Enterprise* is to be honored in a manner consistent with Terran cultural tradition. My own opinion of same is on record, and I trust that no further observation is necessary at this time. Regarding the content of the second memorandum, I have noted the alteration to your earlier instructions and will submit my report directly to Vice Admiral Ciana as requested. Our excursion, scheduled for 2000 hours tonight, continues as agreed.” He pauses; the conclusion to Terran missives has always given him hesitation. In vocal communication, *Spock out* has always been sufficient; were he communicating with fellow Vulcans, there is a series of complicated closing salutations to be used dependent on rank, gender, age, and level of familiarity, but they translate poorly into Standard, and not only because there is no cultural frame of reference from which to decode them. *Regards* is stilted; *Kindest regards*, counter-intuitively, is worse. He could follow Kirk’s lead and sign off with only his initials, but the problem there is that the letter describing the opening syllable of his family name has no equivalent in any Human language, and he has long since given up on attempting to use it outside of Vulcan society. In the end, he settles for “Live long and prosper,” secure in the knowledge that it will raise a smile at least, although for reasons that he prefers not to examine too closely.

He re-reads the text once, then instructs the computer to send it before he can reconsider. It is done.

Spock sits back in his chair, reclining just far enough to align himself with the gap in the trees that points directly out over the Gulf of the Farallones. The sun is struggling behind the horizon, frosting the lower sky with a thin band of iridescent pearl, and scattered, reticent birdsong from the Presidio heralds the approach of daybreak. He doesn’t need to wonder if Kirk is awake, nor does he need the abrupt flare of light from his terminal screen, announcing the arrival of a new message, to confirm his suspicions.

Great. See you then. Talk throughout the day, no doubt. JTK.

Spock closes his eyes, sucks in a breath, and encourages the computer to file it away out of sight. When he cracks an eyelid, the message is gone.

Routine. Routine is useful. Routine imposes order on disorder, and this is important. He sets himself to the task of methodically filtering through his unopened mail.

Four of the seven conferences can be discarded immediately - three of them are far outside his field of expertise, and one of them, he thinks - hopes - is a joke. Of the remaining three, one conflicts

with an existing commitment, but the other two are worthy of consideration. He makes a note to raise them at the faculty meeting. Dr Yin's request is not unreasonable, but it requires access to a series of files that are above his clearance level, and the doctor will have to seek these permissions himself. Professor Edgar's mail has already been answered by the Dean, in terms that will no doubt produce lengthy and bitter recriminations on Friday, and which would almost persuade Spock to volunteer his time this morning if there was any possibility that this might obviate the impending acrimony. Finally, Spock opens the readouts from Marin County, which he probably shouldn't have, given that everybody wants them and access is strictly controlled, but, if he must endure his unwanted celebrity, then it would be illogical not to put it to functional use. He scrolls through lengthy reams of computer feedback, lists of solar activity, interplanetary movement in hundreds of systems across dozens of sectors, course-tracking data from vessels both Federal and Other, subspace anomalies, gravit... *Wait.*

Subspace anomalies. Generally of interest, but in an abstract, academic manner, and only insofar as they have any bearing on his current research. His brain is accustomed to absorbing the information at speed and prompting further investigation only if one of several keywords is detected. None of these are present, which is why it has taken him a moment to process what he's seen.

Signal recorded, says the read-out. Continuous and unremitting. Source undetermined. Edit, 0332 - source confirmed: 43 Ilion Gamma. Nature of signal remains obscure.

Spock steeples his hands in front of his face and leans forward in his chair.

Fascinating.

~*~

The call comes later in the day than he expected, so perhaps there's actually something to Kirk's repeated assertions that, security clearance notwithstanding, Spock is better placed than his former CO to absorb the tides and eddies of information flowing through the 'Fleet. It's something to think about, at least.

"Spock here," he says, and, on the monitor, Kirk's face creases into a smile at the onslaught of scrupulous protocol.

"Yes, I can see that, Commander," he says, a grin twisting at the corners of his mouth. "I'm looking at you right now."

Spock blinks, slowly. It's a pointed gesture, and it causes the grin to deepen.

"Is there something I can do for you, Commodore?" he says.

Kirk's lips purse, though Spock knows from long experience that this is less to check his spreading amusement and more to give the appearance of having attempted to do so. He says, "I'm assuming you've had a memo from HQ by now regarding a signal received in the small hours of this morning? And the non-existence thereof?"

Spock folds his hands on his desk; assignment among the upper echelons of the service is beginning to impact upon Kirk's phraseology. "I am in receipt of a memo instructing me that any further communications are to be re-directed immediately to Operational Command, yes," he says.

"No doubt you informed Admiral Gant that, given that the signal has not ceased since it was first intercepted, the question of 'further communication' is moot?"

Spock says nothing. He did, in fact, draft a message to this effect.

The grin breaks free. "Good," says Kirk. "I find it exhausting when I have to play along with doublethink. I'm due in a meeting at 1700 to expound upon my thoughts of what the signal might mean. I have a few ideas. But I'm interested in yours."

Spock hesitates. "43 Ilion Gamma is large," he says slowly.

"Come on, Spock," says Kirk. "You don't need me to divulge classified information to work out where the signal was coming from. There are three inhabited worlds in that entire *sector*. How many of them are capable of subspace communication?"

A slow nod. "Has Professor Sorelan been contacted?"

"That's classified, I'm afraid," says Kirk, which is as good as a confirmation. It is certainly intended to be taken as such.

"As I understand it," says Spock carefully, "The circumstances under which the Federal delegation

were ejected from Ilion VII were unambiguous. They want no further involvement with the Federation.”

The grin dies, replaced by the dark steel of command. Kirk says, “Yes, that was my understanding too. Think they’ve reconsidered?”

“It seems...” says Spock, “...unlikely.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Kirk curls one hand into a fist and gently strikes the table. “So. Do we assume that we’ve done something else to offend them? I’m not entirely sure *how*, of course, but, then again I’m not sure where we went wrong the first time, either.”

“It is possible that they are requesting Federal aid,” says Spock.

Kirk glances up, eyebrow raised. “Really? It seemed to me as though they’d decided quite firmly that there was nothing we had to offer that they could possibly want.”

Spock acknowledges this with a nod. “True. But perhaps circumstances have left them with no alternative. The region is sparsely populated, as you say; it is conceivable that they have no other recourse to outside assistance.”

Kirk sucks in a breath, releases it with a gentle puff. “That’s going to be a hard sell to Command. They’re not Federal citizens. Quite explicitly not, in fact.”

Spock tilts his head, considering. “There are precedents.”

“There are.” Kirk’s eyebrows twitch laconically. “Very few of them in which the other party has told the Federation quite so unequivocally to go to hell, though.”

“This is true,” says Spock.

Kirk glances up, meets his stare, holds it for a long moment. “You think we should do it,” he says at last.

Spock does not look away. "I believe that the Federation has failed its own ideals if we do not," he says.

The grin returns, flashing sudden warmth in his friend's eyes. "So do I," says Kirk. He leans back in his chair. "If that's what they want. Maybe they just want to shout at us some more. Let's not rule that out."

"I have not," says Spock.

The fisted hand unfurls, flattening out to lay palm down across Kirk's desk. He says, "I'm not sure what value this meeting has in any case. It makes no sense to talk in possibilities, before anyone's had a chance to consult with the one person in Federal space who might have some kind of insight." A sly upwards glance. "Whose name is not subject to discussion."

"Naturally."

A wide smile. "There's a chance I might be a little late this evening, depending on how long this goes on. Admiral Komack is flying in from Jupiter Station specifically to attend." A pause, to allow Spock to draw his own conclusions from this particular piece of information. "If it looks like it's going to be later than 2100, I'll have my Yeoman com you."

Spock nods, but says nothing. If Kirk picks up on the nuance of his silence, he gives no indication.

"Until this evening, then," he says. "Kirk out."

~*~

Think you could smuggle a Commodore into the imaging suite some time? It was the unspoken longing beneath those words that Spock answered, vulnerability layered over with bravado. He has been aware for some time that this impulse exists within him, but he is, as yet, only able to identify it after the fact. It is... inconvenient.

The movement of the sun across the Terran sky are immaterial against the vast backdrop of galactic space, and the sensor array does not typically observe planetary constants such as day and

night. Spock himself has spent more than one productive evening sequestered among the computer banks, filtering through infinity in search of the next level of questions that might bring his current answers into focus. It is approaching 2045 as he makes his way through the serpentine webs of corridors that lead towards the imaging suite, but they are far from deserted: he counts six separate research groups, cloistered in doorways and talking animatedly in the energetic *sotto voce* of the single-minded, weaving through the technicians and the science track cadets in pursuit of academic excellence, laughing by water coolers with red-rimmed eyes that speak of too many nights spent hunting the unfamiliar. And throughout the river of science blues are dotted small islands of red and, occasionally, gold: the men and women on whose orders the wheels of Starfleet turn. Spock wonders how many of them are here because of the meeting that has delayed his friend's arrival.

Kirk is waiting outside the doors to Suite 5-A, hands clasped behind his back as he considers a framed image of the Andromeda Galaxy, captured with primitive equipment in the decades before Humankind had ventured beyond their home system. He turns at the sound of Spock's footfall and a smile lights his face, flashing warmth into eyes that are dulled by exhaustion.

"There you are," he says, and, though his voice is cheerful, it's laced with the strain of the past hours.

Spock draws to a halt some three feet away from him. It's too far by Human standards of personal space, but his body makes the decision for him and there's no way to surreptitiously correct it once it's done.

"My apologies for the delay, Commodore," he says. "I had expected to allow more time for your arrival."

An arched eyebrow, directed momentarily into the gulf that separates them, takes care of Kirk's objections to the distance. But the smile does not fade. He says, "Don't mention it." A brisk, utilitarian shake of the head. "I left the conference room with indecent haste as soon as I had the opportunity. I believe there are people in this organization who talk just for the sake of hearing their own voice." Frustration ghosts across his face, darkening his eyes, but he masters it quickly. "Never mind. I'm not even sure why I'm still surprised."

"The meeting was unsatisfactory?" says Spock, which is extraneous, but seems to be required.

It prompts a half-hearted smile and a breath of laughter. "You could say that." Kirk gestures towards the door, ostensibly an effort to move the conversation away from the contents of a difficult evening, but tension lingers in the muscles of his arm and his face. "Shall we?"

Spock hesitates for the briefest moment, but it's passable as concern over his friend's wellbeing, and Kirk reads it as such.

"It's fine, really," he says as Spock presses his hand to the sensor pad on the wall, which blazes into life with a tinny, computerized welcome that they both ignore. The doors slide open on the sterile vacancy of an out-of-action imaging suite. "I believe Admiral Bernstein when she says that the situation is under control. It's just that..." A sigh, and he folds his hands behind his back and paces to the center of the room, feet clipping smartly against the hard tile surface. "I thought I was there as Deputy Chief of Xenorelations. And it turns out... I was there as the former Captain of a ship that orbited Ilion VII, once upon a time." A beat. "It was not the most productive meeting I've attended."

Spock steps into the darkened room and allows the doors to close softly behind him, sealing them inside a cocoon of warm, stale air, heavy with the scent of repeated and unbroken use throughout the day. He has already programmed the computer protocols: a series of uninhabited systems in Sector 120 seems like a safe enough prospect. The closest *Enterprise* ever passed was two years before Kirk came on board, and nothing in the intervening seven has persuaded Starfleet to take a closer look; the stars do not form the sorts of patterns that inspire Human poets to magnificent feats of verbal acrobatics; and, perhaps most importantly, they are not visible in the night sky above Vulcan. One of the planets - a D class dwarf in 2 Fornacis - has an unstable elliptical orbit that, while undeniably less than fascinating to anyone whose hobbies do not include gravitational physics, provides a handy alibi in terms of excusing Spock's choice of such a pedestrian starfield. It is eminently suitable for his purposes this evening.

Standing by the control panel, it is possible to hear the soft hum of banked duotronic energy whispering through the circuitry, waiting for instruction. *Run simulation?* wonders the text across the screen, but, instead of confirming the request, Spock crosses quietly to where Kirk stands, staring absently at the far wall.

He says, "It would be impolitic of me to ask what conclusions were drawn."

A beat, as Kirk's gaze abruptly refocuses and he half-turns a slow-spreading smile on his companion. The only light is from the terminal screen beside the door and the dim strip of security lighting along the high ceiling; it casts his face in watery blue-white and shadow. He says, "As would I be committing a breach of security protocol if I told you that the admiralty's main concern, at this time, is to establish whether or not the signal denotes hostile intent."

"On whose authority is this determination to be made?" asks Spock.

"Until our star guest arrives?" An eyebrow arches disdainfully. "Admiral Komack's."

“Ah.”

“Yes,” says Kirk. His brow furrows in frustration and he turns his glare back towards the empty wall. “You know as well as I do, Spock: the signal can be as hostile as it likes, but the Veleth Hai aren’t spacefarers; they’re not capable of manned space flight. The Federation is in no danger from that corner, no matter what it is they’re trying to tell us.”

“Others do not share your opinion, however.”

“I proposed a diplomatic expedition to the edge of the system. I think Bernstein was in agreement but she can’t move without Komack’s support and he won’t give it. *Damn* it,” he hisses with unexpected vitriol. “The man’s going to start a war some day.”

Spock arches an eyebrow, unseen. He would prefer to have greater cause to rebut Kirk’s words, but experience advises otherwise. He opens his mouth to speak, although he’s not entirely sure what he’s planning to say, but Kirk cuts him off before he has drawn breath.

“There’s nothing to be done about it tonight, in any case,” he says briskly. “His hands are tied for the time being at least - thank heaven.” Kirk’s fingers fall free of their grip at the small of his back and he rolls his shoulders, slowly, as though the action is uncomfortable. “I think I’d like to think about something else for a while. How’s that simulation looking?”

Alarmingly inadequate, actually. The chances were always high that Kirk would recognize the equivocation behind Spock’s selection of stellar suburbia for tonight’s main attraction, but he would also recognize the impulse behind it, the necessity. It’s a negligible offense in the service of a greater good. That only works, however, given a blank slate from which to work. Set it on top of an evening of frustration and disappointment, and it becomes a kind of betrayal of trust: here, at least, Kirk ought to be able to expect friendship and have it offered without condition. Three dreary conglomerations of interstellar debris stuffed haphazardly into the gravity well of a few unremarkable stars are not what Kirk came here to see, and it doesn’t look like they’re going to be able to pretend that Spock’s planned display is sufficient.

But what is the alternative? It’s not that there’s a shortage of things to look at: data feeds into the array from a couple of hundred outposts scattered across Federal space and any passing starships that happen to stumble across something interesting enough to pipe back to Command. It’s only that galactic space is inordinately huge, and randomly triangulating and hoping for the best is likely to result in a whole lot of black and nothing else. On the other hand... the computer is locked to Spock’s data patterns, and any protocols he’s run in the past twelve years are automatically accessible for as long as he’s inside the imaging suite. That amounts to one hundred

and forty-seven possible co-ordinates at which there will unquestionably be *something* to look at. None of them, unfortunately, come anywhere close to matching Spock's pre-established criteria for the evening.

Well. *Kaiidth*.

"You will recall," he says, turning on his heel and stepping briskly across the floor to the control panel, "That, en route to Sigma Iotia II, long-range sensors picked up what appeared to be a soft gamma repeater within the as-yet uncharted nebula designated NGC 13422."

It's not a question. Once upon a time, in the earliest days of their acquaintance, it might have been framed as a challenge, heavy with the implication that, while *Spock* would certainly recall, Kirk unquestionably would not. As a tool of strategic one-upmanship, however, it quickly lost its edge when it became apparent that Kirk could not be depended upon to forget things.

"Of course," says the Commodore now, pivoting on one heel to follow Spock's progress across the floor. "We planned to go back for a better look, and then we were ordered to rendezvous with the *Serapis* before we got the chance." His face is shrouded in shadow now, but Spock can hear the smile in his voice as he adds, "I might have known you wouldn't let it go."

"Indeed," says Spock, and thinks he hears a soft chuckle from the darkness. "Given the resources at my disposal, and a relatively broad remit, it seemed a productive use of my time to investigate further."

"And have you found your soft gamma repeater?"

"I regret that I have not." Spock draws to a halt beside the terminal interface and calls up his data pocket, scrolling rapidly across a 3D thumbnail of Federation space in search of the appropriate sector. "Sensors from an outlying probe of Rho Sigma 12-D have been unable to penetrate the nebula's inner radiation shell. However, during my research I was able to view several accessible portions of the H II region." Questing fingers find the star cluster that he seeks, and the computer automatically locks on to the protocol associated with the region. Light flares brightly above and around them, and resolves into an ethereal pink glow as the imaging suite processes millions of exabytes of information, flowing freely along a subspace channel thousands of light years across. Spock turns to face the room, where the glow is coalescing into the gossamer threads of nebular mist, curling around the blackness. "Some of the stellar spire formations are quite beautiful."

"Beautiful?" says Kirk, but his voice is hushed with a kind of reverent awe as he pivots in a slow circle, eyes trained upwards as the cloths of heaven unfold around him. "Is that your logical

assessment?”

Spock steps forward, out of the shadow by the door and into the gently rotating nexus of light. The mind knows, academically, that this is a projection, the computer’s best approximation of a series of binary digits captured by the mechanical eye of a distant probe, but the body wants to feel the sense of vertigo, weightlessness, suspension in an endless void. The hand wants to reach out and catch the soft filaments of star dust, like cotton candy; let it run through his fingers and tangle around his flesh. The skin wants to experience a sudden dip in temperature as it plunges into the crisp clarity of freezing vacuum. The self wants to believe it has been transported from a bunker in the bowels of an old Starfleet laboratory, and transplanted into infinity.

He falls into place at Kirk’s side, tilting his head upwards to follow the path of his friend’s gaze, and sees the faint gleam of a birthing star inside a dense cloud of gas and debris.

“It is the only possible assessment,” he says quietly.

Kirk glances sideways and, in his peripheral vision, Spock sees his friend’s throat constrict, as though his breath has caught. A smile plays around the edges of his lips as Spock stares resolutely ahead, though he’s not looking at the stars. He’s concentrating on remaining absolutely still, on steadying the motion of his lungs, on burying the noisy turmoil thundering through his veins. His mouth is dry, his throat is dry, but he does not move.

Kirk says, quietly and without looking away, “Tell me what I’m looking at.”

Right now? He’s looking at Spock. But there is no need to acknowledge this fact; Spock has not turned his head into the glare of that sideways scrutiny. He takes a breath to speak and is obliged to clear his crackling throat before the words will come. The sound is naked, vulnerable in the hush.

He says, “The pink glow is caused by ionized hydrogen gas ejected by the nebula’s central star. There are three distinct protrusions of molecular cloud observable from the probe’s current position. You are currently looking at the most prolific section, in which several stars can be seen in various stages of formation.”

Kirk’s eyes release him at last, sliding slowly upwards towards the ceiling, where a dense pillar of gas and dust occludes the coral glow. One arm rises to trace its outline in the air. “We should have come back for this,” he says.

“Operational demands dictated...”

“I know, Spock. I was there; I remember.” Fingers splay, silhouetted against the radiance of newborn starlight, as though Kirk is trying to filter it through his hand. “I wonder... What else did we miss?”

Again, that vertiginous sense of echo behind every word, as though there’s another, silent sentence running behind and alongside every spoken thought. Spock says, “The galaxy is vast.”

It’s the opposite of profound; the kind of bland inconsequential that passes for sagacity amongst certain members of the service who talk for a living, and Spock fully expects some form of verbal retaliation. But Kirk only smiles faintly and nods.

“*To see a world in a grain of sand,*” he says softly. “*And heaven in a wild flower...*”

“*To hold infinity in the palm of your hand,*” finishes Spock. A beat, and he adds, “William Blake.”

There is a moment of silence. Then Kirk says, “How do you *do* that?”

“I do not follow.”

“I can’t do that with Vulcan writers. Perhaps the occasional line of Surak’s teachings, but T’Rela? Sanvek? I can’t even name any others.”

“Ah.” Spock moves his hands from their clasp at the small of his back, circling them around to fold in front of his lower abdomen, and feels the brush of radiant heat from Kirk’s body as they sweep close to his hip. He swallows. “My mother has a great fondness for classic Terran literature,” he says. “Among my earliest memories is a spirited reading from *Anna Karenina*.”

Kirk’s face creases into a smile. “That,” he says, “Makes a strange kind of sense.”

He turns slightly, feet scraping softly on the floor as his body twists through forty-five, sixty degrees, head held uniformly upwards. Safely excluded from his companion’s line of sight, Spock allows his gaze to fall on the shadowed outline of Kirk’s back, the streaks of opal starlight shot

through the fine hairs on the crown of his head, the tightly-coiled muscles in his neck that never seem to loosen. There is no question now that this evening's enterprise has been a tactical error, but he can't bring himself to lament his decision.

"There's a trade delegation scheduled to visit Sigma Iotia II in October," says Kirk now. His eyes do not leave the curling tendrils of stardust. "I'm going to recommend they bring with them a science team and a short-range scouting shuttle." A beat. "I can make sure you're on it, if you like."

"That will not be necessary," says Spock.

"No?"

How can he explain that the fires of exploration have been banked in that restless place that has propelled him into the unknown for as long as he can remember? The compulsive need to know more, to see more, to unlock the hidden truths that skirt the boundaries of sentient knowledge, this has not abated, but it is subordinate now to another, stronger need. Scientific discovery can be achieved almost anywhere in the universe; Kirk is, generally speaking, only in one place at a time.

He says, simply, "These facilities are sufficient for my present requirements."

A beat. Then Kirk breathes a soft laugh that has nothing to do with humor. "Yes," he says. "You're better at this than I am."

"*Cthia* demands a level of acceptance of that which we cannot change."

"I wish I had your forbearance."

It's spoken lightly, as though it was a throwaway comment, but there is an unmistakable undercurrent of... *something*, something unnamable, beneath it. And still Kirk does not turn around.

Quietly, Spock says, "You have regrets."

Kirk's turns quickly over his shoulder, pivoting on one heel to face Spock.

"Many," he says simply. He hesitates, eyebrows gently sloping in open-faced confession. "You must know that."

The words are innocuous, but they point into dangerous territory. Spock says, uneasily, "I see no reason for you to reproach yourself."

A soft laugh. "Thank you, my friend, but we both know that's not true." Spock opens his mouth to speak, but Kirk silences him with a brief shake of his head. "If nothing else," he says briskly, "I am guilty of many, many wasted opportunities."

Kirk's head arcs backwards, staring directly above him, and the starlight colors the pale skin of his throat in watery shades of rose. It's possible to see, just below the surface, the rapid thrum of his carotid pulse, a hummingbird shadow of gray on white in the gloom. Spock hesitates. Of all the responses he has considered - anger, disappointment, sadness, betrayal - it has never occurred to him to wonder if his friend blames himself for what has happened between them. And now, faced with this new understanding, he can't work out how he's managed *not* to see it. He knows the man that Kirk is; he knows the way he reads the world. It seems suddenly very important to correct this, but he has no idea how.

"Jim," he says quietly, and Kirk's head abruptly snaps forward, eyes widening in surprise.

It's the tone, Spock realizes. The tone has given him away.

He should have known this would happen. He *did* know it would happen, he understands suddenly; he knew as soon as he made the suggestion that brought them to this point. He knew when Kirk accepted with enthusiasm; he knew when they set the plans in motion, and he knew when he messaged Kirk this morning. Every tentative footstep forward has been taken in the certain knowledge that there was only one way this evening could go, and Spock knew this, beneath the layers of denial and self-delusion, and he did it anyway because he *wants* this.

That's the truth. He *wants* this.

Kirk swallows, adam's apple skipping against his skin. There's a moment of perfect silence, telescoping into infinity, and every second drags them further from the place where it's possible to claw this back. Spock knows he needs to retrieve this - he's not so far gone that he can't remember

why he's fought so hard - but Kirk says, softly, "Spock...", and there's no mistaking the vulnerability lacing that single word, and no way to answer it short of an outright lie. He won't do that. He won't bury this in untruth.

Kirk shifts his weight, twisting so that his body is angled directly towards his companion's, and his scent fills the air between them, known and coveted; his heat is like a curtain of static against Spock's skin. Hesitantly, skittish shadows betraying a faint tremor, Kirk reaches a hand into the space that separates them. Spock watches it rise, close the distance between them, and he knows he must move; he must do *something* to obviate what's coming, but his controls are in fragments now. How many nights have these same images assaulted him, twisting and stabbing at his mind as it struggles for equilibrium? How many hours has this been the memory that pulls him back from the very brink of the trance, screaming up through the layers of consciousness to batter ineffectually against the walls of his resolve? How many dawns have found him, blood pooling solid in the flesh of his groin, aching with frustrated desire and unable to release it for fear that it will collapse the fracturing fortress of determination that he's labored hard to build? Warm, Human fingers close tentatively around the upper sleeve of his tunic and he can feel the press of every tiny point of skin against his, energy humming across the connection. Almost without conscious instruction, Spock's hand rises up to close over his friend's, and he has no idea if the gesture is intended to encourage or deter. Fingers curl over fingers, tangling and deepening the join, and he feels the muscles flex beneath his friend's skin, hears his breath catch in his throat...

How easy would it be to take what's offered in that uncertain gaze, to forget the red-rimmed white of his mother's eyes all those years ago and their unspoken injunction against what he needs? How easy would it be to just give in?

There is nothing he has ever wanted so badly as he wants this now. He wants it with an ache that feels dangerously ungovernable; uncountable hours of wanting distilled into a roiling torrent of desire. And so, when he finds the breath to force the word through his lips - a single, plaintive, "Jim," - he has no idea if he's asking for absolution or for the discipline he lacks.

"Jim," he says quietly, and Kirk's head drops towards his chest. It's like a circuit breaking. The atmosphere shifts; something is lost.

So. Discipline, then. For all that it's the right decision, it feels like a blow to the gut.

"I'm sorry," says his friend, quickly and quietly. "I'm sorry. You're right; I'm sorry."

Shame clutches a fist around Spock's chest. He wants to say the words that appropriate the blame from a man who does not deserve it; he wants to say *You are not at fault*, but there are no words to strip Kirk of the heavy weight of responsibility he carries with him like a mantle of stone; if there were, it would be the work of different circumstances to make them heard. So he says, simply,

“No”; a tiny word that sounds smaller in the dark silence, and hopes that it will be enough.

“I know,” says Kirk. “I’m sorry, my friend.” A deep breath. “You have no idea how sorry.”

Ah - *no*. Too late, Spock understands that his word has been taken as a dismissal, not a refutation. Kirk has heard *no* and assumed it’s an injunction, an emphatic rejection of whatever it was he offered. Spock opens his mouth to correct him, but his brain is wheeling feverishly, scrambling for the way to fix this, and the shades have already dropped behind his friend’s eyes.

“It’s late,” says Kirk. He glances up, and he’s mastered himself again; his face is iron-hard and expressionless. “I should... I have some work to do before I turn in.” A beat. “I should go.”

“Computer, cease simulation,” says Spock quietly. The heavens disappear into sucking blackness.

There is a moment of silence. Then Kirk says, curtly, “Lights.” He blinks in the sudden onslaught of yellow-white glare, and the room is suddenly just a room again: barren, stale, and over-used.

The Commodore manages a tight smile. “Thank you for...” - a hand gestures vaguely at the blank air behind him - “...for this evening,” he says. He purses his lips. “I’ll comm you tomorrow.”

It’s possible there’s a question buried beneath the blunt words, but he’s gone before Spock can sort through the noise inside his head, nodding once and moving swiftly towards the door. It closes softly behind him, and Spock is alone.

Chapter 25

Kirk knows before the door has closed behind him that he's not going home. The idea is so absurd it almost chokes a bitter laugh out of his tight, painful throat: what, should he go back to an empty apartment and stare out the window at the distant stars and pretend that it's not a mockery of the evening he's just trampled all over? Go to bed and not replay the past five minutes in an endless loop behind his eyelids as he tries not to wonder what this means? Comm Bones for a commiserative drinking session in the hope that the first goddamn question he asks won't revolve around the circumstances that led to the invitation? Stare at a wall? Pace the floors? Swing blindly at inanimate objects until *something* breaks?

It's barely 2200 hours. He's worked later than this. He comms an aircar - privilege of rank - and directs it to Horseshoe Bay.

Xeno doesn't sleep, not really, but it's a skeleton staff after core hours: one CO and three Yeomen, in possession of a strict set of protocols for who gets woken up and under what circumstances. Kirk's name is somewhere close to the top of the list, but it's a moot point, since, more often than not, he's here anyway. Commander Terek has pulled overnight duty, which is just exactly what Kirk needs to see right now - a Vulcan with one single, twisted braid on his sleeve - and he rises in that familiar, sinuous way as Kirk enters the room. His face betrays no surprise, which it wouldn't, but Kirk's appearance is hardly extraordinary in any case.

He says, "Good evening, Commodore Kirk."

"Commander," answers Kirk more tersely than he means to, but it's been a long day. "Have the Photeus reports arrived yet?"

"Not yet, sir," says Terek. "Commander Willard..."

"Yes, please comm Commander Willard and ask her to follow up with the *Antigone* ASAP," says Kirk. "The delay is becoming unacceptable. I'll be at my desk; I don't want to be disturbed."

"Yes, sir," says Terek, but Kirk is already moving past him, through the still, dark cavern of the central lobby, towards the sanctuary of his office. There's a light shining from below Ciana's door, but he files the information away under *inconsequential* and lets himself inside.

Sanders has been tidying again. Irritation prickles Kirk's skin as he barks a command to the computer, dialing down the overhead lights as far as they will go, and finally just switching them off altogether. The pale glow of the terminal screen is sufficient; it's more in keeping with his current mood, in any case. The windows are darkened, though they weren't when he left the room in the late afternoon, but he supposes he's grateful for that. His mug has been washed and set neatly on a coaster beside the terminal screen and his tapes have been filed away in alphabetical order by due date. She's even smoothed out the bumps in the seat of the chair, which has a habit of moulding itself to the contours of Kirk's body when he sits in it too long. Everything is quiet order - methodical and systematized, clean and comfortable - and there's absolutely no reason for the resentment that wells in his tightening chest as he fights the urge to sweep the flat of one hand against a geometrically-stacked sheaf of files on the edge of his desk. It's only that everything's so damn *logical*, everywhere he looks, and can't a man just mire himself in chaos every once in a while?

Goddamn it.

Goddamn it.

A protest from his knuckles and he glances down, distractedly, to find that he's gripping the edge of his desk with enough force to drain the blood from his fingers. They creak their disapproval as he releases his hold, flexing them stiffly as he crosses absently to the window, where the faintest glimmer of starlight mocks him from behind the curtain of smoked glass. He leans forward until his forehead is pressed against the pane, sharply cold in the tepid air of the office, and sucks in a deep breath. Another. And then a third, as though the air in his lungs has some kind of restorative properties suitable for dampening down the fires of agitation in his belly.

It's not entirely a surprise to hear the gentle hiss of his office door sliding open on the resonant hush outside, although she usually knocks first. He straightens his spine and turns on his heel as Ciana greets him with a conspiratorial twitch of her eyebrows and steps inside, leaning back against the door as it closes softly behind her. Her face is soft with fatigue and stray wisps of hair have escaped from the clasp at the back of her head, but otherwise she's exactly as he left her a couple of hours ago. It feels like longer.

"I thought you went home," she says.

He probably ought to dial the lights back up, but he'd really rather she didn't decide to stay, and that might imply some form of invitation. So instead he steps smartly away from the window, crosses the short space to his desk, slides into his chair without meeting her eyes.

"Not exactly," he says. He attempts a smile, but he can tell by the way his cheeks ache that it's fallen somewhat flat. "I had a prior engagement." A beat. "It... didn't last as long as I expected."

“So you came back here?”

“There are some reports I need to action.”

“And they can’t wait until tomorrow?” He can feel her gaze on him as he makes a show of reorienting the terminal so that it lines up with the angle of his shoulders. “Seriously, Kirk: go home. That was some quantity of bullshit you had to deal with tonight; you don’t need to be here.”

A humorless laugh wells up in his throat, and he smothers it with difficulty. “I prefer to finish this tonight,” he says, and turns his eyes towards the screen in the hope that she’ll give up and go away.

She doesn’t, of course. You’d think he’d have learned by now, especially after all those years of dealing with Bones. Instead of taking his manifest equivocation as her cue to leave, she unfolds her arms, pushes herself up off the door, and crosses the room to perch on the edge of his desk. And then she waits.

Kirk gives in; he’s learned *something* at least. He looks up from the screen, meets her eyes, considers raising an eyebrow in challenge, and then decides against it. She’s still his CO.

“You’re tired,” she says. “This isn’t healthy, Kirk. You need to sleep as well.”

Kirk purses his lips. “Ma’am,” he says, as evenly as he can, “I hesitate to point this out, but... you’re here too.”

She laughs softly, edging back onto his desk in a manner that makes it clear she’s getting settled in for the long haul. “Yeah, I pull the occasional all-nighter,” she says. “I outrank you, though, Mister. Vice Admiral’s prerogative. And, you know... it’s not every night. For me.”

He leans back in his chair. “I prefer to be here,” he says.

“And I prefer to have a deputy who’s had more than fifteen hours’ sleep in the past four days. Don’t even,” she says, holding up a hand as he begins to protest. “I don’t need the exact figure; I know I’m in the ballpark. You don’t ‘prefer to be here’; you just don’t want to be anywhere else. What is it, Kirk? Did something happen?”

He can feel his eyes darken. “We were at the same meeting, Ma’am.”

“Yeah, and I swear I thought you were going to quit right there and then,” she says quietly. “But here you are. So that’s not it.” She raises her eyes to his in relentless appraisal. He takes an impatient breath, but he holds her stare. “After the meeting?”

Despite himself, an eyebrow arches. “I believe I’m entitled to a private life,” he says.

She shrugs, but doesn’t drop his gaze. “Sure you are,” she says. “It’s not my place to ask.”

Ah. It’s a variation on the standard *I don’t want to pry*, one of the most disingenuous statements in the English language. And it’s largely unassailable, because it’s been mitigated up front. It’s not her place to ask, but she’s asking anyway. And, therefore, absolved from castigation, she expects an answer.

“Nothing happened,” he says shortly. “I was...” - and the pause is more revealing than he would like, but he genuinely can’t work out how to phrase it - “...in consultation with Commander Spock.”

“Commander Spock, huh?” she says. A beat. “So - who insulted whose mom?”

Laughter sputters out of him, unexpected and irresistible, and something eases, as though it’s lanced poison from a hidden wound. She joins him, chuckling softly and folding her arms comfortably across her chest. In another woman, it might look defensive, but her body is soft, relaxed.

“The Zeta Calliope report and the 5 Philippus Alpha report and then you’re out of here, okay?” she says. “I *mean* it. The only thing this department has going on this week is 43 Iliion Gamma, and we’re on top of that right now. Don’t burn out - I need you in fighting form on Callisto next week.”

He smiles. “Yes, Ma’am,” he says.

She releases her arms and slides off the table in one lithe, smooth movement. “And then take some leave or something,” she says as she stands, straightening, brushing down her uniform where it has

ridden up against her skin. “You look like hell, Kirk.”

He wonders what will happen if she meets Bones at the ceremony; if they’ll annihilate each other like matter and anti-matter in a conversion chamber, or if they’ll fall into mutual orbit as two halves of one whole.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” he says.

She grins. “I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

And then she’s gone.

~*~

Things generally look better in the cold light of day. But the cold light of day creeps under the drapes before Kirk has managed to settle his unquiet mind to more than sixty minutes’ sleep at a time, and its remedial effect is somewhat dulled by the thick blanket of exhaustion fogging the inside of his skull. A quick glance at the chronometer tells him that it’s another three quarters of an hour until his alarm is due to go off, but he can tell by the sudden spike of adrenalin in his gut that there’s no point in even closing his eyes again. This is it. The day has begun, and there’s not much he can do about it. He might as well get up.

The sun is barely over the horizon. Kirk shuffles aimlessly, absently, around his living quarters, scratching at his bare chest and scrubbing a hand over his face. He considers slaking some of this restless energy on an early morning run, the way he used to do as a cadet when sleeplessness haunted him, but years on a starship have broken him of the habit, and running in place in a gravity-controlled gym is not the same. The few times he’s let his crowded thoughts push him out the door and onto the tree-lined paths of the Presidio, he’s stumbled back through his apartment door an hour later, breath laboring an acid-trail of raw heat along his trachea, sweat pooling in the hollow at the base of his spine, calf-muscles pulled tight as a bowstring, and his mind racing in time with his frantic pulse. There are times when he just needs to not be on his own, and it doesn’t get more solitary than a 5am jog.

So, instead, he makes himself walk decisively to the shower, as though it’s a positive decision and not the default option of a man who’s run out of ideas, dials the temperature just shy of scalding,

and lets a tattoo of searing water purge the doubt and self-reproach in a current of steam. He stands beneath the excoriating stream for as long as his protesting flesh and skittering, superheated heart rate will allow him, and, when he's done, he steps out of the cubicle in a billow of heat and mist, wraps a towel perfunctorily around his waist, and pads wet footprints across his apartment to his terminal screen.

There's no message from Spock. He didn't really expect that there would be. Still, frustration tightens Kirk's chest and he straightens, turns away, paces to the window. He knows last night was a mistake; it's really not as though he doesn't *know*. He can feel it in every innervated nerve ending in his body; it's like a cloud of static, hovering around his head and discharging irregular bursts of electricity inside the part of his brain devoted to shame. But the thing is, he's *sick* of this. He's sick of the tentative equilibrium, of the sense that everything's just a misplaced glance or a brush of the hand away from collapsing in on itself like the heart of an unstable star. He's sick of walking on eggshells and wanting - but never too much, and always at the very back of his conscious thoughts, in case it creeps, unbidden, into the curve of his smile or the tilt of his shoulder. He's sick of being constantly on his guard against stray desire, of scanning the horizon for impending catastrophe, of feeling as though he's some kind of predator on a tight leash, something to be regarded with caution and to keep at a distance. And most of all, he's sick of the constant undercurrent of despair that colors his every word and action with the knowledge that, somewhere along the line, he's bound to screw this up. That living without Spock is like scrambling in the darkness; it's like trying to get by with half of himself torn away, and, somehow or other, just wanting him close by is going to be enough to push him away.

So he purses his lips, steels himself, turns back to the terminal and makes himself write, *I guess last night got derailed. Let me make it up to you with lunch. JTK.* His hand hovers over the *erase* key - ninety seconds, one hundred, one hundred and ten; so long that muscle fatigue kicks up a fine tremor in the bones of his fingers - and he stares at the screen until the lines of text blur into each other and two sentences of reluctant contrition congeal into a globular stain of black on white. Bones would call him a stubborn son-of-a-bitch with an over-developed martyr complex, and maybe that's partially true, but it's not just that. It's more that there's an air of desperation to apologizing for something just because he's afraid that he's been down this road before. And he wonders if that bleeds through those fifteen short words; if Spock will read them and hear the echo-voice behind them that whispers, *I know I messed up. Please don't leave.*

The chirp of his communicator cuts abruptly through his reverie, and Kirk's hovering hand strikes the table with an audible thump. Adrenalin spears his belly and he almost knocks over his chair in his unsteady haste to snatch the device from the kitchen counter where he's stowed it until such times as he might be wearing actual clothes with a pocket or a belt on which to clip it. He *knows* it's not likely to be Spock, not really - there was a time when a communicator call at 0510 was unlikely to be from anyone else, but those days are gone - but the Human brain is designed to make connections out of coincidence and hope, and for a second, an ill-considered moment, he genuinely believes that the universe works in such a way as to cause his friend to call just as Kirk prevaricates over how to make things right again.

So when he snaps, "Kirk here," there's a catch to his voice; a thready, breathy edge that's all

expectation and anxiety.

“Kirk, it’s Ciana,” says her disembodied voice, brisk and efficient and entirely too free of the fug of sleep to have been to bed yet. He will not acknowledge the jagged shard of disappointment that sinks out of sight in some disregarded corner of his thoughts. “Did I wake you?”

He clears his throat. “No, Ma’am,” he says.

A breath of laughter, but businesslike. “I had a feeling. Can you come in? I just this minute got some news across my desk and I need you here.”

“News?”

“Yeah.” A pause, and he can imagine the furrow of her brow while she debates how much to tell him over an unsecured line. “Not good,” she says.

Kirk glances towards his terminal, milk-white glow fading into gray as daylight chases the shadows from the air. “I’m on my way,” he says. “Kirk out.”

The communicator shuts with a snap. “Computer, send message,” says Kirk, and turns for the bedroom.

~*~

It’s a strange feeling, reading about a crisis in the hours after it has passed. Commander Jeunais’ report is brief, perfunctory - much like the reports Kirk might once have sent himself, in fact, and maybe it’s the fact that he understands this imperative very well that makes it so easy to slip between the lines and read into the stark, emotionless prose the sense of adrenalin massing, of desperate focus, of uncertainty, and, yes, *fear*. The *Hibernia* has seen her share of action since she left Spacedock, and Kirk knows both her Captain and First Officer by reputation. They are a solid team, with more than twenty years’ command experience between them, and they don’t scare easily. Captain Corrigan is a man with a flair for diplomacy: calm, respectful and fair; Jeunais is level-headed, intuitive and resourceful. They were a good choice for the Draconis mission, no matter what anyone decides to say now. There are plenty of worse ways this could have gone.

It's late morning, and Ciana has gone home to snatch a few hours' sleep and a change of clothes before the inevitable rounds of hand-wringing and recriminations begin, and she's left Kirk to piece together an analysis of the situation from the Captain and First Officer's logs, transmission records, and Xeno's research dossier on the Draconis system. It's not exactly difficult to see what went wrong; it's more that it's going to be tricky to word it in such a way as to avoid sounding as though they're trying to abdicate responsibility for something that is, actually, genuinely not Xeno's fault. Nor is it Corrigan's fault, and it's certainly not the fault of his First Officer, who, without question, saved her captain's life. Draconis II is, by definition, located in a system outside of Federal influence; observation is utilitarian and driven by operational need. They don't have a probe pointed at every planet on which they hope to exercise a charm offensive, and they certainly don't have someone watching every sweep and revolution of its orbital path.

There was no way anyone could have known about the attack.

Details are a little sketchy in places, the way they usually are when an incident is less than half a day old, and the captain, who is the only person who was actually planetside for the whole debacle, is still lying unconscious on a sickbay biobed, but Jeaurais' report outlines the facts as she understands them. They achieved orbit some eighteen hours ahead of schedule, and Corrigan took the decision to allow his Head of Sciences to conduct some additional close-range planetary scans while they awaited final authorization from HQ to make their approach to the designated authorities. It's standard procedure; Draconis II has been warp capable for only a decade or so, as far as anyone can tell, and they haven't developed any kind of centralized protocol for managing extra-planetary traffic. Best guess is that they haven't actually made it past the boundary of their own solar system yet, so it's entirely possible that the *Hibernia* is their first official visitor - with "official" being the operative word here. It would certainly explain the itchy trigger finger.

The ship has taken severe damage to the starboard nacelle, from a surprise barrage of cannon fire that erupted without warning from a city on the largest archipelago. The loss of coolant through the blast hole triggered a cascading warp malfunction in the central coil, rendering all engine systems temporarily inoperable while persons unknown on Draconis emptied their arsenal into orbit with alarming accuracy and Captain Corrigan was obliged to make a split-second decision about whether or not to launch photon torpedoes and start a war before they'd even exchanged so much as a reluctant handshake. Kirk will be the first to admit that he doesn't know what he would have done in Corrigan's position: it's *easy* to look back on it now, with the benefit of hindsight, and congratulate or castigate, but in the heat of the moment, with his ship hanging like dead weight in the center of a firestorm and the lives of his crew in the balance, who's to say that he might not have chosen to send a warning shot screaming over the low-lying, water-bound streets; to sacrifice a few hundred people he'll never meet over men and women he's sworn to protect?

Corrigan didn't. As far as Kirk's concerned, he earned his pay for the week right there, because that takes some kind of nerve: to stand in the center of a bridge under fire and repeatedly demand of empty static that it open up a line of communication with you *right now*, as though it's outside the boundaries of conceivable thought anyone might continue to ignore that level of mulish obstinacy. Kirk takes a moment to wonder, uncomfortably, if it always looked so reckless when he

tried that sort of thing.

Captain Corrigan used all available frequencies to repeatedly restate our non-hostile intent, writes Jeunais with the diplomacy of a woman who's been in similar situations before. It was my stated opinion that we were either misunderstood or unheard, as the attack was unrelenting, but after approximately seven minutes of sustained fire, Lieutenant Cordiner reported activity on Hailing Frequency 3L. This was our first communication with the population of Draconis II. Given our substantial disadvantage, the Captain deemed it prudent to accede to their demands that he beam down to the capitol to open up negotiations. The away party was comprised of Captain Corrigan, Lieutenant Commander Yu (Chief of Security), Ensign Bell (Sec.), Ensign Hashimoto (Sec.), Doctor Vazh (2nd Medic), and Lieutenant Cordiner (Chief of Communications). The team was planetside for no more than three minutes before I received word from Draconis II that the captain had been taken hostage.

Kirk has spoken to her over subspace on and off throughout the morning. She's a tall, angular woman in her late forties, with a handsome face and a stare that you wouldn't want to cross. She's tired and shaken, and a fading blossom of purplish-gray across her right eye and up into her hairline speaks of an appointment with the dermal regenerator in the recent past, but she has the imperturbable constitution of a spacfarer of several decades' experience; he would not object to her presence at his flank in a firefight. Kirk's reasonably certain that her Captain's going to recommend her for a commendation when he comes to, but if he doesn't, Kirk will.

She's not sure what she can add to her report, she says, but Kirk wants her impressions, and that's not something that Starfleet tends to commit to record. It prompts a solitary eyebrow raise that's painfully familiar, and he finds himself wondering, savagely, if this is something they've started teaching at basic First Officer training.

"My impression is that these people have been seriously frightened," she says. "That became obvious very quickly."

You see, *that's* not in the report; the report talks in brittle, dry inflections about someone called the *Ssar Fithosh*, whose rank doesn't translate well into Standard, but who seems to have general responsibility for civic security - possibly for the entire archipelago, possibly for the city alone, and possibly - though she doesn't believe this is likely - for Draconis II as a whole. He - she *thinks* it's a he, though she's prepared to accept the possibility that Human gender conventions are laughably inadequate in this instance - demanded their immediate departure from Draconian space, with the Captain held as surety against the likelihood of another attack, and it took her several minutes of fraught discussion to establish that the hypothetical attack in question was expected to come from the *Hibernia*, not from the Draconian batteries.

I vehemently stated our position, says her report, that there was no question of the Hibernia's departure without the Captain's presence on board. I was certain, at this juncture, that their

intention towards Captain Corrigan was hostile.

Kirk wants to know why, and at first she insists that she can't quantify an instinct. But he presses her, and, after a moment's reflection, she remembers the anger in the *Ssar's* words; the frills on his neck would quiver and rise, like hackles, when he spoke. It was not interaction, it was overreaction, predicated on his absolute certainty that the *Hibernia's* intent was to do them harm, and evidenced by no action on the part of Corrigan or his crew. This is when she began to suspect that what they were dealing with was not terror of the unknown, but, rather, terror of the *known* - that, somewhere in the recent past, Draconis II had learned that they had every reason to fear outworlders.

It was a secondary observation; useful only inasmuch as it provided a frame of reference from which to proceed. The *Hibernia* was still dead in the air above a demonstrably hostile planet, and the Captain was still in captivity and likely to die if he couldn't be retrieved. But it gave her a blueprint, a way in.

As negotiations continued, she writes, it became clear that it was imperative that we convince the Draconian authorities that we had no knowledge of this earlier contact. I requested details and, at first, the Ssar Fithosh was unwilling to elucidate but, as I recognized that, in all likelihood, this earlier extra-planetary contact was of non-Federal origin, it seemed prudent to invite him to scan our ship for evidence that it matched their earlier visitors'. While I acknowledge the substantial risk involved in such a strategy, I was confident that it represented our best chance for success. It was at this point that they conceded their lack of direct information concerning the specifics of the earlier contact, which took the form of an unprovoked attack on an isolated mining settlement in the north of the archipelago.

Hathsh Sassafith is a village of approximately seven hundred people, on an outlying arm of the island chain. It's nestled along the shores of a deep lagoon blown from the cone of a long-extinct volcano, where the flow of the ocean has created a natural well of semiheavy water that provides the local community with a constant source of gainful employment and income. The attack came by night, when the majority of the populace had retreated underwater, and the first instinct of the elders that remained on the surface - the alpha caste, whose function is primarily custodial - was to dive down to the sleep chambers to protect the young. The Alpha Prime was surfaceside longest, and the report that he presented to the Grand Chamber was unequivocal: three ships appeared out of nowhere in the clear sky above the village; one fired a shot directly at the town hall, where the lights were still burning from the alphas' evening meal, and then all three swooped down on the distillery. This is all he saw before he retreated underside, but, when dawn trickled watery sunlight through the fathoms and he led a tentative expedition to the surface, he found the area around the processing plant in ruins and the distillation vats drained dry of nearly 5,000 gallons of deuterium-rich water destined for the capital.

"No one saw the attackers?" says Kirk.

“No,” says Jeunais. “But they’re adamant that the ships were not Draconian.”

Kirk is inclined to agree. Draconian spacefaring vessels are bulky and cumbersome, weighted on either side by vast submersion tanks full of Draconian seawater. They’re constructed in orbit around the planet and never cross the mesosphere; seven million tons of water is the opposite of aerodynamic, and they would fall out of the sky like massive metal spaceships full of liquid. If three starships descended out of a clear sky and landed on Hathsh Sassafith, they didn’t come from Draconis.

I continued to engage the Draconian authorities in negotiations for as long as was practicable, says the report. Commander Yu and the remainder of the away party had been returned to the ship shortly after the Captain was taken hostage, and I informed him, on his arrival on the bridge, that we were at alert level Sigma Rho. As per Starfleet regulations, he understood this to mean that a covert Search and Rescue operation was to be put into effect at the earliest opportunity and removed himself to Security to plan his strategy. At 1112 hours, ship’s time, Ensign Bell indicated that Commander Yu’s task force was in position. It is my belief that diplomatic engagement may ultimately have proven successful in resolving the incident, and progress was being made; however, I judged the situation to be time-sensitive as I could not verify the current state of the Captain’s health. Given that Commander Holtz had earlier reported that warp functions were back online, albeit at a much reduced capacity, I gave the order to proceed.

The words are delivered with such dispassionate authority that it’s almost easy to forget that she’s talking about a life or death decision, one that was stacked fairly heavily in favor of failure either way: an impossible choice. But, faced with action or inaction, where all else is equal, it’s Human instinct to go for the former. Jeunais is a woman of instinct, and it steered her right this time. Captain Corrigan is suffering the effects of oxygen deprivation and hypothermia, and took phaser fire to the chest and leg during the retrieval, but he’s alive. A couple of Draconian military police are not, and now it’s up to Kirk to determine if there’s any possibility of salvaging their nascent relationship with an antsy populace that have just lost two citizens to Federal firepower. He suspects that there is not.

“For what it’s worth, Commander,” he says, as he’s preparing to conclude the interview, “I believe you made the right call. That will be reflected in my report.”

“Thank you, sir,” she says. “I hope Captain Corrigan agrees with you. He... feels strongly about our responsibility to emerging warp-capable cultures.”

So does Kirk, though he leaves it unspoken and signs off. The medical report indicates that Corrigan is likely to be fit to give a verbal statement by tomorrow morning, ship’s time, which is around 0100 PST; too late to have any bearing on their meetings this afternoon, but maybe soon enough to turn around the Starfleet policy machine if it needs to be turned. Kirk is not likely to take any heat for this, given that it was his predecessor’s recommendation and he was only following up

on ground work long since set in concrete, but Ciana might and, besides, that's not really the point. The point is that Draconis was a safe bet and a good target for first contact; there's no reason it ought to have gone bad, and what they should be focusing on - but won't - is the question of *why*. It's going to get buried under operational and trade concerns; can they afford to make an enemy in this sector, what are the fiscal implications if Draconis goes hostile, who will ally themselves with whom. A thousand ripples, but it's the epicenter that interests Kirk. An isolated planet with no near neighbors and nothing particularly to recommend it beyond its potential as the site of a future Starbase; it's neither mineral-rich nor technologically advanced, and if it was in the pirate lanes it would have been raided long before now and the *Ssar Fithosh* wouldn't be as jittery as a man who's just seen everything he thought he knew about the universe turned inside out. The point is: the timing stinks.

He turns to the comms recording: incoming only, and punctuated with lengthy pauses while the bridge crew, presumably, react to the man on the screen. The *Ssar Fithosh* is tall, sylphlike, with opaque skin through which it's possible to see the rapid flow of ochre blood in narrow veins just below the surface. Standing to attention, he keeps his limbs folded close to his torso in clean, fluid lines, so that he seems to be carved from yellow obsidian: one smooth, sinuous shape, bent at the neck and narrowing into a serpentine head with double-lidded, suspicious eyes. He barely opens his mouth to speak, and the universal translator stutters here and there over the soft-voiced, palatal sibilants. Cordiner has flagged the most pertinent sections, though he hasn't cross-referenced it with the corresponding footage from the bridge just yet, and Kirk skips ahead to the portion marked *Attack on Hathsh Sassafith*. The *Ssar*'s neck frills are fully extended, his eyes narrowed almost to slits, and Kirk thinks that Ciana really ought to watch this; there are probably a half-dozen non-verbals that she could identify or make sense of here that have absolutely nothing to do with Human body language cues, quite apart from the qualities that scream *person under severe duress*. Kirk scrolls through at 2.5 speed, translator squeaking a commentary while the spokesperson for Draconis II describes the scent that hung in the air above the village for many days, which the forensic team from the capitol could not identify, and the unusual signal picked up on long range scanners the night of the attack: three vessels shaped vaguely like *sthusa* shells, apparently in a geosynchronous orbit above the north of the archipelago, blinking suddenly into existence and disappearing just as rapidly, only to reappear again as blips on a radar screen two minutes later.

The translator has no synonym for *sthusa*, so Kirk runs it through the cortex and, a moment later, an image blinks to life on his screen, overlaying the righteous indignation of the *Ssar Fithosh* with a pencil-sketched diagram from God knows where, describing a crab-like creature housed in a kind of upside-down heart-shaped shell, rounded point facing upwards. The picture rotates through 360 degrees, exploring the soft underbelly with its alarming profusion of legs, the thin spine that crowns the apex, the jutting head... and Kirk freezes it on a frontal view, leaning in towards the screen as though proximity might suddenly make the pieces slide into shape.

That looks kind of like... Doesn't it? Or is he simply seeing what he wants to see? It seems a little convenient that this sudden revelation correlates so neatly with a long-discarded idea that he filed away for lack of evidence; it reeks of confirmation bias, but... *really?* He needs another opinion, but his second choice is currently sleeping off an all-night teleconferencing session, and his first choice...

His first choice has just messaged him, actually.

That's unexpected.

Kirk closes the image with an absent, barked command, and stares at the alert on his screen, rather unfortunately superimposed over the *Ssar*'s open mouth, like a speech bubble on the galaxy's most surreal comic strip. *Display message?* asks the reluctant emissary from Draconis II, and there's really only one answer to that: if he doesn't read it now, he's only going to wonder what it says until he gives in, ten minutes or an hour from now, and calls it up anyway, and that's not exactly maximizing his efficiency in the interim. So he purses his lips and responds in the affirmative, and the screen switches to his inbox, where, with infuriating Vulcan economy, his friend has written two short, perfunctory, and irrefutably inauspicious sentences:

Lunch today will be impossible. My apologies, CDR Spock.

Kirk blinks, tightens his jaw. He wasn't expecting assent, but this feels like the verbal equivalent of a lightning blow to the gut. This sounds like the opening lines of a man about to take his leave of their friendship. Anger rises with alarming speed: the kind of cold, focused fury that makes him say things he later has to take back, and he grips the edge of the desk to keep his hands from rising to the keyboard where they will certainly punch out a reply that's designed to bruise.

Better to close the message, safely out of sight. It doesn't need to be addressed right this second; he can leave it for an hour, two hours, until this evening if he needs to, until he can work out how to call his friend out on his default overreaction without making it sound defensive and pissy. But he's reaching for the manual command, hand poised over the keystroke that will send the nine-word missive into temporary oblivion, when the screen flashes again, appending two further sentences to the bottom of the screen.

However, there is no need to "make it up" to me. The fault was mine.

Kirk's hand hovers. Fingers flex. It hovers another moment, then drifts deliberately downwards to rest against the desk.

This feels uncomfortably familiar.

He stands up abruptly, chair scraping across the carpet tile with a noise that sounds like something

being softly strangled. It's a reflex action, and one which leaves him with very little in terms of options once his somatic nervous system has regained control of his motor functions, so, to cover it, he paces to the center of the room, turns on his heel, and stares out over the bay with unseeing eyes.

It's not as though anything *happened*. There was a moment, sure, but that's all it was: a fleeting, transitory rupture in this cover they've labored so hard to create. It went nowhere, and *that's* what matters. It's not as though... *goddamn it*.

He crosses the room in three rapid strides, ignores the computer's polite inquiry, and taps out a response.

Can we talk about this at least?

Kirk's hand hovers for half a second, no more. *Send*. It's done.

But there's no reply. He's not really expecting one - not *really* - though he watches the screen like a dying man in a desert might scan the sands for water. A minute ticks by. Two. Three, and he has work to do; he flicks back to the *Ssar Fithosh* and allows the frill-necked indignance to wash over him for a moment. But there's an absence humming at the back of his head: an empty space that's full of too much nothing to be comfortable.

Goddamn it.

This has happened before.

~*~

It's not until Bones comms him from an old 'Fleet haunt in Fisherman's Wharf that they used to talk about fondly over late-night brandies in sickbay that Kirk realizes how late it's gotten. A swift glance at the chronometer while he prevaricates over an offer of beer pitchers and big-screen Federation ice hockey playoffs tells him that it's past 2330 hours; the day has disappeared and he has no idea where it's gone. Ciana vanished into the upper echelons immediately after the review meeting, and commed a couple of hours later to say that Kirk's recommendation has been accepted

and they would discuss it in the morning; she's been summoned to the Centroplex to conference call with the Minister for Federal Expansion, who's currently in Vulcana Regar and apparently not a happy woman. No-one's happy, least of all Kirk, but there's not a whole lot anyone can do about the way things are.

It's been nearly twelve hours since he sent his message, and Spock has yet to reply.

"That's a hell of a lot of silence I hear in the background," says McCoy, barely audible over the opposite of silence behind him. "If I was a gamblin' man, I'd bet you were still workin', Jim."

Kirk considers lying, but he's too tired. "It's been a long day, Bones," he says. He tries to remember the last time he ate, and comes up blank. "I'll pass tonight."

An explosion of joyful whooping in the background presumably signals a Terran goal. "Your loss, Jim," says the Doctor. Maybe he can hear the lassitude in Kirk's voice - though it doesn't seem likely, given what it's competing against - and maybe he's just distracted by the game, but he doesn't press the issue. "We still on for Sunday night?"

"What's Sunday night?"

With one voice, the bar erupts in a sound of visceral pain. "Damn, that was close," says Bones. Then, "Sunday. Your place. Ganymede's finest *ruba* grass whisky, courtesy of your friendly country doctor."

Sunday, of course. He'd forgotten. "Sure," says Kirk, and suspects Bones knows very well he's equivocating. Spock will be halfway through his evening meditations now; there's no chance of a reply tonight. A vicious, uncensored part of Kirk hopes the trance is fighting him every step of the way; why should he be the only one to sacrifice peace of mind? "I have work to do. I'll comm you tomorrow."

It's true: he does, but his recalcitrant brain, having worked out that it's supposed to be tired now, has succumbed to a tidal wash of fatigue that softens the edges of his thoughts. He leans back in his chair, scrubbing his hands over his eyes, and stares at his terminal screen as the blurred images gradually refocus, sharpening themselves into the familiar contours of the *sthusa* shell that he's been staring at, on and off, for the better part of the day. Circumstances have conspired against the procurement of a second opinion, but he's peered at it and cross-referenced and finally superimposed the two images over each other, and he's *certain* now, or as certain as he can be. The similarities are too pronounced to dismiss as coincidence. The ships that attacked *Hathsh Sassafith*, the ones that resemble an unassuming freshwater crustacean native to the temperate shores of the

Fathassathis river... they look a hell of a lot like Klingon Birds-of-Prey.

But *why*? This is where the theory falls apart. Draconis II is a long way from the Neutral Zone and, all right, that's not exactly *prima facie* evidence against, but it's a *long* long way from anywhere they've been sighted in the past. It's not on any of their trade routes, it's not on the way to or from any of their colonies, and it doesn't have anything worth stealing, bar a few thousand gallons of deuterium-rich water that they can get on countless other worlds much closer to home. Starfleet wants it for a base of operations in an otherwise uninhabited sector of the galaxy; a defensible site to use as a jumping-off point for further exploration, but that's not precisely consonant with Klingon galactic aspirations and it's not likely to capture hearts and minds on Q'onoS as a rationale for paying a visit, Klingon-style.

It doesn't make any sense. Draconis shouldn't even be on their radar, let alone inspire a galactic odyssey across several thousand parsecs of blank space. Why attack a small, isolated settlement on the only inhabited planet in an unexceptional system, light years from anywhere interesting? Kirk rolls his head backwards on his shoulders until it's hanging over the lip of his chair, and presses the balls of his fists into his eyes, feeling little tendrils of sleep tug at the fuzzy edges of his brain. He needs Spock for this. He just thinks better when Spock's with him, and when he's not... it's as though a bulb has blown in a cavernous room; he can see enough to find his way, but it's not quite as clear. Would the world fall apart if he commed him? But he remembers the flash of *something* in his friend's eyes - knowledge, maybe, or resignation. He knew what was coming; he could see it in Kirk's face. It's not as though it wasn't *obvious*; anyone could see where Kirk wanted it to lead, and that single word - that plaintive, proscriptive *Jim* - was almost worse than a litany of reproach. It's not enough to definitively belie the mirrored desire that Kirk thought he saw, that he felt in the hesitant touch of his hand, but it effectively shuts down any possibility of pretending that something else was going on.

So, no, maybe the *world* wouldn't fall apart if he commed his friend again now, but... some other things might.

He stands up, quickly and impatiently, and crosses to the darkened window. The glass is half-clouded, in deference to an effulgent early-April sunset that bounced golden glare off the bay water at an angle that was exactly consistent with Kirk's eyeline, but the night sky is clear and he can see pinpoint stars peering through the smokey panes. He really, *really* ought to go home, try and grab a few hours' sleep after the messy night he passed last night; tomorrow's going to be more of the same as today, only possibly with more shouting, and it might be a good idea to have a rested brain that's able to cope with the madness. But the act of getting there is more than he can contemplate just now, and so he stands by the cool glass and watches the criss-cross lines of light scouring the heavens, bursts of heat resistance as offworld traffic penetrates the thermosphere: homespun shooting stars, brighter than the distant suns that scatter the black. Somewhere out there, someone's looking back at them: a far-off blue planet surrounding an unexceptional star, a lonely world in an otherwise lifeless system, hungry for connection. What if, when Humanity began to reach out into the void, the first faces they saw were hostile? Would they have kept on reaching? Will Draconis, now that they've had that sense of wonder snatched away from them, turn inwards again and close off the skies? Detached, isolated, there's no real reason for them to keep trying to

bridge the gulf that separates them from the galaxy's abundance; the will was there, once, but what happens now?

Detached, says his brain, and a prickle of something insistent needles at the back of his consciousness. *Isolated*.

Kirk's eyes widen. *Attacks*.

Attacks.

He crosses the room in three rapid strides, grabbing and spinning his terminal screen to face him before he's sat down; speaking before it has fully turned.

"Computer," he snaps, and it flashes to life, "Call up all files on the attacks on Ajillon Prime and Archanis IV. All right," he adds, holding up a hand as though it might be in any way effective in stalling the tinny, mechanical protest that these aren't exactly specific instructions. "Archanis - limit to files for January of this year. Ajillon - November, December last year, January this year."

"Working," says the computer

Isolated settlements. Mining communities. He's seen this before. Goddamn it, it's like a blueprint, a facsimile; it's like a mirror held up to the recent past. How has he not recognized the pattern? *How* has he missed this?

Sweep in and sweep out; food, equipment, supplies all taken. They're not Federal planets; they're not even Federal protectorates, so there's no question of any breach of the treaty... He lowers himself into his chair as the computer rattles out two small, image-heavy files: nothing to go on, nothing to investigate. Second-hand information that suggests discrete raiding parties on a longer foray, but run them together, and... Deuterium. Livestock. Fresh water. Rations. Weapons. Separate them and you have a whole lot of nothing extraordinary.

Run them together, and you could - you *could* - have an armada in advance.

"Computer," says Kirk, and he can feel the adrenalin rising in his chest, rolling back the clouds of fatigue, blood singing in his ears, "Plot a route from Q'onoS to Ajillon Prime, through to Archanis IV."

“Q’onoS to Ajillon Prime, through to Archanis IV,” says the computer, and the screen flashes to black, frosted with flecks of starlight and bisected by a heavy red line that runs from left to right through three yellow dots. It’s almost perfectly straight.

Kirk releases a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. His head is swimming. He says, “Pull back, plot onwards to Draconis II.”

“Plotting onwards to Draconis II.” The image recedes, reference points shrinking as more of the quadrant pours onto the screen. As Kirk watches, the red line turns at a 2D angle of maybe thirty degrees and the viewpoint swivels to show that it’s moved in a third dimension also, but not by much. Not enough to blow the theory apart.

But it’s a long way from Archanis to Draconis. If there’s a pattern... Kirk says, “Check for files on attacks along this section of the route.”

“Working,” says the computer. Then, “No attacks on file. Widen search parameters?”

Well. It was a long shot. “Widen to include systems within a radius of five light years along the route,” he says.

“Working.” A beat. “Files report no attacks on any systems within a radius of five light years along the route. Widen search parameters to include attacks on extra-planetary colonies?”

Kirk feels his eyebrows slowly reaching for his hairline. “Are there extra-planetary attacks reported within the area covered by the current search parameters?”

“One attack reported,” says the computer. “Stardate 6422.8. Federation Starbase, designation 19.”

Chapter 26

Kirk stares at the screen for a long moment, while several distinct strands of thought clamor for attention.

The first is a kind of horrified vindication, because he knew - he *knew* - there was more to 19 than met the eye. He *knew* it, and he let himself be convinced he was jumping at shadows. Hard on the heels of that is a sickly self-doubt: five light years is kind of a long way - maybe it's too far to be significant? The Starbase is 4.5 light years off course for a ship en route to Draconis II: not exactly a major detour at warp 4 or 5, but still... It's as far as Earth to Alpha Centauri. And, behind all of these things, there's the abiding question of *why*. If this is an epic Klingon odyssey, what's the endgame? They're warriors, not explorers. They haven't just blindly headed out into the black in the hope of bumping into something that takes their fancy; they've got plenty of scope for that closer to home. And they sure as hell haven't just upped and stolen a Federation cortex for shits and giggles. He knows from the *Enterprise's* sojourn on K-7 that there's considerable scope for semantic wiggle-room in the application of the Organian treaty, but he's still reasonably certain that a direct attack - even one in which nobody was injured - is more than the High Council is likely to be willing to risk unless there's a clear rationale behind it.

This doesn't exactly make him feel better.

They learned about Ajillon Prime and Archanis by accident - the former was a news story dug up by a New Human-affiliated holo network investigating instances of lawlessness on non-Federal planets in the years following First Contact; the latter came to light after a mission-critical mining shipment from the system was delayed and eventually cancelled, and a proposed Federal colony had to be indefinitely shelved as a result. And then there's Draconis. They say they tracked three vessels in geosynchronous orbit around the planet, and the numbers fit with reported losses in the previous raids, but these are just the attacks they *know* about. What if there were more? What if the three *sthusa*-shaped starships were just the raiding party, broken off from the main battalion? How would anyone know?

He glances up at the chronometer: four minutes off midnight. Well. This can't wait. He lifts his communicator.

"Kirk, this has to be you," she says, voice thick with sleep. "It's you, right?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he says. There's no need to bother with an apology; she won't expect one. "I have something on the Draconis situation."

“Uh-huh.” A badly-stifled yawn. “And I guess it’s urgent or you wouldn’t be waking me up to talk about it when you *know* I’ve had four hours sleep since Wednesday night.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Okay.” She draws a deep breath. “You still at the office? What am I saying, of course you’re still at the office. It’s midnight on a Friday; where else would you be?”

Despite himself, he feels the edges of his lips curl upwards. “I guess... I got sidetracked.”

“I guess you did.” He can hear the answering grin in the sudden warmth of her tone. “You need me to come in or can you come to me?”

“I can be with you in ten minutes, Ma’am,” he says.

She laughs. “How about you give me fifteen, Kirk? I just woke up.”

“Fifteen, then,” he says, though he doubts it will take her that long to kick her brain out of sleep mode.

“Okay, I’ll message you the address. But let’s not make a habit of this, Kirk, huh?”

“No, Ma’am,” he says, and signs off.

~*~

He’s never been to her apartment and never given much thought as to where it might be or what it might look like; if he’s considered it at all, he’s assumed that she’s billeted in some slightly higher-spec version of his own quarters. But, of course, she’s not temporarily grounded between deep

space missions; her life is in San Francisco and has been for many years. She has a completely different frame of reference for what “home” is supposed to look like, and it’s nothing like his.

He’s vaguely aware of Gough Street as an affluent, ‘Fleet-heavy neighborhood of Pacific Heights, though it’s not an area he knows well. The wide road is quiet as he exits the aircar outside her apartment block, a turn-of-the-century brownstone overlooking Lafayette Park, and the air is cool and still, heavily perfumed with the scent of freshly-mown grass. He breathes deeply as he buzzes at the main door and waits for entry; it feels like he’s been cocooned in an office half his life, and the night air smells like release.

Ciana’s apartment occupies a substantial portion of the fifth floor. She’s waiting for him as he steps out of the elevator, front door ajar behind her, and, through it, he can see directly into the spacious living room, where huge bay windows open on a panoramic view of the Marin Headlands and the moonlight-frosted bay.

“Hey,” she says. Her hair hangs freely about her shoulders, and she’s wearing a loose-fitting, filmy dress that contrives to make her look smaller than she is. Her face is drawn with tiredness, but she offers a warm smile. “You look like hell, Kirk. Come in, I’ll get you a drink.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” he says, and he’s prepared for her rejoinder, delivered over her shoulder as he follows her inside.

“Lori,” she says. “You wake me up in the small hours of Saturday morning, you don’t get to stand on ceremony, Kirk. Jim, I guess.”

He smiles tightly and nods as she turns, gestures to him to take a seat in one of the large, overstuffed armchairs arranged in a semi-circle in front of the windows. Kirk lowers himself into one set close to the glass, glancing around the room as she busies herself at a drinks cabinet behind him. Bookshelves cover two of the walls, filled edge to edge with neatly-stacked volumes, reaching up towards the high ceilings. A potted rubber plant of inordinate size stretches lazily in the shadows beside a replica fireplace, dormant for now, but stacked high with imitation logs and framed by a hardwood mantelpiece, on which she’s arranged a series of framed photographs. At least two of them feature Ciana herself, fresh-faced and grinning, uninhibited, into the camera: in one, she is flanked by a man and a woman who might be her parents; in the other, she’s squeezed between a young man and a teenage girl, one arm wrapped around either, while snow falls behind and around them.

“Scotch, right?” she says, reaching a squat tumbler into his line of sight. Ice clinks gently against the glass as he accepts it from her, and she lowers herself into a nearby chair, folding her legs beneath her and nursing her own drink against her chest.

“Thank you,” he says, raising the glass to her and to his lips. It’s a good quality malt, of course, but it has the effect of reminding him how long it’s been since he ate. A large, oak coffee table stretches between the nest of chairs, blanketed with a Peruvian throw and scattered with granite coasters; he leans forward with a questioning glance up at his CO, and sets his glass down when she nods.

“So,” she says. “Shoot. Why am I drinking Laphroaig with my deputy instead of sleeping off the week from hell?”

Kirk straightens, sucks in a breath. He says, “I think Q’onoS is behind the attack on Draconis.”

An eyebrow arches, but if she’s surprised, it’s the only sign. She says, “Huh.” A beat. “I know you have more than absent speculation, Jim. So - tell me.”

He turns his head, scanning the room. “It’s easier if I show you,” he says. “Where’s your terminal?”

“Sure.” She sets down her drink, unfolds her legs, rises to her feet in one lithe, elegant motion. “Come through to the office.”

He levers himself out of the enveloping cushions and follows her across the room to a door set into the wall behind his chair. It opens onto a large, well-appointed study, crowned by an expansive desk beneath a huge, framed star chart showing the constellations of Alpha Quadrant.

“Computer,” she says quietly, moving around the table and gesturing to the single chair behind it, “Authorize access to Kirk, James T, serial SC937...” She, trails off, glancing up at him.

“0176CEC,” he finishes.

“...0176CEC.”

The screen flashes. “Access authorized.”

She nods again at the chair. “She’s all yours, Jim.”

He doesn’t need the seat, and his mother would be horrified if she saw him, but it’s easier than making a scene, and Ciana won’t appreciate the gesture in any case. He slides reluctantly into the chair and calls up his data pocket, feeling her hand close around the top of the headrest as she leans in to peer at the screen.

“What am I looking at?” she says.

His finger hovers over the surface, tracing the red stripe that cuts across the black. “It occurred to me that the attack on Draconis shares several characteristics with the attacks on Ajillon Prime and Archanis IV,” he says. “This line represents a hypothetical route from Q’onoS...”

“...Through Archanis.” She exhales a soft puff of air. “That’s a pretty direct route,” she says.

This is why he can work with her. A half-dozen other superiors would click their tongue and shower him with *yes, buts*; Ciana takes hold of Occam’s Razor and slices through their cautious objections.

“That’s what I thought,” he says.

“And this?” Her hand reaches over his shoulder to follow the off-shot incline that leads to Draconis, and he can feel her breath close to his ear. “Kind of spoils the effect, doesn’t it?”

He clears his throat. “I wondered about that,” he says. “Computer, magnify 44-1382-75; ratio 16:1.” The screen distorts, like a ship entering warp, and reforms on a distant image of Starbase 19, floodlights glistening against the void. He turns his head slightly and finds hers directly alongside, eyebrows raised, eyes widened. It’s as close as he’s ever seen her manifest *shock*. “It’s a detour of 4.5 light years,” says Kirk quietly. “At warp 6, a Bird of Prey could cover it in less than a day.”

“It’s a hell of a detour.”

“Not if there was something there that they needed.”

“Like what? Nineteen doesn’t fit the pattern, Jim; no-one died, it wasn’t raided...”

“Not for supplies,” he says.

“You think the *cortex*?” she says. “Jim - no. No, I know what I said, but... No. Nineteen wasn’t Q’onoS. You think we didn’t check? You think we didn’t scan that place a hundred times, looking for the faintest hint of a Klingon signature? No, we’d know. We’d *know*.”

That particular fact didn’t make it into the version of the report Kirk read. He finds this interesting.

“Ma’am...” he begins, and corrects himself: “Lori. Nineteen was careful. Meticulous. Someone went to a lot of trouble to make sure that the cortex disappeared with the minimum of fuss. There are plenty of races who want the information held in Federal archives, and there are plenty of races with a vested interest in not shedding Federal blood. How many fit into both categories?”

“Maybe more than you’d think,” she says stubbornly, but she sounds less than certain. “Okay, say you’re right. Maybe they did something we don’t know they can do. Maybe they used an agent, I don’t know. So they have a Federal cortex now. So what? Those things don’t just give up the goods to anyone that asks, Jim. I don’t think they even work outside of the Federation mainframe...”

Kirk shakes his head. “If it’s possible to connect a defunct cortex to the archives outside of the mainframe, I’m sure the Klingons are not the ones to make it happen,” he says. “But they have a window - a small window - where they might be able to hack into the databanks after a full-scale power shut-off.”

“But it would still have to be connected to the mainframe. The system would have a record...”

“The system is offline. It can’t transmit.”

“Oh...” It’s a breath, a half-word, spoken in a kind of horrified awe. “So they remove the evidence.”

He nods. “They would have to know exactly what they were looking for. Core support re-routes all auxiliary functions to life support after five minutes of complete power-down; it can’t be overridden. And it would have to be something recent enough to be held in the cache folders,

which also means it was something with a classification level of 2 or lower.”

Ciana sighs, straightening, and he turns to follow her movement as she crosses to the far side of the room, leaning backwards against the wall, pillowed against her hands. “That doesn’t exactly narrow it down,” she says.

“No.” He takes a deep breath, raises his eyebrows in surrender. “I know.”

A beat. Then she says, “*Damn* it. Where the hell did I put my drink?”

She pushes off the wall and slips out the door, and he sits in the half-light for a moment, wondering if he should follow. But she’s back within a minute, glass in hand, sipping from it as she walks, and carrying his discarded tumbler, which she reaches out to Kirk as she settles on the desk beside him.

She stares at him for a long moment, taking a lengthy sip from her drink, wincing as the alcohol hits the back of her throat. “Whatever they found,” she says, “It set them on course for Draconis.”

Kirk considers, rolling his glass against his chest. Ice jangles against the edge, loud in the quiet room. “Federation starcharts,” he says.

Ciana nods slowly. “I guess so,” she says. Then, “They need deuterium. What are the chances they just stumble across the only deuterium-producing planet in a seven light-year radius?”

“Small,” says Kirk. “But you don’t think Draconis is their endgame...?”

“No. Nu-uh.” She shakes her head. “But it’s somewhere we know. It’s somewhere they can only get to with our maps.”

“That could be...” How many hundreds, thousands of worlds? Federal expansionist policy, when you get right down to it, is not so different from Klingon; it’s only that they tend to ask permission before they start taking what they need. Half the worlds he visited with *Enterprise*, he was there to make sure the folks in charge signed some kind of trade agreement or mining treaty. All of the recommendations he’s made in Xeno have been based on what their new interplanetary friends can bring to the Federal table. The point is, there are a number of systems marked up in the Federal cortex that might be of interest to the Klingon Empire, and a limited window in which to narrow that down to a manageable list. “There are a lot of variables to consider,” he finishes.

Ciana raises her eyebrows as she lifts her glass to her lips and sips. “The attack on Draconis gives us a ballpark,” she says. A beat. “It’s not much, I get that...”

Kirk purses his lips. “I could work up some potential targets, based on their trajectory,” he says. “But it will be guesswork...”

She closes her eyes, shakes her head. “You’re right,” she says. “Jim. This is... this is a whole lot of hunch and not a hell of a lot of evidence. You know that, right?”

He waits until her eyes are open again; meets and holds her gaze. “It fits.”

“Yeah.” A deep breath. “I think it does, too.” A beat. “I’ll take it to the admiralty tomorrow. You have my word on that.”

Kirk nods. “I’ll get started on some possible destinations right away,” he says, and his hands are already moving, setting down his glass, reaching for his communicator, even as Ciana laughs incredulously.

“Jim, are you kidding me?” she says. “It’s one am. Go home, for Christ’s sakes. Sleep. We’ll look at this again tomorrow.”

He feels a flash-flood of irritation pool in his belly, prickling beneath his skin, and he closes his hands around the arms of the chair, tightening his fingers until his knuckles turn white.

“With respect,” he says carefully, “We have no idea how time-sensitive this might be.”

Ciana levels a stare at him, holds it. The edges of her lips curl faintly, but the laughter is gone from her eyes.

“You’re right,” she says at last. “But there are two things that doesn’t change. One: no matter what happens, I don’t get to wake the admiralty before 0600 hours unless there’s an actual goddamn attack taking place on Federal territory, and I’m damn sure I would have heard about that by now. And two: Jesus, Jim, when did you last sleep? You look like a reanimated corpse.”

Kirk purses his lips, sucks in a terse breath. "I was a starship captain for five years," he says, and the *was* ties a knot in his chest that wakes up the angry ache. "This is not the first time that I've..."

"No, I guess not," she says, shaking her head impatiently. "Maybe when you're under attack, Jim, when the ship's in trouble... But this? This is not that. 'Fleet will suck the blood from your veins and the marrow from your bones if you let it, but I know you're too smart for that. I know you know the difference between 'Fleet urgent and *urgent* urgent. There's *nothing* we can do tonight. So, what is it? Seriously, I'm asking. What is so important that you have to kill yourself behind a computer screen right now - not just right now, but every single goddamn night?"

He purses his lips, feeling his face tighten into a mask of silent anger, knowing there's nothing he can do about it. He says, "I take my work seriously, Ma'am. I always have."

"No. Uh-uh." She shakes her head. "I want a *real* answer."

It's on his lips to snap that she wouldn't understand; that the sublimation of the body's diurnal requirements is one of the first things he learned as Captain, that it's something he couldn't have survived without. That command, *true* command, is something that only happens far away from familiar shores, where it's one man and his crew against a thousand ways to die; that she can't possibly know what this means. He wants to say something bruising, something to make her feel inadequate, something that will shut down the fire behind her eyes and make her retreat to that dark-faced place he goes to when the world isn't operating the way it damn well ought to. The words rise in his throat, curl his lips, but he forces them back inside, stands instead, paces to the other side of the room.

She slides off the table, folds her arms across her chest, fixes her stare on him and dares him to look away.

She says, "I'm asking as your friend, Jim."

That chokes a snort of bitter laughter out of his chest, and he half turns, facing out of her gaze, angled towards the door.

"What, you don't believe me? You think I hand out Laphroaig like orange juice?"

His eyes slide upwards at the abrupt change of tone, and he finds that the corners of her mouth

have edged upwards, coloring her stare in warmer tones.

“I should hope not,” he says.

“Damn right,” says Ciana. “You know how much that stuff costs? I save it for the people that irritate me least.” A beat. “I’m considering rescinding yours on those grounds.”

Laughter - minimal, but genuine - agitates his chest. He glances meaningfully at his barely-touched glass, still nestled by the terminal screen, and she grins and lifts it, extending her hand towards him so that he’s obliged to take a couple of steps forward to take it from her.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” she says quietly. “It’s none of my business. I just... You’re a good guy, Kirk. You’re one of the better ones. This” - a vague, circular gesture towards his face, presumably intended to indicate his air of general fatigue - “This... I don’t like this. I wish... I wish there was something I could do, is all.”

He drops his eyes to the ground so that he doesn’t have to see himself reflected in hers, to feel that vertiginous sense of being known far too easily. Her glass is sitting, disregarded, on the table behind her, and he leans in to retrieve it, shoulder brushing her arm and releasing the faint scent of faded perfume. When he stands upright, glass proffered, he finds that she’s watching him carefully, sadly, like a mother might watch someone else’s unhappy child. She accepts the glass from his hand, raises it to answer his gesture, clinks it gently against his. Sips.

“There’s no need,” he says quietly, but she grins ruefully and shakes her head.

“Sure,” she says. “Whatever you say, Jim.”

What *can* he say? *Give me back my ship?* It’s out of her control. *Fix the friendship that I’ve broken?* So that he can keep on destroying it? What he means, what he wants to say, is, *Cut out this piece of me that will not stop wanting him; make it possible to be satisfied with never touching him, or else burn away the love until there’s nothing left but equanimity so that I can survive it if he leaves.* There it is, right there: the essence of the darkness that follows him, that breaks over him in the small hours of the morning, until it’s *easier* just to get up and work, or run, or swing an ax at firewood, or drink unspeakable green liquor with an unpronounceable name. And he’s tired of pretending that he doesn’t know it. He’s tired of the angry ache just below his ribs, sucking the breath from his lungs with every vicious twist of the knife. He’s tired of the constant, numb fear in the pit of his belly and the sense that he’s standing on the edge of the abyss, waiting for the ground beneath him to crumble. He’s so damn *tired*.

“I just...” she says quietly, words soft as silk in the shadowed silence, “...I wish I could make it better.”

He looks up to find her eyes still fixed on his, and he thinks he sees, somewhere in the depths, a tiny flicker of kindred spirit. Whatever this is, he thinks, Lori knows it. She knows it because she sees herself in him: broken and badly mended, something vital cut away. Her eyes are liquid in the half-light, dark, hollow pools, and the golden glow of the lamp behind her haloes her hair, casting her face in shadow. She is beautiful. She is not Spock, but she *knows* him, and she wants to make things better.

What would happen? Would the world fall apart if he just let go? If he gave in and did what he damn well *wanted* to for once?

So he reaches up with his free hand, slowly, towards her face. Halfway through the trajectory, it's impossible to deny where it's going, but, though she drops her eyes to watch its ascent, she says nothing, and, when his fingers connect with the soft skin of her cheek, she exhales gently and leans into it, laying her head against his hand. Her eyes close as he twists his wrist, stroking his knuckles along the ridge of her cheekbone, down her hairline, across her jaw; her lips part as his fingertips trace the outline of the pliant flesh.

“Jim,” she says softly, a whisper, and it turns out that this is as much as he's wanted: to hear his name spoken by a lover who doesn't want him to stop.

It's not like it was with Spock. There is no hesitation, no equivocation, no questioning hands or uncertain gaze. He lowers his lips to hers and she meets them with conviction, hands snaking around his shoulder and fisting in his uniform tunic, glass falling to the floor with an audible thump that makes him break away to look.

“Leave it,” she hisses, and closes her mouth on his.

They stagger backwards, striking the edge of the desk at an awkward angle, and he grips her narrow waist, lifting her onto the surface. Her body is wrong - all rounded curves and delicate flesh - but she wraps her legs around his hips and pulls him close, drawing him down on top of her, curling her fingers around his neck as he trails ungentle kisses across her throat, her collar bone, the thin fabric that covers her breasts.

She is not Spock. But she is beautiful, and she wants him. Maybe she can teach him how to let go.

Chapter 27

Kirk wakes in the shadows to the sound of birdsong, and wonders if he's ever felt so lost.

He has found his way, in sleep, onto the very edge of the bed, facing the dark drapes that cover a window almost as large as the wall itself, but he can feel her presence behind him, the soft, even rasp of her breath, the contours of the mattress where they dip under her weight. He doesn't know what time it is, but he guesses from the empty ache behind his eyes that it's still early. For a moment, he lies, disoriented, seeking his bearings in a place he doesn't know, and then, quietly, carefully, he pushes back the sheets, slides his feet out and onto the floor. The hardwood boards are cool beneath his soles as he stands slowly and crosses, naked, to an armchair in the far corner. He doesn't sit - there's etiquette to be observed in someone else's home, and it advises against pressing one's buttocks *au naturel* into the cushions of their pale yellow furniture - but instead he leans his coccyx against one high arm, bending his head to his hands and scrubbing them vigorously over his face.

He feels hollowed out, evacuated, and it has nothing to do with exhaustion.

Ciana sleeps curled in on herself, knees bent halfway to her chest, spine curved, one arm thrown over her head and resting against the bedstead. Her hair is fanned out like golden thread across the pillow, sheets pulled up to her collarbone but stretched tightly across her body so that he can see every line, every camber: the arc of her hip away from her small waist; her narrow, muscular thigh; the rise of her breasts. And he remembers the taste of her skin, the touch - like satin - beneath his mobile hands, the arch of her neck, his name on her lips. He watches her sleep, and remembers, and he just wants to leave.

The air is cool and fresh, cycled by a conditioner that knows its job, and he can feel goosebumps pricking through his skin. He wraps his arms around his chest, exhales deeply, and it's not a grand gesture, but it's loud in the silence and, across the room, she stirs. A sharp intake of breath; her wide-flung hand twitches, and her legs stretch slowly beneath the sheets, spine twisting, hips flattening against the mattress. He freezes, watching and waiting, as she swallows, chin dipping as her throat contracts. For a moment, there's silence, and then, just as he's thinking she's gone back to sleep, she sucks in a deep breath and her eyes slit open. The shadow of her lashes colors them dark blue, almost black, behind the glazed, vacant stare of a brain reloading after sleep. Then she blinks, slowly, and when her eyes open again they are pointing at him.

Her mouth curls upwards in an uncertain smile. "Hey," she says.

The script dictates that he stand up, pad across the cold floor to perch on the bed beside her, lean in

and press a kiss to her lips. She tastes faintly of whisky and sleep, and she kisses him back, softly, but, when he pulls away, her eyes are like stone. She reaches up a hand to brush a stray wisp of hair from his face, cupping her palm against his cheek, but there's a strange sort of loneliness to the gesture.

She says, "What time is it?"

He offers his best smile, though it feels plastered on and he knows better than to think she won't notice. "Early," he says.

"Still couldn't sleep, huh?" Her hand leaves his face, sweeps down his naked arm. "You're cold, Jim. How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long. The room is..."

"Yeah." The hand retracts, drifts to her face to pinch at the bridge of her nose. "I live here; I know." A deep breath. "You want coffee or something? I guess you're not coming back to bed."

The thought dances in front of his eyes, and he sees himself pulling back the covers, sliding in beside her, feeling the warmth of her body stir the air beneath the sheets. He sees her rolling onto her side, twisting into his arms and nestling her head into the hollow beneath his neck, her warm breath ghosting across his chest. Maybe they make love again; maybe they simply sleep, wrapped in each other, warm and content and untroubled by the world outside this room.

But that's not him. That's someone else, someone Kirk doesn't know, someone who's worked out how he feels about this. He was so certain last night, so sure of his desire. And now? His commanding officer lies, stretched out and naked in the bed before him, watching him with eyes that see too much, and it's... not simple anymore.

So he says, "It would look bad if we showed up at the office together."

"Jesus, Jim." She laughs, but there's no humor in it; it's the most bitter sound he's ever heard her make. "Is it even light out yet?"

He has no idea. He's not even sure that it matters. He says, "Lori..."

But they both know there's nowhere for the sentence to go. She sits up on her elbows, shuffling herself awkwardly upright, sheet clamped to her chest as though it's armor, and he stands up, paces to the foot of the bed. The frame is built of dark, solid wood that rises like a barricade between them, and it allows him to meet her eyes again, to hold her stare, to acknowledge what's in it. Her mouth tightens, and, after a moment, she looks away.

She says, "It's okay, Jim. It's not me; I get that."

Her knees are drawn in to her chest, her shoulders hunched around them; it makes her look smaller than she is. Kirk's hands tighten on the bedframe, knuckles whitening under the strain.

He says, "What do you mean?"

She brings her eyes up to meet his, though they're skittish. "It's not me you want," she says. A beat. "I do know."

If she were anyone else, he would close the distance between them in two strides, climb onto the bed and close his mouth over hers, press her into the mattress with a wordless denial. And maybe she would allow him, but he doesn't want to lie like that, not to her. Not when he knows she'll read it for what it is.

So he answers, as honestly as he can, "It's not that simple."

Her lips curl into a rueful smile. "Seems that way to me."

Kirk releases his grip, fingertips protesting the sudden rush of blood, and pivots on his heel, pacing to the center of the room. His shorts are lying where they were discarded last night, and he snatches them from the floor, shakes them out, pulls them over his legs, covering his nakedness before he turns back to her. She's still watching him, but he knew that anyway.

"I saw your face, that day outside OpTacs," she says quietly. "When you turned, and you saw him... Yeah." A soft breath of laughter. "My parents have been married nearly fifty years, Jim. That's the way my dad looks at my mom." A beat. "Like nothing's ever been so beautiful."

Kirk's breath catches in his chest and he feels his hands curl into fists, feels his brows furrow and his lips purse as his throat tightens and the angry ache lacerates his chest.

"It's okay," she says, but her voice is thready, distant. "It is what it is, Jim. There's not a whole lot either one of us can do about it, I guess."

Kirk sucks in a steadying breath, clears his throat. "I didn't mean to...." he says, and hesitates. "... Lie to you."

But Ciana shakes her head. "You didn't lie to me," she says. Softly, almost a whisper: "Christ, what a mess." She looks up, eyebrows arched in rueful defeat. "I knew the way it was, Jim. This one's on me. I guess... maybe my judgment's not what it ought to be when it comes to you. Don't," she adds, holding up a hand to check his hesitant, guilt-stricken half-step forward. "Just - don't. It's okay. I just didn't want you to think..." She trails off, shakes her head again, as though she's trying to rattle free a troubling thought. "You know what? Never mind. I need to get moving; we have work to do."

She throws back the sheets, swinging her legs out of the bed and onto the floor, standing and crossing briskly to the other side of the room. He watches her move, detached, aware that he ought to be aroused at the sight of her naked body moving uninhibited across his line of sight. But she disappears through a doorway for a moment, and, when she reappears, she's shrugged on a thin robe and she's fastening the belt in a knot at her waist, carefully and deliberately, eyes focused on the fabric as she makes her way across the empty expanse of floor. As she approaches Kirk, she folds her arms beneath her breasts, hugging them in tight against her chest, and tilts her head until her chin is pressed in against her shoulder.

She looks up at him and says, "This doesn't change anything between us, okay?"

He nods slowly. "Agreed."

"Okay. Good." A resolute half-smile. "And... you know. If you ever work out what it is you want, Jim..." She shrugs. "I'm here."

A gentle laugh, utterly devoid of humor. "What I want," he says, "...Is complicated."

Her hand unhooks itself from its defensive circle, moves up to cup his cheek. "Yeah," she says, "That much I worked out."

She rises quickly onto her toes, presses a soft kiss to his mouth. Kirk closes his eyes and drops his head to meet it, breathing in her scent and her warmth. His hands hang uselessly by his side, fingers flexing distractedly, but it feels wrong to pull her closer, to circle her waist with his arms, to push for anything more than she's offering in this single, chaste brush of her lips.

It lasts no more than ten seconds: too brief to be provocative, too long to be casual. But she pulls away and rocks back on her heels, meets his eyes, and says, "You know what? You're right. We shouldn't turn up at the office together. I gotta take a shower." An eyebrow arcs, and she grins, a flash-bomb of color in the gray shadows. "Think you can find your pants okay?"

He returns the gesture in the spirit in which it's offered, and it feels as though it reaches his eyes. "Yes, Ma'am," he says.

Her fingers find his, lock around them, squeeze once, then retract. "I'll see you in a few hours," she says.

~*~

The apartment is cold and dark and the air is stale with lack of use. Kirk kicks off his boots in the doorway and crosses straight to the head, stripping as he goes and letting his clothes fall on the floor at his feet. His skin smells of Ciana, of her perfume, and he dials up a torrent of hot water from the shower and lets it scrub the textures of her body from his; opens his mouth and lets it pool on his tongue, washing away the taste of whisky and regret.

You ever work out what it is you want, Jim...

But the thing is, he knows *exactly* what he wants. He knew it last night as well: he knew it when he kissed her, he knew it when he took her to bed, and he knew it in the empty hours afterwards as he lay in the darkness and tried to silence the ghosts inside his head. His hips are stiff and sore from folding himself into a lonely corner of the mattress all night while he pretended *not* to know. Kirk rests a hand against the cubicle wall and bends his head underneath the hail of tumbling water, letting it catch in his hair and spill down over his cheeks, his lips; a fraying curtain of water, cascading from his face, sealing him inside a liquid cocoon with memories he doesn't want to see.

Yes, he knows what he wants. That's the problem.

He twists the faucet with unnecessary force and steps onto the bathroom floor, puddles spilling onto the tiles around his feet as he pads across the narrow room and into the startling chill of the bedroom. His footsteps press irregular dark shapes into the carpet tile as he carelessly rubs himself dry, tossing the towel into a damp heap on the bed and grabbing a fresh uniform from the closet. This at least has not changed: welcome continuity in a world that's spinning off its axis. These are the same clothes as the ones he casually shed last night in his CO's bedroom, and these are the clothes he will wear again today. At least this much is the same.

He snaps a command to the computer as he steps out of the bedroom, clammy hair clinging to his head and disarrayed in abstract spikes where he's run his hand through it to shake out the worst of the moisture, a towel slung around his shoulders to catch the runoff before it can stain his tunic. Coffee: never in history has a man been in greater need. A glance over his shoulder as he slings a cup into the synthesizer and punches in a code tells him that his terminal is slow to get started this morning, and he resists the urge to cross the room and physically impress a sense of urgency into the sluggish reboot.

"Computer," he says, in a voice thick with curbed impatience, "Whenever you have a moment, please call up my latest messages." A beat, and he can't refrain from adding, pointedly, "Of course, there's no rush."

The synthesizer heralds the successful completion of another cycle with a tinny buzz, and Kirk retrieves his steaming mug, carrying it with him to his desk where he pointedly does not glance up at the wall or acknowledge the presence of any form of pictorial ornamentation thereon. Whether by accident or malevolent design, Starfleet's collective knowledge of the culinary diversity of a galaxy's worth of sentient beings still can't replicate coffee worth a damn, and he pushes it irritably to one side as he lowers himself into his chair and waits for his terminal to remember how to find the cortex, and what to do with it when it gets there. He wonders if he could comm in a request to work from home - it *is* supposed to be his day off, after all - but, in the first place, the last thing he needs is more time inside his own head, and, in the second place, Ciana is really, really not that stupid. And there is surely only one thing more humiliating than having to look his superior officer in the eye the morning after a spectacularly ill-advised seduction, and that is having her know that he is too cowardly to look her in the eye at all.

His head aches: a ferocious pounding just behind his eyes. It feels like it's trying to beat its way out of his skull. Kirk drums impatient fingers on his desk for the moment it takes him to realize that this is at least 100% more irritating than just sitting quietly - silently, in fact - and waiting for the computer to just do as it's damn well told.

"Unread messages retrieved," says the computer, and he'd swear there's a note of pride to the monotone delivery, as though it wants a gold star for fulfilling the very least of its obligations.

"On screen," says Kirk, and at least *that* command doesn't cause the duotronic relays to cough to a

consumptive halt. "Prioritize messages pertaining to the situation with Draconis II... Wait," he adds quickly, as the computer begins to work. "Go back. Reorder the messages by time of arrival."

The screen flashes and the messages reappear in chronological order. Kirk is not completely certain, but he thinks he saw... yes. 0125 hours, right when he was... Never mind.

At 0125 hours this morning, Spock finally replied.

He stares at the message for ten, fifteen seconds, while his eyes ache and his brain fills the inside of his head with hot white noise. After almost fourteen hours of silence; of waiting and very deliberately not doubling back to check every fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes; of pointedly and stoically ignoring the sucking, black loneliness that opened up in his gut every single time his mind returned to the subject of their abortive stargazing expedition and what very nearly happened there - somewhere in the small hours of the night that followed *that* day, Spock finally decided to reply. *Goddamn* it: they've been here before, and he just does not have the energy to do it again.

Kirk snaps an irritable command to the computer and the message opens, filling the screen with the expected two short lines of text.

My apologies: my work has demanded my full attention all day. This is likely to remain the case for some days to come. I look forward to resuming our social engagements at a mutually convenient time. Regards, LCDR Spock.

Kirk shuts his eyes. This *again*.

It's not that it's unexpected. It's not even as though it has to be irreversible. Maybe it's actually a *good* sign - Spock's going to that place he goes to when he's pushed himself a step too far and he needs to regroup, reassemble his shields, find a way to live with what he's feeling. So why, *why*, does it feel as though there's a wall going up, brick by brick, with every passing day? Why does it feel as though it's waist-height already and getting taller?

Why does it feel as though he's already gone?

Yes, Kirk knows what it is that he wants. He just doesn't know how much longer he can keep doing this.

Xeno doesn't sleep, nor does it particularly observe weekends. Kirk is not comfortable asking subordinates to work hours he wouldn't work himself, so he often takes a Saturday or a Sunday shift; it turns out it's much easier to do this when his team's shift patterns are not controlled by a Vulcan with an encyclopedic knowledge of Human physical tolerances and an obsessive interest in the Captain's sleeping patterns. Ciana notices, of course, but her habits are scarcely healthier than Kirk's, and so she's tended to hold her peace.

The lobby is at somewhere between thirty and fifty percent capacity as Kirk makes his way through the gentle buzz of activity and towards his office. Ciana's door is closed, but all that means is that her door is closed; he doubts she wasted any more time than he did kicking around in an empty apartment full of silence and thoughts. Draconis occupies a substantial portion of three of the five floor-to-ceiling screens, and Kirk glances absently at them in turn as he passes, though it's no surprise to find that the information is just new ways of phrasing data that's already ten, twelve hours old; if there was something else to say, he'd know about it by now. Yeoman Banner, doing his best impression of Sanders after three nights without sleep, presses a PADD into Kirk's hands as he passes, but otherwise his presence goes unremarked. There's something satisfying in this.

The office is as still and quiet as if nothing has changed in the hours since he last crossed its threshold. Kirk steps inside, letting the door close quietly behind him, and sets the PADD on the desk as he crosses to the window. Ciana will either leave him for a couple of hours until a natural opportunity presents itself to require his presence, or else she will...

"Hey," she says as the door slides open. She hesitates for a second before stepping inside, which is unusual, but, he supposes, normal etiquette is temporarily suspended. "Took you a whole forty-five minutes, Commodore." She grins, and he realizes, with a heady rush of relief, that she's going to just brazen it out. "What, did you get stuck in traffic or something?"

He should have guessed this was how she'd want to play it: she won't bury it, because that does neither of them any favors, and she won't let it fester. Instead, they're going to skip right ahead to the part where they can laugh about it, and just keep on pretending that's how it is until it becomes true. It's how he'd play it, in her situation, but there was a darkness behind her eyes this morning when she woke up to find an empty bed and a lover separated from her by the length of the room, and he couldn't be certain she'd want to fix what they've broken. He's certain he's wounded her, and not only in the obvious way: there was an echo of earlier cruelties in her face when she looked at him. But she's going to paper over the cracks as best she can - because they have to work together, because they work together well, and because that's just who she is.

In another world, he could fall in love with this woman.

So it's easy to return the grin; it's even possible that it chases away a few of the lingering cobwebs inside his skull. Kirk grins, and says, "I believe you had a head start on me, Ma'am."

He thinks he sees something release, some hidden tension in her shoulders that was waiting to see if he'd meet her halfway. But if it's there, she's covered it well.

"Maybe," she says. "But your place is closer to the airshuttle."

She crosses halfway to his desk, but stops short of closing those final feet and perching on the edge, the way she might have done twenty-four hours earlier. "So - that work I told you to go home and sleep instead of doing last night?" she says. "I have a meeting with the admiralty at 0930 hours; I'll need some kind of preliminary findings by then."

"0930 hours?" he says. "That was quick."

She arcs an eyebrow. "They're with me on this," she says. "They think you've got something."

That's... unexpected, but he's not going to argue. "It will be *very* preliminary," he says.

Ciana waves a hand. "I'll take your 'preliminary' over two weeks' research from some other ranking officers in this organization," she says. "Whatever you've got in an hour's time, send it through. And I guess... stick close to your desk, too. I don't know if they'll want to call you in, but it could be that they do."

Well, what else would he be doing on a Saturday morning but sitting in his office in case the admiralty decide they want to have a chat? Actually... not much, if he's honest. He can think of a few things that he'd *like* to be doing, but most of them are connected in some way to Starfleet. The only thing that's changed with being grounded is that now he has the illusion of free will.

But he sits staring at his terminal screen for several long minutes after the door slides shut behind her. He's fighting some rebellious urge to storm out of Bozeman and go find somewhere that beautiful, successful people hang out so that he can charm someone into his bed and convince himself that he hasn't lost his edge completely, but, number one: it's not even 0800 hours on a Saturday morning and the beautiful, successful people are still in bed or working, and, number two: he's not that man and he doesn't want to be. He came close enough last night with Ciana and that's bad enough.

So he calls up his message from Spock and gives himself a moment, no more, to feel the irritation roil in his stomach and the angry ache twist against his ribs. Then he types, briskly and efficiently, *Sorry to hear that. On all counts. Will await further developments, JTK.* It's deliberate ambiguity laced with an ugly, vicious subtext designed to bruise, to exchange like for like, but he hits *send* nevertheless and watches it disappear.

It doesn't actually make him feel any better.

There's no use in expecting a reply; even if Kirk's response had been all sweetness and light and beneficent understanding, Spock has retreated out of reach again and he won't return until he's ready. And besides: there's already one impossible task sitting on Kirk's desk, and he's eaten ten minutes into a deadline that was already insanely truncated. So he takes a breath, dials a fresh batch of strong coffee from the replicator, and calls up the Federal starchart archive.

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The problem, of course, is that space exists in three dimensions, and his terminal screen exists in only two. There's an interactive simulation suite over in the Marin County observatory, of course, and he has the rank and authority to jump the queue, plus a contact on the faculty who knows how the damn thing works, but he can spend the next fifty minutes tied up in bureaucracy and specifics, or he can draw a straight line across his screen and try and work out what it comes near.

Trouble is, it comes near a hell of a lot of places. He calls up the map he used last night and instructs the computer to plot a course onwards from Draconis and watches the red stripe telescope into infinity with something of the old sense of Human insignificance that always assaulted him in his earliest days of exploration: so much space, worlds unnumbered, and mankind is like a grain of sand on an infinite beach, with no way to ever conceive of just how inconsequential they really are. They've barely visited a fraction of the worlds inside their section of galactic space, barely even plotted more than a few thousand cubic parsecs. Kirk's hypothetical route blows through the metaphorical equivalent of Here Be Dragons and shoots straight out into the intergalactic medium, and the usable portion, from which he can gather data pertinent to his present task, is depressingly short. There's a mining colony in Delta Epsilon Rho that's poorly defended and spectacularly remote; he adds it to the list and assigns it a probability level of three. There's an asteroid system in Faustus with a rich profusion of *sideralis petraviridi*, which is useful for breaking down antimatter waste, and potentially a few diamond reserves that might be easily accessible. Coronis III is no more than 0.7 lightyears off-route, and they've been doing some interesting things with lithium compounds that's certainly got Federal ears pricked up and might, potentially, be of interest to Q'onoS too. And there's about four hundred other places that all had *something* to recommend them to the men and women who've held his job in the past - resources, technology, or political allegiance - but nothing strikes him as particularly exciting from an imperial armada point of view. The Empire is large and well-stocked. They don't need to go striking out into pastures unseen for the kind of rewards they can get closer to home.

About fifty-five minutes in, Kirk realizes he's still waiting for his Eureka moment, the one where the slightest shift in perspective makes the pieces slide effortlessly into place, like an optical illusion that can only be seen from a specific angle. There's *always* a Eureka moment, and its conspicuous absence this morning makes him uneasy. He's narrowed the list down to twenty possible targets, ordered by likelihood and ranked according to accessibility, return, and probability of success, but the top candidate, Cocidius IX, has Federal embassies in two of its fourteen capital cities, and currently has ambassadors at the trade summit on Rigel V. There's no way they were recently attacked, and there's no way the armada hasn't got there yet, if that's where they were heading. Ciana comms him at 0905 and he stalls her, running his figures again, expanding his search parameters outwards, even as he shakes his head in frustration. They are already too generous. Numbers five through eleven are pushing the boundaries of probability; they're so far off the proposed tangent that he might as well just point his finger randomly at a starmap of the sector and see where it falls, for all the logic that's guided his selection. Ciana comms again at 0912 and he promises to have the report on her terminal by 0915; then, three minutes later, he stretches it to 0920. In the end, she has to invoke a *Commodore Kirk* in a tone that brooks no disagreement and he has no option but to forward what he has, with the proviso that he's not happy with his own conclusions; that there's something he isn't seeing.

Her reply comes back almost immediately, couched in warmer tones: *Understood, Commodore. I have every faith in your calculations. For what it's worth, I'd have said Cocidius too - Ciana.*

But it's *not* Cocidius. He knows she knows that. He also knows that she's going to have to go into the meeting now and immediately rebut a half-dozen objections that Cocidius IX seemed perfectly fine two hours ago when the latest reports came through from the Starfleet field office in Ralassa. He waits until she's left, then stalks out into the lobby and asks Banner to pull up the last three weeks' transmissions from the Cocidius system; nothing Kirk can't find himself, of course, but he's restless and pensive and he thinks better when he's on his feet. The Yeoman obliges with a speed that might be humiliating if Kirk was prepared to think about it, but he's distracted, wandering absently across the empty atrium as he scrolls through the PADD, and there's nothing, not so much as a streak of lightning across the pale green Cocidian sky.

Kirk hands the report back to Banner with a muttered word of thanks and slinks back to his desk to find a forgotten mug of cooling coffee and a rainbow profusion of scattered tapes spread across the surface. There's a small note at the foot of his screen to say that he has unread mail, and for a heart-stopping, hopeful moment he thinks he might have been wrong about his friend and snaps a breathless command to the computer, but it's nothing: a communique from Communications and Marketing about the event next Sunday, a note from Lieutenant Berniere about some long-range scans from the *Antigone* that *still* haven't arrived, a reminder from Admin Support that his weapons certification is due to expire in the next three months and he'll need to pass a refresher course to be re-certified. It's the fault of none of them that they are not Spock, but he feels a tidal surge of frustration wash up his throat anyway, twisting his voice into something thin and furious as he barks out the command that closes them and switches him back to his red streak on black.

A straight line from Q'onoS through Archanis IV. A slight adjustment, then straight ahead to Draconis II and onwards to the final piece of the puzzle, the bit that makes all of this *fit*. A detour

to Starbase 19 where they took what they needed to make that final leg of the journey, the one that brought them into the orbital path of a lonely planet of semi-aquatic spacefarers who now, for reasons that are not entirely unfair, blame the Federation for putting them on someone else's radar. But *why* Draconis? It's the question he can't escape, the one he keeps coming back to because there's still no answer. They have to change their course heading at Archanis to point them in the right direction - and it's even more obvious in 3D; it's a significant angular adjustment - but there's no discernible reason. There's nothing about the deuterium on Draconis II that they couldn't have gotten elsewhere, and there's *nothing* in the blackness beyond unless they readjust their heading again, and that just doesn't fit with the journey so far. Why follow a straight line as far as Archanis and then suddenly veer off?

And then it hits him. It hits him so hard upside the head that he can't imagine why he didn't see it before. *This* is why he needs Spock at his side, this right here: because his brain just works better with his friend beside him to bounce ideas off, to challenge and to quietly disapprove until a light goes on in Kirk's head and the fuzzy outlines of something indecipherable resolve into a fully-formed idea.

Draconis was *never* the course heading after Archanis. How the hell did he convince himself that it was?

"Computer," he says, and he can feel the adrenalin building; he *knows* he's right. This is it: this is *Eureka*. "Adjust current route to ignore Draconis and terminate at Federation Starbase 19."

"Adjusting route," says the computer, and the red bar shifts again, reorienting the angle by thirty degrees.

It's a straight line.

Draconis was the afterthought. The course heading was for Starbase 19; Ajillon Prime and Archanis IV, and who knows how many silent others were collateral damage along the way, convenient stopovers to collect supplies. A Klingon armada left Q'onoS with the express intention of targeting a Federal Starbase for information held within its cortex: navigational plans that made them readjust their route accordingly, brought them in line with Draconis II when they were starting to run low on fuel.

"Computer," says Kirk now. "Plot a course from Federation Starbase 19 to Draconis II, continue on from there indefinitely."

"Plotting course," says the computer. It's so damn *obvious*; how, *how* has he not seen this until

now? The line disappears into the vanishing point and Kirk scrolls along it with impatient hands, through empty space and planetary clusters, stellar nurseries and asteroid clouds. There's nothing out here, no outposts, no colonies, no M-class planets, but Kirk has a lingering sense of déjà vu that grows as he plunges further into the black. There's nothing out here, but sections of it have been named; it has been explored and categorized, scanned for items of interest and filed away as dead space by the stellar cartography team on the *Merrimac* when their path brought them out this way more than a year ago. There's a binary system designated Mitra and Varuna, cloaked by a vast, sprawling Oort cloud; a lonely planetoid orbiting the black-hole remnants of its long-dead sun; a fifteen-planet system full of nothing but rock and exotic chemical compounds... and Kirk remembers these, because he's been here before. He knows where he's going because they planned to stop and take gravimetric readings close to the event horizon so that Spock could satisfy some fit of curiosity piqued by an unusual long-range scan, but they had a mission to complete first, a delegate to deliver to a hostile race whose planetary riches were worth the effort of forcing the hand of friendship.

Whose planet has been emitting a single, continuous signal for more than forty-eight hours now.

He scrabbles for his communicator amongst the detritus of prolonged and frustrated thought, and dials Ciana, once, twice, three times, before giving up and tossing it across the desk, scattering tapes onto the floor. *Damn it.* Her communicator is switched off, which means she's already in her meeting with the top brass of the Starfleet admiralty, preparing to make an idiot out of herself with hopelessly inaccurate suppositions and the flimsiest of arguments as to why they need to pay attention. She knows that she doesn't have much, and he knows he can't rely on her to sell something she can't get behind. This could be their only chance to make the case, and the signal has been running for two full days now. There's no time to waste.

There's a dress tunic in his cabinet. Kirk grabs it with one hand as the other is tearing off his everyday fatigues, pulling the shirt awkwardly over his head and casting it haphazardly towards his chair. He's still fastening the front seam as he exits his office, striding briskly across the wide lobby floor and calling a brusque, "Yeoman, with me," to Banner over his shoulder as he goes.

Banner catches him midway across the atrium, scurrying to keep up, and fussing over Kirk's uniform as he moves, smoothing and straightening, pulling it into place.

"Keep trying Admiral Ciana," says Kirk impatiently as they walk. "I need to speak with her immediately. Interrupt her meeting if possible. I'm on my way over to OpTacs to do the same, but I'd prefer you kept that information to yourself for the time being."

"Yes, sir," says Banner. "May I say I'm calling on your authority?"

"You may. But if they ask why I'm not calling directly... deflect. I've never tried to crash an

admiralty conference before, but I doubt they'll take kindly to it. I'd rather they didn't have time to prepare their defense."

"And if I manage to contact Admiral Ciana?"

They're at the doors to Xeno now. Kirk pauses, turns and addresses his Yeoman full face. "Tell her I know where the armada is headed," he says. "Tell her there's no longer any doubt."

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If Xeno never sleeps, then OpTacs is the relentless tide of adrenalin that keeps the system moving. There is no such thing as *downtime* in the center of Starfleet, only the occasional pause before the next inexorable scrambling panic, and the halls of the higher echelons are awash with movement as Kirk makes his way down corridors greasy with the aura of power. He's been in this part of the building precisely once in his life - the day he received word of his promotion to Captain - and every step is a barrage of memories from that earlier self, the man whose life's ambitions were about to be handed to him with a canny smile and a firm handshake.

The dress uniform was an instinct, but it's a good one. Fatigues are in evidence, but they're accompanied by insignia far above Kirk's rank; the lower flag officers are in their formal best. One does not simply wander into the offices of Heihachiro Nogura; one needs to look as though one belongs there, and Commodores who belong there are dressed accordingly.

The last time he was here, he was ushered into the plush, wood-paneled office by a smiling assistant whose security clearance most likely rivaled Komack's, to be clapped on the arm by the aging head of Starfleet who was performing Genial Uncle Hei that day, to great effect. This time, he meets the stone-faced glare of a woman who gets the same old shit on a daily basis from men two grades above Kirk, and who knows where to punch so that they don't get up again.

"You don't have an appointment, Commodore," she says, by way of an opening, and Kirk is struck by the uneasy feeling that, not only has she read his entire file, including his medical and sexual history, but she's memorized the important parts.

He tries his most effective smile, though he's privately convinced that he might as well try scratching his way through the highly-polished, oak-effect walls, for all the good it will do him. "That's correct," he says smoothly. "However, I work with Admiral Ciana..."

“I’m aware of that, Commodore Kirk,” she says, and now she’s showing off. “Vice Admiral Ciana is in a meeting with Fleet Admiral Nogura and cannot be disturbed.”

So much for the charm offensive. He clears the smile from his face and says, in his bridge command voice, “It is imperative that I speak with her immediately. I have information critical to her current discussions.”

“My instructions are to allow no interruptions...”

“This is more important than your instructions. Please verify with Admiral Ciana...”

“Commodore Kirk, if I had a dime for every time I heard those words from a visitor to this office...”

“Admiral Ciana has incorrect information.”

“Then you’re free to take a seat and convey the correct information to her once her meeting has concluded. I will *not* interrupt them, Commodore. Now take a seat or please leave.”

There’s a security guard stationed at the door to the waiting room, another by the connecting door that leads to Nogura’s office. Both are armed. There’s no way to get past them, not without using his own weapon, and he won’t even dignify that notion with his consideration, but all he needs is enough of a commotion to carry into the room beyond.

The assistant is half a step behind him; she catches his intent before he’s three strides across the floor, rising to her feet with a sharp, “Commodore Kirk, what do you think you’re doing?” and then, “Security, apprehend that officer!” Elsewhere in the service, his Commodore’s braid might count for a second’s hesitation; here, the replicator maintenance crew outstrips his authority, and the man by the door, whose insignia give his rank as Captain, moves swiftly to intercept him before he’s halfway there. His hand closes around Kirk’s arm with disconcerting force, bone locking onto flesh and holding him in place.

He glances down, impassive. “Commodore,” he says quietly. “I’d think again, sir.”

“Damn it!” snaps Kirk, twisting in his grip so that he’s facing back towards the assistant. “Ma’am - this *cannot* wait! I will take full responsibility for any repercussions, but I must *insist* that you let Admiral Ciana know that I’m here!”

“Commodore Kirk, you’re in no position to *insist* on anything,” she says calmly. “Captain Novak, please escort the Commodore out of this office...”

Novak moves like an advancing glacier; there is literally nothing else for it but to be dragged along in his wake. In the end, it’s less humiliating to fall into his sphere of gravity, to straighten his back and move of his own volition towards the door, but as he passes the assistant’s desk, Kirk snaps, “Wait. One moment - just wait.”

She looks up, a mask of ice-cold disdain, but one raised eyebrow buys him a moment’s grace. Novak releases his grip, and Kirk shrugs the kink out of his arm. “Will you please,” he says, “With all due urgency, inform Admiral Ciana that I was here, that I have time-sensitive and critical information, and that...”

“Commodore Kirk!”

The sound of Ciana’s voice cuts through the thickening tension, causing both Kirk and the assistant to look up abruptly. Novak immediately straightens, snapping to attention, and the assistant scrambles to her feet. Kirk wonders idly what her rank might be, that she doesn’t feel the need to attend a superior officer, but it’s a momentary aberration, quickly dismissed as he tightens his spine, squares his jaw.

“At ease,” says Bernstein, from somewhere towards the back of the group, and Novak relaxes into parade rest, but Kirk takes a firm stride forward.

“Commodore Kirk was just leaving,” says the assistant, but she sounds a little less certain now.

“Ma’am, I apologize for the interruption,” says Kirk. “I have information that couldn’t wait.”

“About Draconis?” says Ciana, as Komack opens his mouth to speak. She stands almost half a foot below him, and he outranks her by a full grade, but there’s something about Ciana’s tone when she shrugs on the mantle of authority that tends to discourage outright dissent.

“About the armada,” says Kirk.

“Kirk, we’ve just spent a highly unproductive half hour debating the existence of your *armada*,” says Komack irritably, and Ciana’s jaw sets in a way that tells Kirk as much as he needs to know. “I’ve spoken to both Federal ambassadors to Cocidius over the past three days and I can tell you unequivocally that there have been no attacks in that system...”

“It’s not Cocidius,” says Kirk, with poorly-reigned irritation. “The co-ordinates that led to Cocidius were based on a misconception. Ma’am” - he turns to Ciana - “Starbase 19 was not a detour. It was the primary target.”

“Commodore *Kirk*...” begins Komack, with choleric fury, but Bernstein cuts him off.

“I think we’d better discuss this in the office,” she says quietly. “Stern,” she adds to the assistant, and Kirk takes a moment to reflect on the fact that never was a woman more aptly named, “Clear Admiral Nogura’s diary for another fifteen minutes, please.” To Kirk: “Commodore. You have five.”

An economic gesture of her hand invites him to lead the way into Nogura’s inner sanctum. Kirk sucks in a breath and sets off in the direction of the open door, through which he can see the figure of the Fleet Admiral himself, settled at the head of a long, mahogany desk. PADDs are stacked at his left hand, though he’s bent over a screen inlaid into the table itself, scanning its contents with the air of a man who will be disturbed as and when he sees fit, and not a moment sooner. A series of huge, stuffed armchairs circle a low coffee table, where discarded mugs and a plate of untouched donuts testify to the morning’s activities, and a large, shimmering screen displays a familiar red streak across a dark starmap.

The Admiral looks up. “Commodore Kirk,” he says neutrally. “This is a surprise.”

Kirk can feel Ciana settle into place at his right shoulder; it’s something about the way the energy changes in her presence. It’s not quite the same as having Spock there, but, right now, he’ll take it.

“Sir,” he says, “I apologize for the interruption. But I believe the report I presented to Admiral Ciana this morning was wrong.”

A white eyebrow slowly arches. “All right, Commodore. I assume you have a revised conclusion, or you wouldn’t be bursting into my offices unannounced?”

Kirk bristles, but buries it. “Yes, sir,” he says as evenly as he can.

“Let’s have it, then.”

A brisk nod; Nogura was never a man for preliminaries. Kirk says, “Sir, the attack on Starbase 19 was not a detour.” A beat. “It was the armada’s original destination.”

A quiet scoff somewhere behind him pinpoints Komack’s location in the room. Bernstein, standing close to Ciana’s right, says, “Kirk, we found no evidence to suggest that the Empire was behind the attack on Starbase 19.”

He turns in her direction. “Ma’am, with all due respect, I’d be suspicious if we *had*. They cannot afford to be held responsible for an attack on Federal citizens.”

“Commodore Kirk has a point,” says Ciana now. “We found no recognizable DNA signature anywhere in the environs of the starbase. The official conclusion speculates that we were subject to an attack from an unknown race or lifeform. Sir, you know my objections to that conclusion. It’s too neat. It’s premeditated...”

“Not every sentient race in the galaxy is warlike, Admiral,” says Nogura calmly.

“Sir, I’m aware,” she says, and Kirk can hear the note of frustration creeping into her voice and silently wills it away. “But the attack on the starbase was purposeful, it was planned and executed with military precision. They wanted the cortex and they didn’t want anyone to know...”

“Must we rehash the same arguments again?” snaps Komack, and Kirk hears her sharp intake of breath. If he thought he could do it without drawing attention to himself, he’d edge a foot backwards and tread on her toes, protocol be damned. Komack is an ass, but drawing him into open battle is unwise.

“Sir, with respect...” she begins, which is the universal symbol for *I would like to tell you where to shove your stripes but it’s important to maintain the illusion of politesse*, but fortunately Nogura intervenes.

“Jim,” he says, and it takes Kirk a moment to remember that Komack is also James, and Nogura knows him somewhat better than he knows Kirk. “I’d like to hear this.”

A pace behind and to the left of Kirk, the temperature drops noticeably. “Yes, sir,” says Komack coolly.

Nogura nods, and couched in that simple, utilitarian gesture is the kind of effortless authority that can build and maintain an empire. His steel-eyed gaze falls on Kirk.

“Commodore,” he says. “Enlighten us.”

Kirk is not unaccustomed to the sensation of commanding the unwavering attention of the entire room, and he’s weathered it in situations where far more was at stake. So he clears his throat, an anchoring gesture, and indicates the terminal interface on the wall beside the screen. “If I may?” he says.

Nogura registers his assent with a brief dip of his head, and Kirk crosses quickly to the control pad. As he slides his tape into the dock and the screen flickers and rearranges itself into his revised schematic, he says, “The attack on the starbase bothered me for a long time. I was certain there was something to it that I wasn’t seeing.”

“So I understand,” says Nogura dryly. “Admiral Urquhart was good enough to inform me of your interest in the committee’s report.”

Kirk lets that one slide and turns to the screen. He says, “Admiral Ciana and I discussed the possibility that the attacks on Ajillon Prime and Archanis IV might be part of a series that included Draconis. As you see, when I plotted the progression onto our starcharts, it was immediately apparent that both systems fell along a roughly straight line along a trajectory from Q’onoS, which veers” - he adjusts the display - “on a tangent at Archanis, heading for Draconis II. This new course heading carries them at a plausible distance from Starbase 19 within a timescale consistent with the attack. However” - and the display adjusts again; he sees Bernstein’s eyebrows arch abruptly and Nogura leans forward in his chair - “If we ignore Draconis for the time being and continue along the same course trajectory from Archanis, it is immediately apparent that Starbase 19 was their initial destination.”

“It’s four points on a three-dimensional graph,” says Ciana quietly. “That doesn’t leave a whole lot of room for doubt, sir.”

“Assuming that all four points are evidentially connected!” protests Komack, with the air of a man who knows he’s twisting in the wind. “I have yet to see one shred of proof that these attacks can be linked by *anything* substantive. It’s guesswork...”

“Yes, sir,” says Kirk sharply. “Because they were too damn clever to leave anything substantive behind.”

“Kirk...” says Ciana quietly, a warning tone. He glances at her, briefly, but her eyes are fixed on the screen. “Starbase 19 to Draconis gives us an alternative vector,” she says. “Did you plot it onwards?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he says. “There’s not much along that corridor. However...”

“That’s a loaded ‘however’, Kirk.”

“Yes, Ma’am. There’s one system of interest. I believe it’s an excellent candidate.”

“For an entirely hypothetical advance...” says Komack, but Nogura cuts him off.

“Jim,” he says. “I think we’re past hypothesis now.” To Kirk, with an unreadable expression: “Go ahead, Commodore.”

“Sir,” says Kirk. “On a trajectory from Starbase 19 that brought them in line with Draconis, they would be heading directly towards Ilion Gamma.”

There is a moment of perfect, loaded silence.

Ciana is the first to break it. “Jesus,” she says. “The signal...”

“Yes, Ma’am,” says Kirk. “It’s also isolated, formerly unknown, practically defenseless, and incalculably resource-rich. We wanted them in the Federation for a reason; mining rights on either of their northern continents would have doubled our pergium yield in the first year alone. And they’ve been trying to get some kind of message through to us - the same Federation they threw off their planet not six months ago - for the past two days. That fits with the distance and the trajectory.

They're under attack, sir, and they may or may not know that we had something to do with pointing the Empire in their direction, but they sure as hell know we're the only ones who can help them. Now, I know that the bulk of the fleet is out of immediate range, but the *Invictus* and the *Pharsalus* are both within seven days' journey at maximum warp. It might be enough to rebalance the equation in the interim..."

"Now, just a minute!" snaps Komack. "You're not suggesting that we get involved, Kirk?"

"Of course I'm suggesting..." says Kirk, quickly, without thinking, anger geysering up through his chest and escaping in a rush of ill-considered words that disappear into a room that has gone suddenly silent. His eyes automatically find Ciana's, flicking back from a quick survey of Nogura, Bernstein, a red-faced, venomous Komack, and they meet his with a rush of horrified understanding.

They are the only two people in the room for whom Kirk's epiphany comes as a surprise.

"You already knew," says Ciana quietly. Her face is expressionless, canted on her shoulder to face Nogura. Softly, almost to herself: "Damn it. I'm an *idiot*. Of course you knew."

"I don't understand," says Kirk, though he has a terrible suspicion that he does.

"I think we're done here," says Bernstein. "Admiral Nogura, thank you for your time..."

"The hell we're done here!" cries Kirk with a violent rush of impotent rage. Ciana's eyes widen in sudden shock, and she whirls on him, face tight with anger.

"Commodore Kirk!" she snaps, all ice-cold fury. "That's enough. We'll discuss this in my office..."

"You knew that the signal was a distress call! How long have you known, sir? How long have you known and done *nothing*?"

"Commodore *Kirk!*"

“I see no reason to discuss this any further,” says Komack, but he glances at Nogura as he says it.

“We led Q’onoS directly to them!” cries Kirk. “We’ve given them the keys to the safe, and now we’re just going to sit back and watch them take what they want?”

“That’s *enough*, Commodore!” snaps Ciana. “Goddamn it...”

“We have a moral obligation to help these people!”

“They are not Federal citizens!” snaps Komack, and Kirk rounds on him, but Nogura interrupts before he can speak.

“Kirk, do you know what would happen if we were to take these people’s side against the Klingons?” he says. His voice is even and unwavering, stripped of emotion. “The Klingons with whom we have a peace treaty in effect, prohibiting any act of war by either side?”

Kirk huffs a bitter, humorless laugh. “No, of course not...”

“Neither do I,” says Nogura.

Kirk stares at him for a long moment, while words tangle in his throat. “This is obscene,” he says at last.

“Admiral Ciana, control your officer,” snaps Komack.

“Commodore Kirk,” she says coldly. “That’s *enough*, goddamn it. You will leave this room right now.”

“Ma’am, with all due respect...”

“No. No respect. Leave. *Now*.”

“We’re going to stand back and watch an atrocity happen?” Kirk is vaguely aware, behind the hazy fury, that he’s mouthing empty words to a room irretrievably lost, but they spill out of him regardless. “We’re going to wash our hands of it, even though we set it in motion? We *gave* them that planet. We gave them the goddamn cortex!”

“We gave them nothing,” says Komack. “They took what they wanted from us, and you are so far out of line, Commodore, that you’ll be lucky if your next assignment is scrubbing plasma coolant from an engine room floor...”

“This is *not* the oath that I swore to uphold,” spits Kirk. He is so angry he can barely hear himself over the thunderous roar of blood in his veins. “This is a matter of *honor*, sir...!”

“Kirk!” snaps Ciana.

He spins on his heel, pivoting to face her. “We have a peace treaty in effect!” he says. “Were we the aggressors? Was it Federal aggression that breached the treaty? Did we attack a Klingon outpost? Are we waging war on a peaceful planet in the name of monetary gain? What value does a peace treaty hold if it allows that kind of license? We are betraying *everything* we stand for if we do nothing!”

“And we are risking war with the Empire and war with the Organians if we act!” hisses Komack.

“If war is the consequence of standing behind our principles...”

“Do you really think this has never crossed anyone’s mind but yours, Kirk?” Komack is white with rage. “Are you really so *arrogant* that you would think that yours is the only voice of dissent?”

“Where is your *voice of dissent*, Admiral?” snaps Kirk, and Ciana’s eyes widen.

“Kirk, that’s it,” she hisses. “Get out. You’re on administrative leave, effective immediately.”

His eyes fix on hers, hold them. She does not look away. He says, “You *cannot* support this.”

“What I do or do not support is immaterial right now,” she says. “You are on leave, Commodore.”

Don't make me have security escort you from this building."

"You've been told, Kirk," says Komack in a dangerous tone, but Nogura cuts across him.

"That's enough, Jim," he says, and it's no longer clear which man he means. It could be either.

A bitter smile slices across Kirk's face and he shakes his head. "This is obscene," he says again.

Her eyes close. Her face is very still, but there's a faint tremor in her shoulders that speaks of muscles under extreme duress. "Leave, Commodore," she says. "I don't... we'll talk about this when you get back. That's it. We're done here."

"Admiral Ciana," says Nogura quietly. "Perhaps you'd be good enough to escort Commodore Kirk to the aircar bay."

Her jaw tightens. "Yes, sir," she says. To Kirk: "Let's go. Just... let's go, Kirk."

A sharp, acid laugh chokes its way free of his throat, and he gestures, with exaggerated politesse, for her to go ahead of him. She falls into step without another glance in his direction, leading them out through the door, and he can hear Komack's affronted rage explosion before they're even across the threshold: "Goddamn it, the man's always been insubordinate but that was two steps shy of mutiny...!"

As the door slides shut behind him, Kirk just catches Nogura's even reply, delivered with a soft authority that brooks no argument: "Let it alone, Jim. We need more men like him..."

Chapter 28

The taxi leaves him at his quarters close to midnight on April 16th, travel-creased and heavy with the kind of honest fatigue that comes from a day's exertion. Given the choice, he thinks, he'd have stayed away another week, but Ciana's right: he doesn't want to quit, and that's what he'd be doing if he followed his instincts and left the Cochrane Day ceremony to other people, people for whom Starfleet isn't a mass of contradiction and compromise. So he's come home, though that's not the word he'd choose to use. Given the choice.

She combed him on the second day of his furlough, waking him from an uneasy sleep on the spring-spiked mattress of a motel-room bed somewhere in Louisiana. He's not entirely sure why he chose Louisiana; he's not even certain that he *did*, it's just where he found himself when the red mist receded and his brain abruptly plummeted into exhaustion so profound he could barely muster the energy to sign his name on the guest register.

Where are you? she wanted to know, without preamble. *You didn't go home yesterday.*

He didn't ask her how she knew, though a small part of him was glad that she did. He said, *I'm not in San Francisco.*

That much I gathered. A long, loaded pause. *Are you coming back?*

Hesitation. *Do I have a reason?*

You still have a job, if that's what you're asking. Goddamn it, Jim. That was some stupid shit you pulled yesterday.

He felt the fire rise in his chest, tightening his throat. *I stand by everything I said.*

I know you do, you stubborn son-of-a-bitch. And I also know you're not obtuse. I know you understand.

That's the problem: he *does* understand. He understands the need to weigh billions of Federal lives against the freedom of a planet that refused their allegiance, and he understands that there was only one possible decision. And he *hates* that he understands this.

Mostly, he's just glad the choice was never his. It's easier to let the flames of righteous indignation burn out all the trade-offs and the balancing acts in a combustive blaze of honorable fury. He's damn sure this is not what the Organians had in mind, but where the hell are they, now? How the hell is he supposed to live with this?

Nogura overruled Komack's strenuous objections, she explained; no-one will be seeking disciplinary action. *Quite the contrary*, she added, final words before signing off. *I have a message from him sitting on my terminal right now. He says he was impressed with your passion. He says it's vindicated his decision to promote you.*

Kirk supposes he's meant to be pleased, but all he can think about is how much power - *real* power, practical power - that promotion has stripped from him. He used to have the autonomy to act as he saw fit, within a strictly delineated set of guidelines that were flexible enough to allow for the realities of deep-space exploration. Now he has politics and a chain around his throat.

He slings his overnight bag onto the couch and crosses the dark room to his desk, where his terminal hums with leashed energy. For a week now, he's deliberately avoided any kind of technological interface, messages unread hovering like a dark cloud in the ether, daring him to ignore them. A swarm of unspoken words has haunted his every waking moment, walking beside him like a restless ghost, but he has turned his back on all the things that might be said and focused on slaking his impotent rage with the mundane; with relentless motion; with the pursuit of sights unseen; and, when all else fails, with bourbon. He pours a generous measure from Bones' birthday stash as he settles now in front of the screen, speaking a soft command to the waiting duotronic brain, which snaps to life in a flash of light and color.

"Display recent messages," says Kirk, and the machine obliges, conjuring up an inbox crammed with 478 unread communications screaming for attention. He scrolls without interest through Sanders' initial consternation that gradually segues into a kind of weary resignation; through a string of short, curt notes from Ciana that start with *Goddamn it, Jim, what the hell was that? Are you out of your goddamn mind?* and end, abruptly, two days ago with, *As long as you're back for the ceremony, that's all I care about right now. Don't be an ass about this*; through operational updates and marketing mail-shots; through a cheerful epistle from Bones that opens with, *Hearing rumors about a good, old-fashioned set-to over in the Ivory Tower. Tell me they're true? And tell me what shade of purple old Komack's face went while you're at it...* And, interspersed between them all, the name he's been pretending he doesn't want to see:

Commodore Kirk - I have been apprised in brief of the nature of your altercation with Admirals Komack, Bernstein and Nogura. I would be glad of the opportunity to discuss it further with you, should you so desire. Regards, CDR Spock.

Commodore Kirk - I note the unusual delay in your response, and assure you that I merely wish to ascertain your wellbeing. Regards, CDR Spock.

Commodore Kirk - I am unable to obtain details as to your whereabouts. I trust that you will apprise me of your situation as is appropriate and convenient to you. Regards, CDR Spock.

Jim - McCoy informs me that he has been likewise unable to establish contact with you. Your office has been unhelpful. This is now a source of some concern.

Jim - it is five days since my initial contact. I have yet to receive a response. Your earliest attention would be appreciated.

Jim - your communicator is inactive. I wish to determine that no accident has occurred to your person.

Jim - this is unprecedented and I find myself most anxious as to the nature of your prolonged lack of communication.

Jim - please respond. Spock.

~*~

The sun has not yet risen when his sleep cycle pronounces itself definitively *over*, and Spock finds himself crash-dumped into wakefulness with a sharp intake of breath and a sickening lurch of non-specific dread. He glances at the chronometer with aching, bleary eyes and finds that it is still fifteen minutes off 0500 hours, which makes it fewer than three hours since he finally fell asleep. He didn't meditate last night either; the trance would not come, no matter how he tried.

He rises, slowly, and makes his way into the small living quarters, where he attempts, once again, to realign his mental and physical energies with a series of *Suus Mahna* maneuvers, but the floor space is insufficient for the more complex forms, and prolonged physical exhaustion has begun to take its toll on his balance. So he finds himself lying, supine, on the unforgiving carpet tiles, staring up at a stain on his ceiling that he might be able to patch over, given a free hour and a little advice on Terran home maintenance, and trying, without success, to settle the creeping unease that twists in his stomach.

In a little under five hours' time, he will march onto the dais of the Grand Hall, where he last stood to receive his commission on the day of his graduation, and stand beside the man whose name hovers constantly on his lips, whose face is the last thing he sees before his infrequent periods of sleep, whose shadow is his constant companion. He will stand beside him and attempt to unlearn the lesson of the past ten days: that there is no escape from James Kirk. Absence makes it worse. To be without him is to cut away something vital, like an addict deprived of his drug. And it is eating the heart from Spock, minute by minute, hour by hour.

The message on his terminal is not precisely a surprise, though it is a relief. He finds it when his protesting bones and growling stomach eject him from the floor in search of food and comfort, and he carries a plate of *kreylya* to his desk, where he eats methodically and without interest as he scrolls through his new contacts.

Spock - am home. All is well, as far as possible. Thank you for your concern. See you at the ceremony, JTK.

It is bad enough that an emotional vacuum is tearing at his shields from the inside out; anger, on top of everything else, is unthinkable. So Spock simply closes the message, throws his scarcely eaten meal in the cyclor, and retreats to his sleeping quarters to dress.

He is home. It is enough.

~*~

McCoy corners him almost immediately, as though he has been waiting by the door specifically to pounce as soon as Spock arrives. This may, in fact, not be wholly inaccurate. It certainly would not be outside of the Doctor's usual MO.

"My God, man!" he says, by way of an opening salutation, "You look like hell on a stick. What're they doin' to you over in that Academy?"

"I am well, Doctor," says Spock, more in hope than expectation. Even if this were not manifestly untrue, direct contradiction is largely ineffective on McCoy.

"Well, huh?" he says irascibly. "I've a mind to call a mandatory medical on you, Commander, you don't start showin' a mite more flesh on them bones. You any idea how many Terran viruses show up undetected in the Vulcan system right up to the point where they've caused irreparable

damage?”

Spock offers that comment the disdain it merits. “There are no viruses that cause the syndrome you describe, Doctor McCoy,” he says.

“Yeah,” says McCoy, and his eyes narrow. “Think your CO knows that?”

A jostle of bodies behind them puts paid to Spock’s rejoinder, and McCoy breaks away for a moment to greet a couple of ensigns whose faces Spock remembers from gamma shift on the auxiliary bridge. Barton and Martinez, he recalls, although McCoy refers to the former as Benton. She says nothing, returning his easy charm with a smile that wavers for no more than a fraction of a second, until another influx of humanity obliges them to make space in the entryway, and they drift off towards the buffet table on the far side of the room.

“As I was sayin’,” says the Doctor, turning back to Spock from a survey of the swelling crowd filtering into the wide, airy function room that has been co-opted into a kind of pre-ceremony holding pen, “I don’t quite know what to make of this business with Jim.”

Spock opens his mouth to protest that this is *not* what McCoy was saying, but catches himself in time. Instead, he says, “Nor I, Doctor, but this is hardly surprising. Contextual information has not been forthcoming.”

McCoy rolls his eyes. “Why do I always feel like I need a damn dictionary to have a conversation with you, Spock?” he mutters. “Take it that means he ain’t bin talkin’ to you about it either?”

Unexpectedly, Spock finds himself bristling. No, Kirk has not been talking to him about it, but, for some reason, this information feels disproportionately personal. He says, “The subject has not been open for discussion,” and hopes that McCoy does not feel the need to pursue his enquiry into the specifics of that conversational oversight: to wit, the disappearance of Commodore Kirk from the airwaves and Spock’s life for over a week.

The Doctor treats Spock to an appraising look, but doesn’t press the issue. “Yeah, you’re good at that. The pair of you,” he says. An extravagant sigh. “Guess that means I’ll be bendin’ his ear myself, assumin’ I can get in spittin’ distance of him, this damn fool shindig they got planned.”

“That may not be wise...” says Spock carefully, but the wisdom or otherwise of McCoy’s plan is abruptly prorogued by a significant bustle of activity on the other side of the oak-paneled doors to

his left. The function room is off the main thoroughfare of the administrative building, but the corridor outside maintains a respectable flow of traffic; there is no reason for the sudden spike of adrenalin that catapults Spock's heart into a punishing rhythm against his flank, or the flood of certainty that fills his belly like ice water. But he knows, even before the doors slide open on a familiar figure in the green silk of command dress, before some joker in the audience - Lieutenant Wenger, he suspects - barks, "Captain on the bridge!" and the crowd dissolves into laughter and a trickling tidal wave of applause. He knows, even as the world seems to freeze for a moment and the room dissolves like a watercolor in the rain.

Kirk steps inside as far as the press of bodies will allow, smiling his easy smile, shaking hands, clapping shoulders, laughing, accepting the adulation of command with all the grace of a man who has never expected to be a hero. He seems casual, at his ease, as though this is a series of steps from an old dance that he's never fully left behind. Perhaps that's true, in some small way. It certainly ought to be.

"Same old Jim Kirk," says McCoy quietly, at Spock's shoulder. Spock can't tell if the remark is wistful, facetious, or ironic, or some combination of the three; it has never been possible, as far as he can tell, to determine Kirk's mood solely from his interaction with his crew. He has to be very certain of himself to allow the veneer to drop. Maybe that's what the Doctor means.

He moves through the crowd with a diplomat's elegance, and it's only because Spock is watching so closely that he can see the miniscule twist of his head, the hungry cant to his eyes as they scour the room. It's buried in cheerful politesse, genuine pleasure and camaraderie, but it's there: the restless anxiety of a fruitless search. His gaze sweeps the scattered crowds beneath the high, arched windows; the waiters bustling through the dress-uniformed masses with trays of fruit juice and hors d'oeuvres; the familiar faces and hands raised in greeting; while his body moves and circles in a slow pivot, arcing inexorably towards the place where his friends watch and wait to be seen.

Kirk's eyes find Spock's, lock and hold them. Everything stops. Kirk freezes mid-motion and his politician's smile wilts, draining his face of expression. It hovers in uncertainty for a moment, like a slate wiped clean, and then, slowly, like the sun breaking through distant storm clouds, the edges of his lips curl upwards, trailing that familiar, 100-watt glow behind them.

"Yup," says McCoy softly. "Same old Jim Kirk."

A brief comment to the Ensign at his side, excusing himself with words that make her grin and nod enthusiastically, and Kirk shoulders his way through the tide of bodies. "Bones!" he says cheerfully. And then, turning directly to face him with another flash of that smile: "Spock."

Spock nods. "Commodore."

“Well, if it ain’t Starfleet’s golden boy himself,” says McCoy, with a grin that’s designed to provoke a reaction.

“I believe they’ve rescinded that title,” says Kirk smoothly, “Following recent events.”

“Ha!” says McCoy cheerfully. “Not last I heard. What I wouldn’t’ve given to be a fly on that wall, Jim. Damned unfair, you ask me, you disappearin’ before any of us got to bask in the glory of a well-stuffed Admiral Komack.”

Darkness ghosts Kirk’s eyes, but he keeps his voice light. “Rumors of his demise have been greatly exaggerated, Bones,” he says. “I believe he won the round on points.”

“That ain’t the story they’re tellin’ in the commissary, I can tell you that,” says McCoy, waving over a waiter and lifting a couple of drinks from his tray. He passes them out, sniffing suspiciously at his own and wrinkling his nose. “Orange juice,” he says. “Damned morning functions...”

Kirk grins, swallowing a mouthful and turning to Spock. “And how’s your work going?” he asks innocently.

“Adequately,” says Spock.

Eyebrows arch, but there’s no hint of reproach behind the open expression. “I’m glad you were able to snatch a few hours away from the lab,” says Kirk.

Spock would protest that the invitation to the ceremony came from Nogura’s office, which is a state of affairs that renders the “invitation” part rather disingenuous. He might be on the verge of isolating the ancient alchemical formula for transmuting lead into gold and it would still be necessary for him to pack up his crucibles and present himself, dress-uniformed, in the Pacific View function room at 0945 hours to receive his mandated adulation. But there’s a lightness to the words that feels like a tentative kind of truce; an appeal to an easier time.

So he says, instead, “The critical period has passed.” It’s a lie only inasmuch as it fails to define the parameters of the phrase “critical period”, or to specifically link it to his current project. “I anticipate fewer demands on my time in the coming weeks.”

Brightness flares behind Kirk's eyes, colors his smile, warms the air around him. "Good," he says. "Then perhaps..."

But wherever that *perhaps* might lead, it's lost to the moment as a young Ensign clears his throat, nervously, at Kirk's shoulder and says, "Commodore Kirk? Commander Spock? They're ready for you, sirs."

McCoy snorts and rolls his eyes. "Believe you were sayin' something 'bout how you weren't anyone's golden boy these days?" he says.

~*~

They are led to a small Green Room to the right of the auditorium entrance, where a coterie of public relations officials are determined to shake as many hands as possible, while the rest of Kirk's senior officers are ushered onto the stage to a barrage of applause that is alarming even through the four solid walls that separate them from the melee. Spock keeps his hands folded firmly behind his back and offers his blankest and least approachable face, but it nevertheless requires a sharp reminder from his former CO on the niceties of Vulcan etiquette before the most persistent of their new-found entourage retracts the arm he has extended into Spock's personal space.

"Perhaps you might get us a couple of glasses of water," suggests Kirk with an affable smile and a tone that implies that it's not a request.

"Of course, sir," says the officer, who outranks Spock, but who appears to have forgotten this.

"Remind you of anything?" says Kirk under his breath as the young officer disappears in search of refreshments and another, older man, wearing admiral's stripes, breaks away from a conversation on the other side of the room to take his place.

"Indeed," says Spock quietly, who has been attempting, without success, not to engage with the similarities between their current situation and the press conference that marked the end of his former life. He nods to their approaching companion as Kirk plasters a smile across his face.

"We do seem to have a talent for attracting this kind of event lately," says the Commodore through his teeth, and then, more loudly, "Admiral Girvan. Is it time?"

“Not quite yet,” says the Admiral with a genial grin. “We’ll give them a moment or two to get their pictures and ask their questions. There’s quite a crowd out there, you know.”

“It certainly sounds that way,” says Kirk, and Spock thinks that only a man who knew him very well would hear the hint of distaste behind the cheerful words.

Girvan fails to pick up on it, and loses an amiable chuckle. “You’re quite the hero, Commodore Kirk,” he says.

The diplomatic smile tightens, but only fractionally. “I’ve never seen it that way,” says Kirk.

Another hearty laugh, and the Admiral reaches out a hand to clap Kirk on the shoulder. “Good thing for Starfleet that Admiral Nogura thinks differently, eh?” he says.

A flash of irritation clouds Kirk’s face and he starts to say, “I wouldn’t...” - shallow, warning quakes that herald the eruption of the frustrated fury that has bubbled beneath the surface now for months, and has lately begun to force open the stress fractures that cobweb his soul. Once upon a time, it would have been cause for a low, injunctive *Jim...*, and this would either bank the fires of righteous indignation or pour a quart of gasoline over the smoldering coals, as the situation demanded. Many things have changed, and Spock is no longer certain that his warning would be heeded, or welcome.

Fortunately, a chirp from Girvan’s communicator interrupts the anger vortex before it really starts to spin. The Admiral holds up a finger to excuse himself and turns away, and Spock takes the opportunity to direct an eyebrow at his friend. It’s a fairly bulletproof gesture, in that it can be semantically reconfigured according to the manner in which it is received, but Kirk twists his lips into a wry grin that tells Spock that the danger is over.

Temporarily. “Gentlemen,” says Girvan, turning back into the conversation. “Would you follow me?”

Kirk is still looking at Spock as the words register, which is how Spock sees the flash of something like alarm behind his eyes, chased by resignation into a stoic smile. “Of course,” he says smoothly, and then, under his breath, as Girvan leads the way, “Let’s just get it over with.”

It's a short walk from the Green Room to the auditorium, and, through the side entrance, which looks onto the dais, it's possible to see three rows of Spock's erstwhile colleagues, pressed and stiff on formal chairs behind a lectern, from which the head of Starfleet's PR department addresses a morass of bodies. The front seats of the auditorium are filled with the lower ranks - the Yeomen, the junior lieutenants, the enlisted crew - and Spock knows even without the sharp intake of breath from the man to his left that Kirk will bristle at this evidence of casual disregard. But as Admiral Chavez draws his opening salutations to a close, with a rousing, "And here they are - Starfleet's finest command team and the heroes of the hour: Commander Spock and Commodore James Kirk!" the stalls erupt in a cacophony of cheering, three hundred and fifty men and women clambering to their feet ahead of the wave of motion that ripples upwards along the tiers of the assembly. As one, the senior crew follow suit, chairs scraping across the hardwood floor as they scramble to honor their former commanders. Chavez steps back from the lectern with a beckoning wave towards the wings, and Girvan murmurs, unnecessarily, "That's your cue, gentlemen."

Kirk sucks in a breath, tilts his head towards Spock. "Ready for this?" he asks quietly.

"Insofar as it is possible to adequately prepare for a venture that is, by its nature, both illogical and unpredictable," says Spock.

"Neither am I," says Kirk, and steps onto the stage.

The auditorium explodes into whoops and hollers and flashing lights, a litany of bellowed questions, a hundred voices shouting their names. Nogura steps forward from his position on the far left of the podium, hands raised in elegant applause as he makes his way to the lectern, where two prominent seats are waiting, empty, for the Captain and First Officer of the *Enterprise*. They are flanked, Spock notes with distaste, by urns filled to bursting with *Exterus Aurentiacofloris Enterprisii*.

Kirk stops in front of them and offers a salute, which Spock mirrors and Nogura returns before gesturing to the seats and turning full face to the auditorium, which remains incandescent with adulation. As the Commodore lowers himself into the farther chair, Spock thinks he sees a tension in his shoulders, in the set of his jaw, in the unflinching smile that seems to fray a little around the edges. But he sits easily enough, hands resting on his thighs, and he shoots a sideways glance at Spock that telegraphs a healthy appreciation of the ridiculousness of their situation. He cannot speak unobserved, but he nods: an eloquent, loaded gesture that communicates more than any censored sentence could say. Spock arches an eyebrow and turns back to the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," says Nogura with that quiet authority of his: confidence over volume, the simple assumption that, when he speaks, no one else will. That it has a 100% success rate goes some way towards explaining his lengthy tenure at the head of one of the most powerful organizations in the alpha quadrant. "Esteemed guests" - as the auditorium goes silent but for the sound of several hundred buttocks quietly striking their seats - "Welcome to our ceremony. Today,

as we honor the memory of the man who has done more than any other to advance Humanity's quest beyond the boundaries of our own skies, our own sun and system, we also honor the officers and crew of our flagship - the jewel in Starfleet's crown - whose fearless pursuit of knowledge and harmony across the galaxy has brought our message of peace and friendship to countless worlds where the United Federation of Planets was never previously known. This Cochrane Day, we are gathered here to celebrate the unfailing dedication to duty, the selflessness and sacrifice, the heroism and the valor, of the *USS Enterprise*, and the courage of the men and women who serve aboard her."

A whoop from the gods, and applause breaks free again, scattered at first but rising rapidly into a deafening crescendo. Nogura folds his hands behind his back and watches with serenity, and Spock wonders if, in fact, the original shouter is a plant; it would be extremely unlike the Admiral to be taken by surprise. Nogura allows it to rage unchecked for a moment, then raises a slender hand in an economic gesture that has the effect of dropping a silencing cloak on the crowd. To Spock's left, Kirk's lips purse around a censored smile.

"Five years ago," continues the Admiral, "The *Enterprise* set her first course heading from Earth under the command of the youngest starship captain in Starfleet history. This man of extraordinary gifts had proved his talent and his devotion to duty as an Ensign aboard the *USS Republic*, and as Tactical Officer, and later First Officer, on the *USS Farragut*. He is a man of compassion and tolerance, whose diplomatic skills are informed by a thirst for knowledge and an acceptance, not only of the differences that separate us, but of the differences that bring us closer together. He is a man of great vision, and he is also that rarest of our number: a man for whom other men will lay down their lives in the service of a greater cause. As we celebrate the triumph that is the successful conclusion of this historic mission of discovery, we remember each man and woman who offered the greatest sacrifice that their service can ask, and who gave their lives in the pursuit of knowledge. We feel each loss as a wound to the heart of Starfleet. Commodore Kirk feels each loss as a wound to his commander's soul, and it is this, as much as his comprehensive intellect, his gift for making difficult decisions, his instinct and intuition, and his honorable nature, that makes him the truly great leader that he is. And it is for this reason that it gives me such great and abiding pleasure to announce that it is the decision of Starfleet Command to promote him to the rank of Admiral, in order that his remarkable talents be allowed to find their fullest use.

"Ladies and gentlemen, honored guests: I give you Admiral James Kirk!"

A wall of ecstatic noise explodes upwards from the seated congregation; bodies scrambling from their seats, feet thumping the floor, hands pounding against hands. As the tidal wave of exaltation swamps the cavernous space, Spock turns slowly, in mounting horror, to see the blood drain from Kirk's face, eyes widening in distress, smile frozen in place as he finds his feet on legs that barely tremble. What instinct guides him across the stage to Nogura, what propels his hand forward to grip the Admiral's, Spock cannot tell; his face is correct, his movements are correct, and yet he looks like a man approaching his own gallows. Spock folds his left hand over his right to hide the convulsive curl of his fingernails into his palm; it is the only thing that grounds him right now in a world that is falling apart.

As he turns to face the hollering, baying crowd, Kirk folds his hands behind his back, one over the other, and Spock sees that the gesture is a mirror of his own, knuckles white as fingernails gouge hidden crescents into the pink flesh. He sees this, and he understands what it costs his friend to accept this with the appearance of equanimity. Because the hazy, unplotted future has just been forced into sharp focus, and it turns out that he was right all along.

There will be no more command for James Kirk. There will be no jubilant return to the bridge that he mourns like the loss of a limb. There will be no telling half-smile playing at the corner of his lips as he gives the command that sends his ship back out into the black unknown. There will be no quiet moments in the command chair, when he believes he is unobserved and his fingers trace the arm rest with the care and devotion of a lover. There will be no more long and indolent afternoons, deep in Federation space, to glance back from the science console in response to some ancient instinct and meet a gentle, hazel gaze in eyes that crease into a smile as they meet his friend's. There will be no more chess and arguments; no more constant gnawing anxiety as they walk together, side-by-side, on an unexplored world; no more gentle provocation or casual appropriation of skin and personal space.

There is *one* place in all the galaxy in which the worlds of James Kirk and Spock of Vulcan collide, and it has just been closed to them forever. And there is nothing either of them can do.

Kirk mouths some appropriate platitudes and an observer might never guess that he is breaking beneath his careful facade, but what can he do? Nogura knows his man very well. He knows that Kirk will not refuse this in front of his crew, his peers, the eyes of the Federation. He knows that Kirk does not want this, and he knows that he has him cornered. And so Spock stands with the rest of them, rising to his feet even as a sick emptiness eats away at his stomach. He stands and salutes his friend, and he understands that this is the end.

~*~

“Goddamn it, Bones, now is *not* the time,” snaps Kirk as he strides offstage, passing through the surge of well-wishers like a hot knife through butter. To a passing Lieutenant, as McCoy attaches himself to his friend's wake: “Where is Admiral Ciana? I need to speak with her immediately.”

Corgan takes one look at his former CO's face and his congratulations visibly wilt on his lips. “I believe I saw her making her way towards the west exit, sir,” he says.

“Thank you,” says Kirk, and sets off at a Vulcan pace, clearing the crowded corridor like a shark might carve a path through a shoal of mackerel. “There's no need for either of you to accompany me,” he adds over his shoulder, which, predictably, causes McCoy to crook an eyebrow and increase his pace.

“Jim,” he says. “I got your psych evals; I’ll protest this at the highest level...”

“*Goddamn* it, Bones!” Kirk barks. “*Not now!*”

“They can’t just spring it on you like this,” says McCoy, who has never been particularly amenable to Kirk’s emotional fluctuations. “Damn it, Jim, Nogura’s wily as all hell, sure, but it flies in the face of...”

“Admiral Ciana!” snaps Kirk, loud enough to be considered, in some circles, a shout. McCoy, cut off mid-sentence, winces at the tone.

Ciana is a little way along the corridor, heading in the direction of ‘Fleet HQ, but she stops at the sound of her name, turning over her shoulder with a look that is seven parts questioning to three parts utterly unimpressed.

“Jim, take it easy...” says McCoy quietly, but Kirk ignores him, picking up speed to reach his CO, who has squared her shoulders and folded her hands behind her back in an unmistakably defensive gesture.

“Commodore Kirk,” she says, and Spock finds himself reeling with gratitude that she has thought through the ramifications of using his new title.

Kirk pulls to a halt in front of her, not close enough to invade her personal space - he’s not *that* far gone at least - but close enough to telegraph his hostility. “Did you know about this?” he demands. He’s so angry he sounds almost calm. But she’s far too smart to mistake the icy fury in his eyes.

“What do you want me to say, Kirk?” she says coldly. “I had an idea. You want me to tell you every time I have an idea? I guessed he might pull something like this. I make a lot of guesses. Not all of them are right.”

Kirk’s bitter laughter sours the air. “I’ll take your ‘guesses’ over a month’s research from other members of this organization,” he says, and Spock suspects, from the way she flinches, that this is a calculated barb, designed to wound. “You *knew* this was coming, Ma’am; you *knew* it and you threw me to the wolves...”

“Jim!” barks McCoy in rising alarm as the volume of Kirk’s voice approaches dangerous territory. “Take it easy. This is not the place...”

“Goddamn it, Bones!” shouts Kirk, pivoting on his heel. “You know what this means! You were just witness to professional blackmail at the highest level, and Admiral Ciana is *complicit* in...”

“Jim!” snaps the Doctor. “That’s enough!”

“Commodore,” says Spock quietly. “McCoy is correct.” A beat, while hazel eyes sweep sideways to fix him with a look that is almost entirely affronted betrayal. “Come away, sir.”

Kirk’s eyebrows gently arc as the fury leaves his face. He stares at Spock. “You know what this means,” he says in a low voice.

“Yes,” says Spock. He hesitates, hollowed out, empty, adrift. “Come away, sir,” he says again.

“Jim...” says McCoy softly, but he might as well be talking to the air.

Kirk does not hear him. Instead, he pivots on his heel and strides off along the corridor, spine straight, shoulders back, and the only sound is the clip of his feet against the tiled floor.

“Commander Spock,” says Ciana quietly. “Go after him.” A beat. “*Now*, Commander. That’s an order.”

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He doesn't expect an answer, so when Kirk's apartment door slides open on the disheveled figure of his friend, it's a moment before Spock can compose his opening salutations. This allows Kirk to get in the first word.

"I don't imagine you'd listen if I told you to go away," he says.

Spock has had some twenty-five minutes since he emerged from the western exit of the conference center to see Starfleet's newest Admiral disappearing into the back seat of an aircar, and he has used it to consider his approach. One of the first things he decided upon was that it would not be wise to mention Ciana's instruction.

"Negative," he says.

Eyebrows twitch against a face of stone, and Kirk steps back to clear the entrance. It's as much of an invitation as Spock is likely to get, and he hesitates for only a moment before he steps across the threshold and into territory that he has, until now, successfully avoided.

Kirk stands just inside, watching quietly with pursed lips and squared shoulders as Spock draws to a halt and folds his hands behind his back for want of anything more productive to do. Restless energy hums around him like a thundercloud, and for a long, uncomfortable moment, he regards Spock with eyes that are almost hostile, as though he's waiting for him to speak. Then, with a deep breath, he turns on one heel and sets off into the apartment at a brisk clip.

"I warn you," he says over his shoulder as Spock decides that the best thing to do is follow, "call me 'Admiral' just once, and I may test my fist against that Vulcan jaw of yours."

An eyebrow arches; though their conversation has, on occasion, been strained - and, from time to time, openly belligerent - physical threat has never previously featured. As they emerge into the living quarters, Spock sees an open bottle of bourbon on the counter and an empty glass beside it, and, for a moment, he wonders if Kirk has had time to become drunk. The thought is easily dismissed: it has been less than half an hour since his friend left Starfleet HQ, and Spock knows that there was no alcohol at the function. But he'd be happier if he could be certain that his decision is based on an assessment of elapsed time versus human metabolic capacity, and not the fact that the idea in itself is unsettling.

“I believe your hand would disproportionately bear the brunt of any such altercation,” he says instead, as Kirk comes to a halt next to his desk. With a sharp spike of something unnamable, Spock notes the image on the wall above him: *Enterprize*, drifting freely on an endless sea. He looks away.

“That’s at least partially the point,” says Kirk. His eyes are bright, defiant, but his face is drawn, and shadows darken the contours. For the first time, Spock has the opportunity to notice the grayish tint to his skin, the thick lines of fatigue, the quiet desperation that shrouds him. Under the weight of his companion’s scrutiny, Kirk pushes himself off his perch on the table’s edge and crosses to the counter, where he lifts the bottle and glass and glances back over his shoulder in open challenge.

“Disapproval, Spock?” he says as he presses the neck of the carafe to the lip of the beaker and bourbon floods the glass, spilling carelessly up the polished walls. Kirk meets his friend’s eyes and holds them as he lifts it to his lips and takes a generous gulp, wincing as it clears his throat. “I’ve lost her,” he says gruffly. “I think that’s a damned good excuse for whisky at noon.”

“Perhaps,” says Spock. “If it was, in fact, noon.”

A chuckle rumbles in the depths of Kirk’s chest, but it is difficult to determine if it has been motivated by humor. He says, “I ought to remember who I’m arguing with.”

It’s an argument? That in itself is disturbing. Spock has seen Kirk immolated on the fires of righteous indignation, lit from within by certainty and indignation, cast in ice and granite by stubborn self-assurance; *that* is how he argues. The man across from him is listless, apathetic, as though the color has been drained from him. Spock folds his hands behind his back to counter a sudden urge to cross the floor, to take the glass and the bottle from his friend and place them safely out of reach. It’s not the air of general instability, hanging around Kirk like a malignant cloud, that holds him back, but rather the proximity that the action necessitates, the risk of standing too close, of stepping into his circle of personal space with everything that entails. The thought of accidental contact - of the soft, unconscious brush of finger against finger - sends a network of cracks spiraling across Spock’s failing shields; he simply cannot take the chance.

But Kirk is too brittle just now to deal in ambiguities. He sees only distance and reserve, and he reads it as distaste.

With a bitter smile, he swallows another worrying quantity of alcohol and says, “You could at least pretend you don’t wish you were anywhere but here.”

In fact, the opposite is true: Spock wishes it were *possible* for him to be anywhere else. He wishes he could manufacture some kind of wall of indifference against the need that draws him in, time and again, so that he's no longer certain whose summons he's answering: Kirk's or his own. But he says, simply, "I have expressed no such sentiment."

"You don't need to *express* it," says Kirk, with withering scorn. "It's in your face, my friend." Another harsh laugh, discordant as the scrape of metal on metal. "'Friend'," he says in a low voice. "We'll see about that now, I guess."

Anger flares, bright and dangerous, before Spock can catch it and force it back inside. "Indeed?" he says, acidly. "Perhaps you are referring to your abrupt disappearance for over a week and your failure to inform your colleagues or respond to any requests for assurance as to your condition?"

A sharp glance up, and surprise blanks the acrimony from Kirk's stare. "I don't see what that has to do with..."

"Evidently," snaps Spock, and he can hear the restless, relentless anxiety of the past days coloring his words in shades of fury as his controls struggle to reassert themselves. "However, I would suggest that, before you cast aspersions as to my intentions or motivations at this time, you consider in what light your own recent actions could be described as 'friendly'."

"I left in something of a hurry," says Kirk, but the residual vitriol in his voice is clearly the result of effort, and it's curling at the edges. "I had no idea when I would be back..."

"As I had no idea if you were living or dead," says Spock, though he's prepared to admit, even through the fog of indignation, that this is an exaggeration. However, Kirk does not know this, and that's what's important right now. "And yet, for reasons that I cannot presently explain, it is *my* disposition and *my* inclinations that are under attack. Perhaps you could enlighten me as to why my friendship towards you is rendered suspect by my desire to determine your wellbeing, while your cavalier - your *cavalier* treatment of me," he reiterates, as Kirk begins to protest, "is completely elided?"

The words have tumbled out of him, almost without his conscious volition, and he finds, now they are spent, that a fine tremor agitates his shoulders, that his heart is racing and his breath is rapid, shallow in his chest. Kirk stares at him for a long moment, eyes fixed but expressionless, while a thousand thoughts dance visibly just behind them.

At last, he says, "You're right." A sigh, and a hand rises to pinch the bridge of his nose, face crumpling as though his head aches. "Spock. I'm sorry. You're right."

He lowers himself heavily into the high-backed chair in front of his desk, loose-limbed and boneless, breath escaping him in a long sigh. "I've been an ass," he says. "To you, to... everyone. None of this is your fault, Spock. I'm sorry."

"The question of fault is irrelevant," says Spock, and if there's a tightness to his voice, a lingering tension, it's fading now. "It only remains to decide upon the next course of action."

A breath of gentle, weary laughter. "I'm not sure there is any 'next course of action'," says his friend. "Nogura's a son-of-a-bitch, but he's a clever son-of-a-bitch. God *damn* it. I should have known."

Spock's eyebrow arches; his frustration may be dissipating on a wave of mutual regret, but it allows for only so much latitude. "It has never been your nature to refuse a challenge," he says.

But Kirk shakes his head. "This is different," he says. A swift, fluid movement carries him to his feet and he paces to the window, glass in hand, to stare out over the striking azure glow of the Bay in late morning. "You know it is."

Yes. It is different, and Spock knows this. That's the truth of the matter. He can't define the cause beyond a deeply unsatisfactory, *Because it is not the same*, but Kirk is right. It's only that he's unaccustomed to finality in the face of insurmountable odds. Obstacles appear and recede, and sometimes they are difficult, sometimes they are formidable, sometimes it seems that they are impassable from every angle... Except that there's always a way through, some weakness that can be exploited, a buried, hairsbreadth fracture that they find together, just because everything looks different when their ideas spark off each other like currents in a Tesla coil. It occurs to Spock that he has, illogically, been relying on Kirk to know what to do next, and he's not sure, now, how to process the air of defeat that hangs heavily over the room without releasing all hope.

At the window, a sideways glance over his left shoulder throws Kirk's profile into grayish silhouette against the sunlight, and he offers a sad smile into the space that separates them.

"I thought as much," he says, and turns back to the ocean.

Silence descends: their oldest enemy. It rings in Spock's ears as he scrambles for the words that

make this all right. But he realizes, even as the seconds lengthen, that there is nothing to say; if he knew what those words might be, he'd have said them long before now. So he stands quietly in the still room, spine straight, hands folded at the small of his back, muscles aching with unactuated motion, and watches his friend contemplate the play of frosted sunlight on distant waves.

“Those things he said about me,” says Kirk softly, after a moment. “I never... That’s not...” A sound of frustration, and he tries again. “I’m one man. I’m a better man for serving with you. But I’m not the man he described.”

“I cannot concur,” says Spock.

Gentle laughter. “I had a feeling you wouldn’t. But it’s true, nonetheless.” Slowly, reluctantly, Kirk turns back into the room, twisting the glass speculatively in front of his chest. It is empty. “Did Bones send you after me?” he asks.

“He did not,” says Spock.

A philosophical nod. “Ciana, then.” Spock says nothing, but the silence is an answer in itself, and the squared shoulders sag a little, as though the effort of holding them in place is suddenly more than Kirk can manage. “It’s not her fault. Not really,” he says. “It’s mine. I let this happen, though I’m damned if I know what else I could have done.”

“The admiralty’s decision is not binding,” says Spock. “Perhaps McCoy’s objections...”

But Kirk is shaking his head before his friend can finish the sentence. “Nogura announced it in front of a roomful of journalists,” says Kirk. “I’d call that pretty damned binding.”

“Nevertheless, there is protocol...”

Kirk glances up, and his expression is bleak. “You know Admiral Nogura as well as I do. Do you think he would have done what he did if he couldn’t make it stick?”

A beat, and Spock is forced to answer, “No. I do not.”

Kirk nods. "No," he agrees softly, almost a whisper. "It's over, Spock." A sad smile plays around the corners of his mouth. "You know what this means, of course? We'll never serve together again."

Yes, Spock knows this, but abstractly, as though it is reversible, always reversible. Indignation spikes, forcing words onto his lips that he cannot speak: *I have followed you this far; I will follow you again*. All it takes is a quiet nod in the right direction; a passing comment about his interest in resuming a teaching position, perhaps, and suddenly the future shifts, gravomanipulation trials on Delta-03 become a billet in San Francisco and an imaging suite across the Bay. The future is mutable, but will Kirk see it as such? Or will he see compromise and sacrifice - his own and his friend's - and count the cost too high? That's not even a question. Spock knows the answer before the thought is fully formed, and it's like ice-cold lead in the pit of his stomach.

He says, "That is not certain..."

"Spock!" It's a sound of impatience, of exasperation, and it's not unexpected. It's exactly as he thought it would be. "Please. Don't patronize me. Where else in the galaxy do our worlds intersect if not on the bridge of a starship?"

This is, almost word for word, a replica of Spock's own thoughts in the moments after Nogura's casual declamation closed the doors on their former life forever. And, if he can answer, *anywhere; anywhere at all, if we force it to be so*, it's only half a truth. It's not answering the question that Kirk is asking, but rather the question Spock wants to answer.

Quietly, he says, "Nowhere."

"Nowhere," echoes Kirk. A beat, and then he says, softly, "I've lost you too."

Too much has passed between them to misunderstand his meaning, and there is nowhere to hide from the words or from the unblinking scrutiny that follows them. They sink into the sudden hush, and Spock is aware of a sense of great distance rushing in to fill the space between them as he struggles to find an answer that is neither a confirmation nor a lie. He wants to deny the truth of that sentiment, but desire and desperation will not mend the rift that has been torn between them now. The fact is that, while they are together, however that may be contrived, there is hope. There is possibility. It is that sense of the unattainable, just out of reach, that sustains them both; it allows them to prevaricate and to postpone the moment where they have to confront this irresolute longing, where they have to define what it is that they are doing. It is neither safe nor judicious, but *safe* has never worked for either of them.

Safe cannot survive a separation.

He wants to speak, but the words escape him once more. Kirk closes his eyes, and Spock realizes that he has taken his own answer from the silence.

“Then can we stop pretending?” says his friend quietly. “For now, for once, can we stop lying about what this is and say the goddamn words?”

Spock cannot pinpoint the moment when he realized he was in love with Kirk; it feels, illogically, as though the knowledge has always been there. He cannot remember what it was to exist without this open wound in the center of his soul; it defines his sense of himself. And it’s like a riptide, dragging him down a little further with every breath and every movement.

In a low voice, edged with a disturbing tone of desperation, he says, “What would it profit either of us?”

Hazel eyes snap open, beneath brows arched in disbelief. “Does *everything* have to be a scientific equation with you?” snaps Kirk. The anger is almost a relief; it tears them away from a dangerous place into deep, treacherous waters where the sadness and desire can be turned into something that’s easier to handle. Spock opens his mouth to reply, but his friend is not finished.

“Let me make it simple for you,” says Kirk. “This is my life. My life is Starfleet. It takes, and I give, and that’s the way it will always be. You know that. You *understand* that. Strip everything away, and that’s what’s left: endless duty, service that will never be finished, service that will never be enough. And there were two things that made it all right: there was my ship” - a beat; a deep, resolute breath - “and there was you.”

The words enter the charged air with a certain sense of inevitability, like the first trickle of water through a fracturing dam wall. Spock draws in a breath as something shifts between them. It feels as though they’ve been walking a long road in darkness, stumbling down the path that leads them to this place, and, if he should have known - and he *should*; he could have guessed from the way his friend’s eyes scoured the room like a starving man, from the way Spock turned to track his movements, waiting to be seen - if he should have guarded more closely against this moment, if he ought to fight a little harder to turn them back while they still can... *Kaiidth*. It feels as though this was always coming, no matter what.

So he looks up now, directly into Kirk’s eyes, and he says, “Only one of those is lost, Jim.”

But Kirk only laughs a bitter laugh and rolls his eyes, pivoting a half-turn away from him.

“I lost you long before I lost my ship,” he says.

“You are mistaken.”

Another half turn, so that Kirk faces him again. “If I’m mistaken, then why aren’t you here of your own volition? Goddamn it, Spock, my CO had to *order* you to come. When did this become about *duty*?”

“You are mistaken,” says Spock again, and he can hear a dangerous note of intemperance clouding the edges of his words. “My reluctance to follow you was not rooted in disinterest. I believe you understand this very well.”

“You think I *understand* this?” snaps Kirk. He shakes his head with a loaded smile. “Spock, if I understood the first *thing* about this then I wouldn’t feel like I’ve been walking on broken glass and eggshells around you for almost a damn year. The only thing I understand is that I have to censor every word that comes out of my mouth when I’m around you, I have to police every look and every movement, in case, God forbid, I say something that makes one of us have to think about what happened on Vulcan.” A laugh that has nothing to do with humor trembles his shoulders, twists the air. “And you know what’s so ironic about that? It’s that hardly an hour goes by when I *don’t* think about it. And you can tell me that it’s not the same for you, but you’ll be lying and we both know that.”

Hardly an hour? If there has been a day when the memories have released him for as long as that, Spock cannot remember it. He can feel a network of fractures splinter the last fragments of his shields as naked resentment bubbles to the surface. It colors his voice as he answers, “And since I have given you my answer, I ask again: what would it profit either of us to acknowledge this?”

Spots of red flush his friend’s cheeks. “You can ask where the profit is, Spock; I’m asking you what it’s *cost* us to deny it? Do you want me to tell you that I understand? I don’t. I know what I want and I believe I know what you want - no, I’m *sure* I know what you want, Spock; you can tell me I’m wrong if you like. But I think I know you very well. I think I know you just about as well as any man living or dead. So I’m asking you to tell me that I’m wrong. Go ahead. Tell me.”

And so here it is. They’ve finally arrived at a place where there is no more room for prevarication and nowhere left to hide. And Spock finds he cannot regret this.

With a kind of detached relief, as though he is watching himself from a distance, he lengthens his spine and looks directly at his companion. And he says, "I will not."

The words hang between them, red hot and treacherous. Spock can feel the rapid beat of his heart against his flank, blood pounding a hummingbird rhythm in his ears. Kirk stares at him for a moment, and the world seems to readjust itself, pieces sliding into place, a tectonic reordering of the confusion that has haunted them for many months - longer, perhaps; for as long as this dangerous potential has surrounded and blanketed them, for as long as they have known each other. Kirk starts to speak - a low, frustrated growl that sounds like, "Then *why*...?" but it dies in his throat as his feet suddenly animate him, forcing him across the space that divides them. Three rapid steps, no more, but it feels as though he's crossing a galaxy; as though gravity draws them inexorably into each other's orbit. There is no way to fight it, even if he could find the energy or the will. And so, as blunt, square fingers reach inelegantly for Spock's cheek, as a hand rises to grip the back of his neck, to tangle in his hair and pull his head downwards, he does not hesitate. He lowers his face to Kirk's and crushes their lips together; it's not possible to do anything else.

A sound of surprise escapes his friend, buried in the hollow of his mouth as it opens to meet Spock's. Tongues collide, tangling and coiling, drinking in the flavors that have hummed in his memories for a thousand restless nights. Iron and salt and rust; the buttery scent of Human skin and the sharp, spiced pine of Kirk's aftershave... His body is warm beneath Spock's hands, heat flooding through the fabric of his dress blues where Kirk's fingers gouge his skin as he pulls him closer. Their bodies fit together like lengths of planed wood, flesh pressed close against flesh, and Spock can feel himself hardening, can feel Kirk's arousal tight against him. For a few whited-out, hazy minutes, all he can process is the rush of sensation, the surrender, and it's a relief, a release, as though he's been floundering in deep water for many months and he's finally broken the surface. For these few moments, his body is in charge, and by the time his brain catches up again, it's far, far too late to stop.

Kirk's hands are in his hair, raking the length of his spine, gripping the flesh of his buttocks to pull him closer, and his mouth is demanding: teeth clashing against teeth, scraping over Spock's jaw as he trails ungentle lips roughly from mouth to neck to collarbone. Spock fists his hands in Kirk's dress tunic, gripping the cloth as it resists him, slides against his skin: brushed satin was never meant to be clutched between heedless fingers. He feels rather than hears the low groan of pleasure in Kirk's throat as their erections align, as the last vestiges of rational thought dissolve. He can feel an answering hardness grinding against his as Human hands snake down the length of his back to fasten on his hips, holding him in place as Kirk rocks against him. It's both hesitant and utterly abandoned: as though his friend is uncertain of his welcome, but completely beyond restraint. It sends sparks of pleasure along the length of Spock's swollen cock, and he thinks he makes a sound, though it could just as easily have come from Kirk; in any case, his companion grins around the noise as it echoes in the empty space of their joined mouths, and he thrusts forward, again and again.

A focused, determined pressure edges him backwards, and Spock can feel himself shifting in tiny increments, feet shuffling against the bristle of the carpet tiles. Their legs tangle, hobbling them as they move, and Spock knows where they are going, though his eyes are not open to track their

progress across the room. The back of his calves connect with the cushions of Kirk's narrow couch and they tumble together, a mess of heat and limbs and need. The fall separates them and Spock finds himself thrusting upwards, seeking contact once more, but Kirk arches his hips out of the way and presses down with his mouth instead, seeking out Spock's with an open-eyed kiss that is almost gentle. A hand slides down between their two bodies, grazing his stomach, his hip, seeking out the iron-hard length of Spock's cock where it's leashed to his stomach by the tight fabric of his pants. Fingers contract, cupping the head through the cloth and Kirk pulls his head back a little, far enough that he can meet Spock's eyes. His gaze is dark, uncertain; disordered but contained behind that familiar, granite-faced determination that has steered them through uncounted dangers.

The message is simple and very clear: this is the moment where Spock can end it. One word, and Kirk will disentangle them; will push himself to his feet, step back and straighten his tunic; will cross the room, arousal tenting the front of his pants, and stand by the window, breathing roughly, while Spock collects himself and slips quietly from the apartment. Spock knows he will do this, because he knows his friend. He can feel the vulnerability, the indecision, cloud the air between them, and he can feel the small tremble in the hand that rises to trace the line of his jaw, breath ghosting waves of warmth and moisture across the sensitized skin of Spock's lips. He knows what he needs to do; there is no question of that. He needs to stop this. But the words line up in his throat and collide, and all he can think about is what it cost him, last time, to break away from this touch. Maybe Kirk is right. Maybe, in the final analysis, denial is what will tear this apart. Maybe it's too late to turn back now.

Perhaps it's involuntary, perhaps it's just that his body knows what it wants and presses its advantage in the wake of his mind's indecision, but Spock's hip twitches reflexively, rolling his cock in Kirk's grip, and the sudden wave of pleasure forces his head back against the pillows, forces his eyes shut, forces a noise that's halfway between a sigh and a groan out from the depths of his throat. And this is all it takes to undo so many years of care, so much fear and doubt and anxiety. So many hidden looks, so much longing, so many nights in the quiet dark, hand fisted around himself, pumping a miserable release from a body that wants and can't be made to stop wanting. So much love, so much despair, so much shame: it crumbles now like a wall of sand as they scramble to close the narrow space that separates them.

Spock presses upwards as Kirk bears down on him, hand crushed between their groins as he closes his mouth over Spock's. His fingers flex against the solid flesh of Spock's penis, but the hand retracts, gripping the sensitized skin as Kirk pulls it free, and it settles against the cushions beside Spock's head. Kirk flattens his body against Spock's, sliding into place, sucking in a breath as their erections grind together. He thrusts, hard, and a tiny, nasal sound of pleasure escapes him; again, and Spock arches his neck against the cushions. A third time, and there's nothing left but instinct and a crippling, shattering need.

It's clumsy, it's uncoordinated, it's inelegant; mounting urgency overwhelming rhythm and finesse as every stroke drags them closer to a precipice that approaches with alarming speed. Kirk's breath is rapid, uncontrolled, small noises of arousal forcing their way out of his throat as he pulls back, nips at Spock's lower lips with gentle teeth. His eyes are dark and hooded; they fix on Spock's chin, his hairline, his chest, skittering away from his gaze, for which Spock is profoundly grateful.

He cannot meet his friend's stare and find him so disordered; he cannot see himself reflected in it, see the evidence of what he knows he must not do. And so he closes his eyes, bucks up into the solid line of his friend's pubis, cocks colliding, sliding, writhing against each other, while a roar builds slowly in his ears, in his spine, in his belly. And when Kirk suddenly stiffens, lets out a fractured cry; when his left hand tightens around Spock's arm, right hand fisting into a claw at his back, when he feels warm wetness soak through the fabric at the head of his cock, it's as much as it takes to send Spock catapulting after him. The world whites out, and there is nothing but the crash of pleasure, shorting out his brain, sucking him out of himself and into a hazy darkness beyond.

This is where the fracturing begins.

~*~

The first thing he is aware of is the labored rasp of Kirk's breath and a boneless pressure on his chest, as of a Human body prostrated by fatigue. Spock is not sure how long they have lain like this, though he thinks it's no more than a few minutes; it is difficult to assimilate his thoughts into any kind of coherent order beyond the aftershocks of orgasm. They skitter around the edges of his consciousness, whispering to him, as his body floats on a wave of warmth, release and exhaustion. It would be easy to let go, to drift into sleep with his friend - his lover - pressed tight against him, arms fixed around Spock's waist, and the scent of him - his skin, his hair, his arousal and his orgasm - filling the air, filling his head. Spock has imagined this more times than he is prepared to number; countless days and nights of wanting, of aching, of need. It would be easy to slip into uninterrogated peace and stillness now, to let the curling fibers of lethargy drag him down into unconsciousness and just *sleep* until he's through with sleeping. There will be time, later, to sort through what this means, to process and to evaluate, to make sense of their new reality. It would be easy to release himself into the tidal pull of lassitude, succumb to oblivion for as long as it takes to recuperate too many nights with neither rest nor trance. It's just that his unquiet mind will not let him go.

He feels... empty, in a way he can't satisfactorily describe to himself. It's not just the vacancy, the desolation, that follows climax; it's more than that. It's the sense that something fragile has finally broken. It's the sense that part of him, part of who he is, was bound up in a fight that he's just lost. In the blackness behind his eyes, he sees a white face, blue eyes clouded with buried pain, and a bright, brittle smile that cuts anger and confusion into a young boy's soul. He hears a soft, clear voice, honeyed Human lies that injure where they are supposed to heal, and high whine of panic, like a faraway siren, sounds in the depths of his skull.

From nowhere, rushing at him like a nightmare out of the post-coital fog, it hits him: *see what I have done.*

Adrenalin spikes, a disorienting lurch that twists his guts and catches his breath in his throat. A quizzical noise rumbles in Kirk's chest, soporific and lazy with sleep, but Spock hears it only abstractly, as though it comes from a great distance. It's possible he responds, though he can't say how or what form it takes; only that there is no further sound from his friend. Or maybe it's simply that it's lost behind the thunder of blood in his veins as Spock concentrates on settling the sudden burst of horror that spins him through layers of lethargy and into frozen vigilance.

See what I have done.

Pretense was all they had. It was the only thing that was holding them back, locking them into a place where they could manage this. What's left when that final refuge is gone?

...a rapid, lightning-fire glance up from the science console, and the Captain's eyes are on him, trailing contentment from some part of his soul that he has long since ceased to acknowledge. A stray touch, warm Human flesh like sunlight on the fabric of his uniform; gentle, generous laughter that accepts him more completely than the dictates of regulation and command impartiality. Skin the color of milk and roses, bleached by the mirror-light of T'Khut, and the certainty of love - unconditional, absolute, and profound - reflected in a face he's wanted for longer than he can remember...

But the image twists abruptly, fragments; the face contorts in pain; the body cowers away from him, and there is only sorrow, remorse, and loss...

Ah, but I withheld, says an indignant corner of his psyche. Even in the depths of abandon, I did not take more than was safe to take...

It's not enough, though. It's semantics. It's sophistry. There is no *safe*. *Safe* is not what they do. This was the decision he took long ago, bathed in the ambiguous glory of his new-found self-knowledge: this thing, this dangerous thing, must be contained, it must be bricked up and buried where it cannot cause harm. Because Spock knows his friend: given a choice between secure contentment and reckless joy, he will not hesitate. He won't even understand the question, but he doesn't know what he's asking for. One of them has to be reasonable.

A movement at his shoulder, and Kirk's voice, close to his ear, whispers, fiercely, "Don't go."

Later, Spock will remember that voice and wonder if Kirk knew, even then. It's the voice of a lover, not a commander. There is no confidence in it.

“Negative,” says Spock, but his voice is thin and dry. It sounds to him like the voice of a man struggling for air as a vise tightens around his chest, and he knows, suddenly, that he is lying.

...I've come to take you home, dear, she says, and she smiles but she stands awkwardly, as though her body is trying to bend in on itself, and her eyes are bright, too bright, burying something that she doesn't want him to see...

No, he cannot pinpoint the hour he realized he was in love with his friend, but he can pinpoint the moment, the second, he realizes that this love will destroy them both. It's like a chain, shackling them together, dragging them down into an ocean of darkness. It cannot be managed and it cannot be contained; it was hubris to imagine that he could make it safe for either one of them. Shame chills his stomach, spreading tendrils of self-disgust beneath a pool of cooling semen that testifies to the utter dereliction of his self-control. And it will always be this way, he understands abruptly, because without this part of him he no longer understands himself: the man that he has become is half of a shared soul. This cannot be. This *cannot* be. For both of their sakes, he needs to make this stop.

Spock makes himself open his eyes, makes himself drag his gaze from the desolate contemplation of a hairline crack that fractures the white plaster ceiling above, makes himself tilt his head, hair rasping against the fabric of the cushion as he seeks out two hazel eyes that are fixed, already, on him. Kirk's eyebrows are arched in a gesture that Spock does not recognize, face locked and frozen into an expression that Spock cannot read. It's an effort not to look away, but he will not allow himself that, not now.

I've come to take you home dear, she says.

And his shadow-self answers, *Yes*.

Kaiidth.

END OF PART II

~*~

Chapter End Notes

WAIT WAIT DON'T KILL ME. I'm just a writer, standing in front of a reader, begging you to trust me (and the tags)...

Chapter 30

PART III: LIMBO

The day of their wedding is the day that Ilion VII finally falls, but they're still an hour away from finding out when they speak the words that join them in a small, non-denominational meditation room overlooking Horseshoe Bay. They are married by an old friend of Lori's father, and afterwards the wedding party retires to a function room on the second floor of Bozeman for orange juice and canapés before it's time to go back to work.

It's a dark, gray day in late November, and a vicious wind drives sheets of rain against the window as a string quartet makes a valiant effort to drown out the storm, and two dozen or so relatives and dignitaries mill about and try to find sufficient common ground to make polite conversation. Lori wears her dress golds, unornamented but for the unfamiliar circle of platinum on her left hand, but she moves like sunshine breaking through the clouds; Kirk is certain he could find her with his eyes closed, and, for a moment, he's content to simply watch her glide elegantly among uniforms and Sunday best, smiling her golden smile. He stands a little way apart, as the quartet moves from Pachelbel to Bach, and tries to wrap his head around the fact that, as of twenty-five minutes ago, he has a wife.

He wonders how he's supposed to feel about that. But that seems like a question for another day; today, he guesses, is for smiling and shaking hands.

His mother finds him in a quiet corner by the window, sipping absently from a beaker bearing the Xeno insignia and staring out over the slate gray and steel of the Bay. She slides into place beside him and raises her glass to his and, for a moment, they stand together, not speaking, watching the waves break restlessly against the cloud-frosted struts of the bridge.

"You know," she says presently, "your father and I had a billet in the Residences when we were first married. Did you know that?"

He was an Ensign; she was a cadet. She has told him many times. "Yes," he says.

"We got married in Riverside, though, of course." A reflexive pause while she sips at her drink. "February, it was. The snow was eight inches deep; I thought your Aunt Ida was going to freeze to

death. You know she never knew how to dress for the weather.”

“I remember,” he says.

“It was a nice service,” says his mother now, and it takes him a moment to realize that they’re back in the present again. “I liked the reading her sister gave. ‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds...’ You know - it’s not going to win any awards for originality, but I liked it. You can’t go wrong with the classics.”

He smiles into his glass as he takes a sip. “We talked about having a reading in Swahili,” he says.

“Swahili?”

“An old...” He hesitates, looking for the word, and settles on, “...colleague. When she heard I was getting married - there’s a poem in her language, *In Praise of Love*. She couldn’t be here so she sent a tape. We talked about playing it during the ceremony.”

“But you decided against it?”

Kirk is not sure why he brought it up; his mother misses very little - much like his wife, in fact. He’s fairly certain that Lori only agreed to let the subject drop because Kirk presented her with a *fait accompli*, in the form of a sister and a Shakespearean sonnet.

“We were having an Argelian blessing,” he says. “The poem seemed like overkill.”

An eyebrow arches, but his mother only nods. “Well,” she says. “It was a nice ceremony.”

“I’m glad you could make it. I know you’re busy.”

She shrugs. “There are some things you don’t miss. Besides,” she adds, “I wanted to meet her. You know, I see it now, I guess. She’s nice, I like her.”

“You see... what now?”

“Hmm?”

“What do you see now, mom?”

She smiles, but there’s a hint of something in her eyes that he can’t quite place. “Oh, come on, Jim,” she says. “All these years, and nothing - then you’re getting married in three weeks? I’m your mother. I know you better than that.”

He takes a sip from his glass to buy himself the moment he needs. Then he says, “Neither of us felt like waiting.”

“She’s nice, Jim,” she says, and he bristles at the note of appeasement in her voice; he’d thought he’d buried his irritation. He guesses he should know better than to try and fool his mom. “You two look good together. If she makes you happy, then great. That’s all I want for you, honey.”

He huffs a humorless laugh. “Well, mom, that certainly *sounds* like praise...”

His mother rolls her eyes. “I said she’s *nice*, Jim.”

“Mom, you think Des Moines is *nice*. You think ranch dressing is *nice*. I’d hoped for something a little less lukewarm about my wife.”

“What do you want, Jim?” she says, with an air of weary resignation. “I think she’s brilliant. I do, I think she’s one of the smartest people I’ve ever met, and I don’t keep company with fools. I think she’s kind, I think she’s beautiful, I think she understands what makes you work and I think she knows how to manage that, and, God knows, there’s not many who do. I think, of all the people you ever brought home, she’s the best fit I’ve seen. I just...” She sighs, shakes her head, peers into her glass. Then she looks up and meets his eyes. “I just - never thought it’d be a woman for you, Jim. That’s all.”

Kirk blinks. His mother *hated* Gary with a passion she didn’t bother to disguise; the two of them used to laugh about it later in bed, after Gary had worked out his frustrations in some spectacularly energetic sex. Kirk never got as far as introducing her to any of the others.

“I almost married Ruth,” he points out.

“Oh, *Ruth*,” says his mother dismissively. “You were barely out of your teens, Jim. You weren’t ever going to marry Ruth.”

“We’d set a date,” he protests. “I flew to Albany to ask for her father’s permission.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” says his mother. “Jim... You remember when you were seventeen and you wanted to sit the entrance exams for the Academy? And your father and I said, no, wait a year, you can go when you’re eighteen like everyone else?”

Kirk purses his lips. He’s pretty sure he knows where this is going. “And I got Commodore Mallory to sign off on my aptitude forms and sat the exam anyway,” he says. “What’s your point, mom?”

“My point,” she says, “is that, when it matters to you, when it’s something so important - you don’t ask permission, Jim. You just find a way to make it so that nobody has any choice but to say yes to you.” A beat, and her eyes soften. “No. You weren’t ever going to marry Ruth, honey.”

He remembers sitting across a breakfast table, a cooling pot of coffee like a wall between him and his fiancée, listening to her explain why she was leaving. He tries to remember how it felt, but the memory is blunted by age; he remembers thinking that he ought to be more upset, but he can’t for the life of him *feel* his way back there.

“For the record,” he says, “I didn’t ask anyone’s permission to marry Lori.”

She watches him for a moment, eyes narrowing: the close, evaluative scrutiny of a woman who has raised two sons with IQs in the top two percentile. Then she says, “Good. She’s a nice girl, Jim. I’m happy for you. I’m glad to see you settled - I worry about you.”

“I’m not Sam,” he says.

“No, and you never were.” She turns a warm smile on him. “I knew he was going to marry Aurelan the first time he brought her home. You were always just... looking for something else.” She sips from her glass. “Couple of times, I thought you were close to finding it, but maybe... I don’t know. I’m surprised, is all.” She smiles ruefully, turns her eyes towards him. “It’s just that it wasn’t ever

a *woman* who broke your heart, honey.”

For a second, for a long second, he’s sitting on the floor by his window, staring out across the Marin headlands, spine slack, forehead pressed against the cool pane... and his throat tightens, his stomach contracts, as something unwanted tries to rise up and choke him. But he’s gotten good at this. Kirk drains his glass, twists his lips into a tight smile.

“No,” he says. “And I intend to keep it that way, mom.”

She watches him for a moment, and he can see a half dozen protests line up behind her eyes and burn themselves out. But, in the end, all she says is, “All right. Good.” And then, “We’ll be back in Iowa for a few weeks in the New Year - you should come by, show Lori the farm.”

“In January?”

“Sure. Don’t tell me she can’t handle a little snow?”

“Mom, she grew up in San Diego.”

“She’s Starfleet, sweetheart; she’s hardy. Isn’t that right, dear?” she adds with a warm smile for her approaching daughter-in-law, who accepts her outstretched hand and leans in to kiss her cheek.

“Yes, ma’am,” says Lori cheerfully. “I keep telling him, but he has this hero fantasy, I don’t know.”

“Tell him you outrank him.”

Lori grins. “Oh, he knows that. Ma’am - I’m sorry to interrupt, but...”

His mother waves a hand. “I’m drinking orange juice, dear. I know it’s a work day.” She leans in, presses a quick kiss to Kirk’s cheek. “Jim, I’m going to go talk to your father. Come find us later.”

“I will, mom,” he says.

“Admiral Kirk,” says his wife in an undertone as his mother disappears into the throng, “I believe you’re hiding.”

He hesitates. “Not from you.”

A gentle laugh. “Understood. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“No.”

She sighs. “No. Chen’s here. We need to disappear for a minute.”

~*~

The mission belongs to neither Xenon nor Operations, though Admiral Wallace is old enough and smart enough to know how to use both departments. He is, like Lori, a career planetsider, but he has been in the shadows of just about every important decision Starfleet has taken in the past half-century; he knows better than anyone how these things work. Better than Kirk, in fact, as he’s happy to admit: back-alley handshakes and coded whispers have never been his style. But what else is there?

Maybe nothing, in fact. He’s pretty sure that’s why they’re here.

Wallace’s offices are on the third floor of the Phoenix Building, at the end of a well-appointed corridor of blank, featureless doors where the air has the greasy consistency of constant electronic surveillance and a low level static charge spikes the fine hairs at the back of Kirk’s neck. It feels like an engine room in the seconds before a malfunctioning warp coil throws the ship offline, but, apparently, you get used to it in time. It’s done something for Admiral Wallace, anyway; the man is well into his eighties and has yet to give any indication, in Kirk’s presence, that he’s aware of this. He stands easily, with the grace of a much younger man, as they follow Chen into the private comms room off his main office, where the windows are darkened against the storm outside. A wide screen shimmers in the corner, scrolling a continuous line of text, abstract letters and numbers along the left panel, while the right displays a color-coded map of the quadrant, and, below it, a local map of a system that Kirk has cause to know very well.

“Admiral Kirk. Admiral Ciana,” says Wallace, reaching forward to grip their hands in turn. “I’m sorry to break up the party. Congratulations to you both, but you could have picked a better day.”

“There’s no such thing as a better day in Starfleet, sir,” says Lori, and he nods, though his smile is thin.

“That’s true,” he says. To Chen: “Commodore? I want that secure line to the *Entente* please. Buzz me when it’s open.”

“Yes, sir,” says Chen, and slips out the door. Kirk hears the soft hiss of the privacy lock sliding into place, the hum of a sound-dampener descending.

“The *Entente*?” says Lori. “We’re speaking to Admiral McGarry?”

Wallace lowers himself into his seat, gestures to them to take the chairs on the opposite side of his desk. “And Admiral Atuaia,” he says.

Kirk looses a puff of air. “Damn it,” he says quietly.

Wallace nods. “Yes.” He sighs. “You read this morning’s briefing?”

“Yes, sir,” says Lori. “Sporadic hostilities along the borders of Aleth, a planned incursion into the occupied sectors, nothing out of the ordinary. Admiral Kirk expressed some serious concerns about their advance strategy; Commodore Chen has the report.”

“For what it’s worth, I agree with you, Kirk,” says Wallace. “But that’s not our biggest problem. That intel was four days old.”

“*Four days*?” says Kirk.

“Eighty-seven hours. That’s the trouble with fighting a war through intermediaries,” says the Admiral. “But even *that*’s not our biggest problem right now.”

“Something’s happened,” says Lori.

Wallace leans back in his chair, folds his arms across his chest. He says, “We don’t have anything concrete yet. The *Entente* has been hailing Hevarus IX since 1130 hours this morning. I think even they don’t know what’s going on yet. Best we can get is that they think there was some kind of subterranean explosion in eastern Vai in the small hours of this morning, local time.”

“That’s maybe 30,000 square miles,” says Lori. “Is there any way to be more specific, sir?”

“We’re working on it. Intel is maybe thirty minutes old right now.”

“Is there anything but tundra east of Ki’Shanah?” asks Kirk.

“Other than the headquarters of the central resistance cadre on the northern continent?”

“Yes, sir,” says Kirk. “Other than that.”

Wallace fixes him with a stare. “No,” he says.

“Well,” says Kirk quietly. “I guess we don’t need to wait for the exact coordinates.”

“Goddamn it,” snaps Lori. She stands quickly, one fluid movement, but there’s fury in her speed; he knows her well enough to recognize that need for motion. She crosses the length of the room, then circles back to stand behind her chair, hands gripping the back, knuckles white in the half light from the screen. “If they’ve hit the central cadre...”

“It’s over,” says Kirk.

“Goddamn it!” she says again. She looks up. “When can we expect an update, sir?”

“Admiral Atuaia is working through the usual channels,” says Wallace. “The trouble is...”

“The trouble is, if central HQ is gone, we don’t have any channels left on the planet,” she finishes. “What are the Hevarians saying?”

“They’re frustrated. They’re worried this opens them up to attacks on their homeworld.”

“We have half the fleet in Hevarus,” says Kirk. “It’s the safest system in the quadrant right now.”

“You tell me how much of a comfort that’s supposed to be to them right now, Admiral Kirk.” Wallace’s eyes are like stone. “They most likely just lost another two thousand men. In a fight that we asked them to take.”

A soft breath of humorless laughter from Lori. “With friends like the Federation, who needs enemies, huh?”

“Hevarus stood to gain from this too, Admiral Ciana,” says Wallace.

“Yes, sir,” says Kirk. “But it wasn’t their battle. We can arm them, we can advise them, but... they’ve never had the heart for this. The Federation can’t strong-arm a people into fighting a war for us.”

“Sure we can,” says Wallace. “We just can’t make them win it for us.”

He’s right. It was always a long shot. Best case scenario - *best* case, now - is that they haven’t led a Federal ally into a war with the Empire that they’d never have started by themselves, and which Starfleet has to pretend not to notice again. This *cannot* be the spirit of the Treaty... but he’s spent a lot of time thinking about that lately, and he can’t think of any good way to test that hypothesis. Nogura is right: you cast those dice, and you have no idea where they fall.

So you do what you can. He doesn’t like it, not one bit - it feels like the biggest kid in the playground twisting a little kid’s arm until he breaks into the principal’s office and steals the keys to the cafeteria - but if that’s all you’ve got, you *do* it. You take it and you go with it. You do what you can.

And then you run away as soon as the kid gets caught. Yeah, he needs to get an analogy that doesn’t make him wonder whose side he’s on.

In the heavy, loaded silence, Wallace's terminal buzzes, and Chan's voice says, "Sir, I have the *Entente*. Admiral McGarry is standing by."

"Thank you, Commodore," says Wallace. "And Admiral Atuaia?"

"Admiral McGarry has him on a separate line, sir. He's going to conference him in."

"All right, Commodore. Put him through."

There's a hiss of quantum static, and Wallace's terminal screen flickers, but stays blank. "Starfleet Command, this is the *USS Entente*," says McGarry's voice, tinny with distance. "I have Admiral Atuaia on a secure line from Haven 12."

"Admiral Atuaia," says Wallace. "This is Admiral Vaughn Wallace, Starfleet Defense. Do you have an update on the situation on the ground?"

"Admiral Wallace, this is Atuaia," says a second voice, twisted down the octaves by a burst of subspace distortion. "I have an update from Hevarus IX."

"Thank you, Admiral," says Wallace "What can you tell us?"

"The Hevarian Central Defense council has just received word from their contacts in the system," says Atuaia. "Sir, it's confirmed. Ilion VII has gone dark."

~*~

It's late evening by the time she shows up at his office. The storm has blown itself out, but the moisture hasn't left the air; it's just settled into a wispy, insubstantial mist and a frosting of water on his window that twists the elegant lines of Fleet Command into abstract whorls and shadows. As darkness sucks the last traces of the day from the sky, he stands by the cool glass, cradling an empty cup of coffee, and tries to find some way to be wrong about what they learned at lunchtime.

“Hey,” she says quietly, and he turns over her shoulder to see her stepping inside, door shutting gently behind her. She’s changed into fatigues, and he can’t blame her - he’s done the same himself - but it feels as though a little of the sheen has worn off the day. “Did you hear the news? It’s all over the commissary. The Chief of Operations got married today.”

Kirk feels a weary grin tug at the edges of his lips as he crosses the room to meet her halfway, feels the strength of her slim, narrow arms as they circle his waist, feels the warmth of her mouth as he bends down to press his lips to hers. “Lucky man,” he says.

She flashes her sunshine smile, the one he loves. “Damn right,” she says. “She’s *way* out of his league, I hear.” Her arms slide up to grip the back of his shoulders, and she pulls back, looks into his eyes. “You’re beat,” she says. “Did you eat yet?”

It takes him a moment to remember, which is an answer in itself and she knows it. “Not since lunch,” he says.

“Jim, you didn’t eat lunch.” One hand smooths a stray hair from his face. “We were getting married at lunch, remember?”

“I ate before.”

Gentle laughter. “Liar. You are such a liar, James Kirk, and you think I don’t even know.” Her hand moves down to cup his cheek, thumb tracing the swell of his lips. “Let’s go home, huh? Let’s go home, let’s get drunk, and let’s have the rest of our wedding day. What do you say?”

“Just the two of us?”

“Just the two of us. There’s nobody else left, Jim; they went home hours ago.”

An eyebrow arches. “That was quite a party we threw.”

“That’s the beauty of inviting Starfleet, honey. No one bats an eyelid when the bride and groom disappear.”

Kirk drops his head to hers and kisses her softly - a light press of lips - then steps out of her embrace to move to his desk, where his terminal is still spitting out data from the other side of the quadrant. "I'm waiting for a couple of reports from Travis and Holeczek," he says. "Go ahead; I'll catch up with you."

"Ha! No chance," she says cheerfully. "I've heard *that* before. I'll wait right here until you're done."

He turns his head sharply, biting back on a flash of irritation as he opens his mouth to speak, but she meets his gaze with equanimity and faint amusement, and it turns out there's not much you can do to counter that.

So, instead, he says, "Nogura sent down a bottle of Armagnac..."

"Yeah, a '43?" she says. "I got one too. Is it in the cabinet?"

"Second shelf. There are glasses in the cupboard. He sent you a bottle too?"

She straightens, a tumbler in either hand. "Hands off, mister - that's the Xenorelations bottle. You want some, you come to *my* office."

He offers her a lopsided grin as she sets the glasses on his desk, untucking the carafe from the crook of her arm and passing it to him across the table. "We're on duty," he points out.

"No, we're in your office," she says. "Duty ended four hours ago. Now we're on our honeymoon."

"This wasn't quite what I had in mind for the start of our married life."

She shrugs, but she doesn't misunderstand him. "We did what we could do, Jim. You sitting here at your desk until tomorrow morning doesn't change what happened. We'll figure this out, but you can't make this your problem. You can't make this your *fault*."

He purses his lips as the stopper comes free with a pop of escaping air, and the warm scent of good brandy spills out into the circle of lamplight above his desk. "Where do we go from here, Lori?" he

says. “What’s the next move? Because I’ve been trying all afternoon...”

“You’ve been staring at a terminal screen, scrolling through memos and directives and fleet depletion reports, looking for the magic words that make it all go away, and all the while wondering how the hell you screwed up so badly.” She accepts a glass from him, raises it to his. “And there’s nothing I can say right now that’s going to make you see that you *didn’t*, this *wasn’t* you - you’re not the only goddamn admiral in Starfleet, Jim. We all got this wrong, and a whole lot of people who didn’t deserve it got screwed, and some of them aren’t going home again, and the rest of them just *lost* their home. It’s the worst possible way this thing could have played, and it’s not the way you wanted to play it, and there’s nothing you could do about that. And there’s nothing I can say to make you see that. So instead, I’m saying, come home. Be married for a couple of hours. We will figure this out, but it’s not getting fixed tonight.”

“If we’d approached Hevarus sooner...”

“Yeah, maybe. But we didn’t. And you know what? The fact that we approached them at all is because of you.” She folds herself into a chair across the desk from him, tucking her legs beneath her and burrowing backwards into the cushions. “Jim - you’re tired, I’m tired. It’s been a long day, a hell of a day. There wasn’t anything about it that we wouldn’t have done differently if we could.” A beat, and the corners of her lips twist upwards. “I told you we should have eloped.”

Despite himself, he feels an answering smile tugging at his mouth. “There were a few parts of today that I enjoyed,” he says.

“You mean, those fifteen minutes between the vows and the party?”

“I was including the vows as well,” he says.

“You *liked* those?”

“I liked...” he says, and hesitates. “...The sentiment.”

“Why, James Kirk,” she says, and beams. “You’re a closet romantic.”

The smile breaks free. “I’m told I have my moments.”

“Want to forget about those reports and show me?”

“Lori...”

“All right, I know, I know. I know who I married. You know, I had this idea that when you stopped working for me, your crazy workaholic masochism stopped being my problem.”

“Bones could have told you that was a pipe dream.”

She laughs. “I’m pretty sure he did.”

There’s a moment of silence, and Kirk glances up from his screen to see that she’s holding her glass away from her body, twirling it silently between her hands. Lamplight flashes amber on the mobile surface; she watches as it spills up the edges, staining the crystal with a thin, ocher film, sliding back into the bowl. He thinks he knows what’s coming next, and he opens his mouth to head it off, but she knows him better than that, and she speaks before he can get the words out.

“They were all my guys today,” she says quietly. “At the party. At the wedding. They were all my guests.”

Kirk purses his lips, sucks in his cheeks. “My parents were there,” he says.

“Yeah, and you need to call them before they fly out tomorrow, by the way. But that’s not what I meant.”

“We talked about this...”

“No,” she says. “We didn’t.”

“We said we’d keep it small. I kept it small.”

Her eyebrows twitch, a gesture of reproach. “That’s for sure...”

“Lori, my brother and his wife are dead. Peter’s in school. And I’ve spent five of the past six years in deep space; anyone I’d have chosen to invite is on the other side of the galaxy. *We talked* about this.”

“I know,” she says softly, and her voice is conciliatory. “It’s just... I felt bad for you today, that’s all.”

“Well, as it turned out, I didn’t have to spend too much time shaking hands after all.”

“I saw you talking to your mom, and I realized - there wasn’t anyone else in that whole room that you’d voluntarily spend time with. It was supposed to be your wedding, Jim.”

“I got married just fine, thank you.”

“Jim, *God...*” A soft noise of exasperation and she rolls her eyes. “That’s not what... All I’m saying is...” The glass tilts forwards into the light, backwards into shadow. Her eyes don’t leave the unquiet surface as it surges, recedes. “...It’s just that there were some faces that should have been there today,” she says. “And they weren’t there. That’s all.”

Kirk runs his tongue along the inside of his lower lip, folds his hands together on the table, stares down into his own drink. “Bones would have been there if he could,” he says.

Her eyes flicker upwards, fixing on him with a stare that he refuses to return. “I’m not talking about Bones,” she says.

He stands up. “I’m going home.”

Her eyes are relentless. “So - what?” she says softly. “We’re not even saying his name now?”

His hand strikes the table with a force that surprises even him; his glass jumps, spilling brandy over the sides and onto the table. She looks up, startled, and he still can’t meet her eyes.

“Goddamn it, Lori,” says Kirk quietly, and strides to the door.

Chapter 31

It does not get cold in the temple during the long hours of silent meditation, but in the evening, as the sun drops low on the horizon, the shadows suck the heat from the day in a moment that the acolytes call *i'karil*, the tipping point between desert sun and desert darkness. They do not talk - at least, not to each other - but he hears echoes of their thoughts in the meld, and there's some kind of second-hand comfort to be had from the knowledge that everyone else is suffering as well. There is nothing to be done about the chill that their handspun robes can barely keep at bay, and there's comfort in that too. It makes it easier not to focus on the things that *can* be corrected, and yet remain problematic.

It has been 3.24 *tevon-yonuk* since he arrived at the monastery; 3.15 since he was able to satisfactorily address the Elders' concerns about his suitability to the Discipline. *The need is undeniable*, said Solak as Spock knelt before him, mind cartwheeling down the octaves as the Adept's consciousness receded from his own. *It is his ability that I question*. And Spock said nothing, simply straightened his spine and kept his eyes fixed on the sand-littered flagstones, knowing that they were waiting for him to plead, to protest, to show some sign of the fragility that they required from him in order to close their door forever.

Knowing what they'd seen in the meld.

Perhaps it was part of the initiation process; perhaps all petitioners are subjected to the same scrutiny and skepticism. He has no way of knowing. The acolytes do not talk; at least, not to each other.

The strength of T'Cora's aversion to his emotional imbalance is a source of concern to her and to the Masters, and the fact that she knows that Spock has seen this in their melds further confounds her attempts to control it. He is aware that her progress has been less than satisfactory in the seven seasons she has spent at Gol, and he can feel her growing desperation leaching into the air around her as they sit with the other neophytes, cross-legged and silent, on meditation mats on the floor of their communal cell. They have been partnered, Spock suspects, because Master T'Kel has read the vivid red streaks of distress that slice through his controls every time she traces the edges of the memories that *will not* diminish, and he believes that T'Cora, though she contains her story behind solid walls of Discipline and reserve, has demons of her own.

But the trance has returned. Slowly, incrementally, and there is, as yet, no peace to be found within it, but it no longer eludes his summons. This, if nothing else, is cause to persevere.

There are five of them in his cohort: the eldest is 134, the youngest 23. They sleep on reed mats on

the floor of the soaring, arch-ceilinged room where they pass the majority of their day, beneath streaks of starlight that filter down from the high windows and stripe the dark floor in shades of milky white. The silence of the desert is oppressive to the ears of a man who has become accustomed to the continuous presence of noise in his auditory landscape, and the soft sounds of sleep, of ancient stone settling as it expels the heat of the day, of the quiet footfall of the Adepts as they keep the nighttime watch, though they have become familiar, are not enough to settle his restless mind. At night, the memories come, and there is very little he can do to stop them.

Don't go.

Negative.

Don't go.

Negative.

Don't go...

Over and over, like an ancient SOS call twisted into an infinite loop. And, behind that, the others:

Ri aitlu du dash-tor. Nekhau sanu.

Your world is beautiful, Spock.

It is my understanding that captivity is often a question of perspective.

Show me somewhere we've never been.

Have I ever given you cause to think that my actions are motivated by anything but a regard for your wellbeing?

You stubborn son-of-a-bitch... I won't let you do this.

What would it profit either of us?

I lost you long before I lost my ship.

Your determination to consider yourself responsible for my decision is both bewildering and insulting.

When did this become about duty?

It is not your responses that I do not trust.

Don't go.

Negative.

Don't go.

Negative.

Don't go.

Forgive me, Jim...

~*~

In the morning, while the sun remains low on the horizon, the acolytes tend the gardens. A complex web of pergolas, shaded by a tight latticework of vine leaves, sieve the desert sunlight and provide sufficient protection from the plateau's extremes to permit the cultivation of a flourishing orchard and an extensive series of vegetable beds that, once harvested, become the rough stews and

porridges that feed the *Kolinahru* and their acolytes in the silence of the dining hall. It is the responsibility of those on the first steps of the path to Truth to attend to its maintenance, and to the general upkeep of the temple complex, before their daily meditations begin. Spock finds that he has no objections to the work, though it is physically demanding, even before the fire has fully settled into the day: activity is more conducive than stillness to quieting the noise inside his head, troubling as this may be.

T’Cora works to his right, Sarenot to his left, T’Sil and Tural and Storan spread out along the row. Their cheeks are flushed green with exertion, eyes focused on the brittle red earth beneath their hoes as it crumbles and scatters down the banked terraces. The air is silent but for the chink of metal against soil, the languid rustle of leaves in the dawn breeze, the occasional cry of a circling *shavokh*, and the sound, the heat, the scent of warm foliage and water, plunges him, without warning, into another time – *the piercing call of a bird coasting the thermals echoing in his ears as he strides half a pace ahead, footsteps wide on the heated, brittle sands that front the Sanctuary, and he knows his pace is too rapid for Human feet to match, but there is no way to walk beside his friend now, no way to meet eyes that read him far too well, no way to share those easy words and quiet smiles and continue to protect himself from what he must not acknowledge; even at this distance he can taste the scent of him on the air and desire scalds him with memories of hands gripping hair and flesh, mouth against mouth, body against body, the knowledge of love...* And frustration tightens the muscles of Spock’s arms, riding a wave of kinetic energy that drives the tip of his blade into the ground with enough force to bury it up to the handle. T’Cora glances up, eyebrow raised, and he knows that she has understood enough to guess at the direction of his thoughts. He does not meet her gaze.

Enough. His arm rises, falls, strikes the soil, pulls back. Rise, fall, pull back. Rise, fall, pull back. A rhythm, a heartbeat, a lullaby. A song to soothe the ghosts. Rise, fall, pull back: routine. *Routine.* Order amongst chaos.

When he twists his eyes sideways, T’Cora has looked away.

In the underground bathing hall, they strip off their soiled robes, stained red with desert dust, green with chlorophyll, and wipe themselves down with a damp linen cloth. It is not logical to feel vulnerable in his nakedness, but it requires a substantial portion of his controls to address the irrational desire to cover himself as he washes; he wonders if this is a component of his Human self, breaching the Vulcan exterior, or whether his companions are similarly afflicted. So early into the day, the shadows have yet to lose their chill, and his skin tightens in response to the sudden drop in temperature. It is not, however, unpleasant, after the strain of two hours’ post-dawn sunlight; if it were not for the sense of exposure, of being obliged to witness others in a similar state of intimacy, he thinks he might enjoy this moment of respite – the one part of the day that is, in any sense, his own.

But he does not. He scrubs himself perfunctorily and shrugs on a fresh robe, and sets out to refill the oil lamps that burn in the halls by night.

It is, as yet, no easier, though the crisis has passed. Days have disappeared, drifting into night and back into day - long hours that telescope into the vanishing point, minutes that rush past like pollen on the breeze - and still his controls fail him. He does not need the wash of T'Corra's disquiet, T'Kel's disapproval, to understand this; the knowledge haunts the edge of every thought. It is at the front of his mind upon waking; it is the last thing he sees before exhaustion claims him in the small hours after midnight, and it hovers behind every action, every conscious gesture, every decision, every idle moment of contemplation. It presses on his lips in the long silence, and he cannot reliably contain it during meditation; it remains too strong to manage.

In the privacy of her audience room, T'Kel sits back on her heels and folds her hands in her lap. Her pendant shifts around her neck, falls back against the folds of her robe.

She says, "Your efforts are evident, Spock. Your aptitude exceeds our expectations."

Spock nods. The cell is silent; the monastery is at afternoon meditations and the stillness is so absolute that they might be suspended in deep space, surrounded by vacuum. He has the disorienting impression that he and the Elder are the only living bodies for miles around.

"Thank you, Master," he says.

"Thanks are illogical," she counters. "There is only what is. Your hybrid biology appears to offer no particular resistance to the path you have chosen, though it has clearly problematized your attainment of *Venlinahr*. This is not unusual. I have seen many acolytes pass through these halls whose mastery of the Disciplines was less than satisfactory. *Kolinahr* was their Way, and so, I believe, shall it be for you. We were correct to admit you."

He nods again, but says nothing. The thanks were a mistake. Moreover, he knows better than to think that he can conceal his turbulent thoughts from her, in or outside of the meld, and he knows that she is troubled by what she has seen.

"*Kolinahr* is within your reach, Spock," she says. "Your determination to achieve it has not diminished since your arrival, and some might find this admirable."

Spock's face does not betray him, though he knows that she will have observed the sudden skip of adrenaline in his stomach, the delicate color that has risen in his cheeks. He says, "You do not share this view, Master?"

She inclines her head. "I would invite you to consider," she says, "the possibility that this determination is a manifestation of the emotionality that you seek to purge."

It is not your responses that I do not trust.

Don't go.

Negative.

When did this become about duty?

Don't go...

His hands are already folded in his lap, but he straightens his fingers, stretches them against the rough weave of his robe, folds them again. He says, "What is your advice, Master?"

"Your path is your own, Spock," she says. "I do not advise; I merely guide. I have seen the disorder in your shields and your controls and I do not question your decision to seek your freedom from the bonds of emotion, but *Kolinahr* is neither a refuge nor a balm to soothe a troubled *katra*. We are not mind-healers. We are *Kolinahru*."

He wants to tell her that it is not a mind-healer that he seeks, but that is not strictly true - at least, not yet. He has not let go of the desire to desire; it is simply that it is incompatible with continued functionality, and the mind-healers could not help. So instead he says, "I am ready to receive your guidance, Master."

She nods, but slowly, as though she had expected something more. "I am ready to provide it," she says. Her hand rises, folded once more into the familiar pattern, and she says, quietly, "Your thoughts - give them to me."

He cannot suppress the twist of nausea that tightens his gut as he leans forward to fit his face to her fingertips, as they settle into place with the customary frisson of energy transference. She reads it, as clearly as if he had spoken it aloud, and she says, "You must not resist this, Spock. Let the thoughts, the memories, come. You must break their hold over you before you can take your next

step upon the path to Truth.”

“They are the source of great emotion,” he says with difficulty, but she only bows her head in silent acknowledgment. Such confessions are no longer shocking to her; he understands this, but he has not yet learned to dismiss his father’s teachings or the pride and the shame that they invoke.

“This is why you must let them come,” she says. “It is not possible to purge the emotion they bring while you continue to hide from their power. My mind to your mind...”

“My thoughts to your thoughts...” he finishes, but she’s there before the words have left his mouth, surging forwards like a tidal wave crashing through the flimsiest of breakwaters and leveling the streets behind.

//Let them come, she says, a whisper in the silence of a room that stretches into infinity, and he feels his mind contract, shrinking from her touch.

...don’t g...

//Let them come.

...responsible for my decision...

//They have power over you while you resist. Lock them in shadow, and they cannot be purged.

...stubborn son-of-a...

//They are words. Memories. They have no form, no substance. They are the simply the path to the emotions that you must confront.

...not your responses that I...

//Speak the word. Bring it out of the shadow.

//I cannot.

//Illogical. The word is known to you. It is within your ability to speak it.

...profit either of us...

//Speak it. It has power over you while you refuse.

//It has power also when acknowledged.

//Illogical. It is so; denial cannot change this.

...don't go...

...negative...

...rgive me, Jim...

...Jim...

...Jim...

...Jim...

//Speak it. It unlocks the path that you seek. Speak it, and bring it out of the shadow.

...profit eith...

//Speak it and break its hold. It is a word, nothing more.

...ive me, Ji...

//Speak it.

//I cannot.

//You must.

...Forgive me, Jim...

...Don't go...

...Negative...

//Speak it.

...Forgive me, Jim...

...Jim....

...Jim...

//Speak it.

Jim.

T'hy'la.

Chapter 32

Time moves forward, as it always does, and sometimes it feels like rocks in the pit of Kirk's soul, and sometimes it feels like he closes his eyes for a moment and, when he opens them, three months have disappeared. Another birthday comes and goes, and he's still the youngest Admiral in 'Fleet history, though he's catching up on his wife, who earned her braid three months shy of her fortieth birthday. Kirk spends the day on Luna, staring out at the black expanse of a skyless horizon from a windowed meeting room in AuxCom while decisions happen and progress is made, and, when he returns to Earth that evening, he makes his way to Ocean Beach and walks quietly on the sand as stars appear in the indigo vaults above.

Bones sends one of his infrequent comms in honor of the day, bluntly wondering if the powers that be have got Kirk in Nogura's chair yet and promising to bring home something worthy of the occasion when he's next on Earth. A message from his mother assures Kirk that he's never far from her thoughts; a message from Scotty promises to drink to his health; Uhura thanks him for the recommendation that has her seconded to the Communications array on Sulis II - the most beautiful place she's ever worked, she says - and hopes he'll have a pleasant day. Mass-market mail-shots offer unmissable birthday discounts; officers he's met once or twice at functions he can hardly remember wish him two dozen cultural variations on a theme; and Lori, who has reluctantly acceded to his requests that the day be left unmarked, has left a single red rose waiting for him on his desk when he gets home that night, accompanied by a two-line missive that reads, *You said you didn't want a fuss. This is me not making a fuss. Happy birthday - I love you.*

There's nothing from anyone else. He knew there wouldn't be. It has been almost a year now, and, in any case, Vulcans don't do birthdays.

But life is good. Life is fine. Life carries on, regardless. Heading Starfleet Operations gives him much greater autonomy and freedom to use his judgment as he sees fit, and there's a chance to make the kind of changes that the organization needs: the kind of changes that make life a little bit easier for the men and women filling the boots he used to wear. He can make sensible decisions about deployments, about tactics, about when a Captain needs to be left alone to make the best use of the resources available to them and when it's time to send in the cavalry, and how many reinforcements to send, and in what manner of ship. He can talk ambassadors and diplomats and Federal representatives down from their default assumption that they know better than anyone else how to run a mission, a starship, or, indeed, a bridge crew, and he can make sure that merit is recognized, rewarded, promoted - or left alone - as the situation demands. In many ways, he thinks, this was a natural progression for him. Nothing lasts forever, and, if summer's lease hath all too short a date, then the rational response is to look for ways to be content with fall.

Cochrane Day sees Starfleet host the delegation from Eremitis, newly inducted members of the Federation, and it's good, it's what he needs: something to focus his mind away from memories of this day last year. Nogura corners him afterwards, as Kirk is waiting for Lori to finish talking to a

garrulous Eremitian attaché, and steers him over to a quiet corner by the bar to congratulate him on the anniversary of his promotion.

"I knew you'd excel at this, Jim," he says, eyes roaming the room with the watchfulness of an old hunter, drifting over scattered pockets of stragglers as they disperse into the night. "I've never been wrong yet."

"Thank you for the opportunity, sir," says Kirk carefully, but the angry ache is little more than a dull, background throb these days. Most of the time, he doesn't even know it's there. "I'm gratified by your faith in me."

The old man chuckles softly. "I'm not so sure you'd have said that this time last year," he says.

And Kirk makes himself laugh, makes himself slice straight through memories of a silent apartment; of the sensation of waking to emptiness where a body should be, pressed up tight against him; of opening his eyes and seeing a figure on the other side of the room, cold and still as marble, and knowing, *knowing*, that it was over... He says, "You may be right, sir. I guess I might have been blinded by my own... inclinations."

"I knew you didn't want it," says Nogura, and still his eyes don't leave the dwindling crowd. "But I also knew it was the way things needed to be. I hope you've forgiven the... ah... the manner of the announcement, so to speak."

He doesn't say anything, but Spock's eyes, pointed resolutely at the floor, lift to meet his - slowly, reluctantly, as though it takes all his energy to make this one tiny gesture and there's nothing left for anything else. And he knows. He knows.

"I knew a man," says Kirk quietly, "who was fond of saying, 'There is no offense where none is taken'." It's amazing, really, how easy it is to speak the words now, to bring them to mind and let them fall from his mouth as though they mean nothing at all. "I think that sentiment is appropriate here."

In profile, he sees Nogura's face crease into a faint smile. "Nevertheless, it was an underhanded move on my part," he says. "Do you know why I did it?"

Kirk feels his jaw tighten, but he keeps his voice light. "You wanted to make sure I couldn't refuse," he says.

But Nogura shakes his head. "I wanted to make it *difficult* for you to refuse," he says. "To tell the truth, I was only about 70% sure I wouldn't see your resignation on my desk first thing Monday morning. It was a calculated risk, Jim, but some things are important enough to take the chance." His eyes slide sideways. "Thank you for proving me right."

He sits up slowly, carefully, scrubs a hand across his face. The room has never felt so cavernous, so cold. He says, quietly, "It wasn't my intention to..."

But Spock silences him with a minute shake of his head. "The fault was mine," he says, like he always does, and Kirk can't help the bitter laugh that escapes before he can catch it, force it back inside where it can't do the damage it wants to do...

"Well," he says, resolutely, and he makes himself smile. "As it turned out, a change was exactly what I needed."

~*~

But the words stay with him, long after Lori finally extricates herself from loquacious Eremitian hospitality and her husband from a conversation that he'd really rather not have; long into the night, the restless morning that follows it, and the days beyond. Despite what Nogura thinks, resignation was never an option for Kirk, then or now: there were a couple of moments, in that dark week that followed, when the idea danced in front of his eyes like a mirage, a siren call, but it was always accompanied by a wave of nihilistic apathy so disturbing to his sense of himself that he dismissed it without examining it too closely. Because there is only so much a man can accommodate inside the confines of his own head, and upending whatever parts of the universe still appeared to function just seemed like a step too far.

It was a bad week.

Not this time, you stubborn son-of-a-bitch, he remembers writing in a moment of intemperate fury some time in the small hours of Wednesday morning, sixty-four hours after Spock had walked out of his apartment in a haze of regret and ill-considered words - sixty-four hours in which all messages, all comms, all attempts to contact him had gone unanswered. *Not again. I won't permit it. If friendship means anything to you at all, be at Roselli's on Haight at 2000 hours Thursday. You don't get to hide from this.*

It was 0500 before he finally managed to sleep, sprawled, fully dressed, on his untouched sheets,

as the first fingers of dawn were struggling over the horizon.

That was the day that Bones arrived in his office, gray-faced and subdued, with a story to tell. That was the day Kirk knew for certain that he'd take the damn stripes, the job, the unending service, the chains that bind him to a planet he's long since ceased to regard as home: because there was, abruptly, nothing else left.

~*~

The new orders come through on Tuesday afternoon, and he forwards them to Ciana without a word, which is petulant behavior unbecoming a Rear Admiral, but it has been a trying few days and they're not exactly on the best of terms. Chief of Starfleet Operations - he has no idea why Nogura has chosen this particular brand of perdition, but this is how it is to be, and it comes with another new office and assignment patch, just as he was starting to get used to the look of the Xeno insignia on his chest where his goddamn ship ought to be.

Wednesday morning, then, he spends tying up loose ends, preparing a handover dossier for his successor, packing away his few personal possessions, and answering messages of congratulations in effusive terms that make him want to spit. And the worst, the absolutely most intolerable thing about this whole debacle, is that there is nowhere he wants to be right now less than his damn apartment, but he can't even hide out in work anymore. I've got this, his colleagues will say with a cheerful smile, or, You don't need to worry about that now, sir, and he feels like snatching the damn PADDs out of their hands and barricading himself in his office where he doesn't have to look at an endless parade of earnest good wishes reflected on the faces of people who genuinely think this is something he would ever have wanted.

Late-morning, Kirk is sitting at his desk trying to string another hour's work out of the 57 Camelopardalis A file, when he hears his door slide open and a soft, solitary footfall announce the presence of another body in the room. He doesn't look up. There is literally nobody in the world who has cause to be walking into his office right now who will not annoy him.

"Can it wait?" he snaps.

There's a pause. Then a familiar voice says, "Well, how 'bout I tell you what it is, then you tell me if it can wait?"

Kirk's head snaps upright, eyes widening in surprise and unexpected pleasure. "Bones!" he says. The chair slides backwards as his legs get him upright, hand stretching out to greet his friend. "Have a seat. What are you doing here?"

“Yeah,” says the doctor, but he drops into one of the guest chairs in that comfortable way of his, like a marionette with the strings cut. “Funny story; you should hear it.”

“Funny?”

“Well... no.” McCoy glances up as his friend lowers himself into the seat across the desk. “Not really. I guess not.”

“You want coffee?”

“Might need somethin’ a mite stronger in a minute,” says Bones. His lips curl upwards but his eyes abstain. “Got a comm from your CO this morning. Seems she thought it’d be a good idea if you and me had a chat.”

“I’m between COs at the moment, Bones,” Kirk points out.

“The one who signs your paycheck for the next two-and-a-half days,” says the doctor. His fingers run distractedly along the edge of Kirk’s desk, where a tiny notch has been split into the veneer by some ancient accident. “Thing is,” he says slowly, “looks like she got her hands on some information that you oughtta know. I guess... the way things are right now with you and her... she didn’t think she was the one to give it to you. Can’t say I blame her, really. Just not sure I’m the one to give it to you either.”

“Bones,” says Kirk, in what he hopes is a philosophical tone, “they took away my ship and my crew and everything I ever worked for or cared about. I’m almost certain I’m bulletproof right now.”

“I hope so, Jim,” says Bones. He sighs, and his fingers worry at the dent, polished smooth by the years, eyes following the movement as though it’s the most important thing in the world. “I sure hope that’s true.”

~*~

The letter arrived that afternoon: old-fashioned paper and ink, entrusted to the vagaries of an

almost-defunct internal mail system in a manner designed to ensure that it was not delivered until the sender was safely out of reach. *There's been a mistake*, Kirk had told Bones that morning with a tight smile and a shake of the head, back in those final hours when it was still possible that this was true. *He wouldn't leave without telling me*. And he remembers the certainty in his voice as he said it, the unassailable conviction, because no matter what had happened, no matter how badly he had handled the single most important conversation of their friendship, no matter the words that had fallen out of his mouth before he could rein them in, he knew Spock better than that. He wouldn't leave in silence, without a backward glance. He would not leave without telling Kirk.

But Spock *had* told him, he realized, as his eyes scanned the elegant lines of Vulcan cursive: a single page of neat, familiar writing that closed the doors of denial and leached something cold and empty into his veins. He can't remember the words that were used, the specific declaration of intent, but he remembers that the decision was expressed, however obliquely, somewhere among the recriminations and the hurt and the verbal bruising. Spock *had* told him; Kirk just... hadn't heard. They'd both said a lot of things that day.

He sits alone in his office, cradling a glass of whisky against his chest in the thin light of a single terminal screen, staring blankly at the latest list of modifications to the *Enterprise's* proposed refit schedule. Decker is right to push for the best of everything - it's not as though Command is likely to refuse any reasonable request that ensures their flagship is as well-equipped as she can be before she sets back out into the great unknown - but waiting for the new offline warp power conservation relays to pass initial trials has now set them back so far that they'll be lucky to get started on the main body of reconstructive work before June is out. She should have been getting ready to receive her new crew by now, engines idling, sleek white corridors flushed with the faint scent of fresh paint, and the thought of her, tethered and broken, chained to a drydock while a sprawling backdrop of silky black spreads out behind her... unsettles him. He'll be happier when she's safely on the other side of the galaxy.

Decker was a good choice for her, though; the best choice, really, and Kirk was glad, in the end, to recommend him for the chair. He understands deep space travel at a kind of primal, instinctive level that speaks to a mirror impulse in Kirk's soul; he respects the responsibilities of leadership, he respects his crew, and, above all, he respects the ship. He was born to be a Captain, and Kirk finds something satisfying in knowing that he was able to play a small part in making the workings of the universe unfold as they should. It was a full four weeks into his admiralty before Personnel approached him for his thoughts on who ought to command his former ship - he's not sure if that was the wheels of Starfleet bureaucracy turning with their habitual efficiency, or the hand of Nogura making sure that no salt was prematurely rubbed into open wounds, but he appreciates the hiatus, nonetheless. There was a lot to process in that month.

"I just need your signature - here, and... here," says Commander Garcini from across the desk. Kirk has refused her offer of a seat, on the grounds that the meeting is unlikely to last more than two minutes - just long enough for him to sign his acceptance of a promotion that closes the sky to him for good. Unfortunately, this has caused her to feel obligated to remain standing too, and now they're both bent awkwardly across the table, backs crooked at thirty degrees, peering at the same PADD.

"Fine," he says, with less chill than he feels. He knows she hasn't requested that he meet her in her office so that he can process a document that could just as easily have been sent on the cortex. Kirk has a number of theories as to why Nogura might have instructed her to have him here in person, but, as he catches sight of the uncomfortable look on her face as she straightens, he's realizes with a sinking feeling that it is, indeed, going to be Option A.

Well. At least it gives him a moment's grace to steel himself before she asks the question.

"While you're here, Admiral..." she begins, and it is a considerable effort neither to sigh nor to roll his eyes. But he's been practicing.

"Yes, Commander?" says Kirk, though he moderates his tone. It's not her fault. None of this is her fault. And she can't be expected to know.

"Yes, sir," she says. "It's only that you understand, of course, that your promotion now officially leaves the Enterprise without a commander. Admiral Nogura has asked me to look into rectifying that situation, and - well, sir, even without your own personal knowledge of the ship, as Chief of Operations, I'd be remiss in not asking for your input. If you have any recommendations, sir, I'd love to hear them."

Kirk purses his lips, sucks in a breath. "I do," he says, and does not look up from the PADD.

To her credit, she waits at least a beat past the expiration of common courtesy. "Well, sir," she says at last, "I'll be happy to pass on any names you have to Admiral Nogura..."

"Just one name," says Kirk. He scrawls his signature at the bottom of the contract, sets it down smartly on the edge of her desk with a muted clip. An upward glance fixes her with the sort of stare that has to be met, and he says, "Commander Spock."

Garcini's face blanks in consternation, and there's a moment where she's demonstrably trying to work out how to answer. Kirk can practically hear her lining the words up inside her head, testing them for errors and misapprehensions before she speaks.

"Sir," she says slowly. "Commander Spock is no longer in service with Starfleet."

"Yes. I know." Kirk slides the PADD across the desk to her with a nod and a smile that doesn't reach his eyes, and crosses to the door at a brisk stride. At the threshold, he turns, looks back, meets her uncertain gaze. "Ask him if he'd come back for that," he says, and he walks away.

He won't tell Decker that his was the second name out of the hat, of course - the fallback option - and, in truth, he's not, not really: only the logical corollary of a very long shot. He's a good man - a smart man, the *right* man. Decker on the bridge of the *Enterprise* is the sort of compromise that makes this thing start to look all right, the sort of compromise that makes it possible to conceive of her setting her first course heading without Kirk giving the order that sets her free again. Because nothing lasts forever. You take what you've got and you run with it, and you make the best you damn well can of it, because that's life. And life is good. Life is fine.

Life carries on, regardless.

~*~

T'Kel releases his consciousness and sits back on her knees, folding her hands in her lap.

"The attachment is strong, Spock," she says again, though this is news to neither of them; they have both known for many months that it is the case. "However, it need not be insurmountable. Many pass through these halls seeking freedom from the bondage of immoderate *ashaya*. Yours is simply... more pronounced."

Spock says nothing, head bowed as he stares quietly at the abstract pattern of sand on flagstone. He awoke again last night with Jim's name on his lips and arousal burning in his belly. It is becoming intolerable.

She says, "Your Way will not be easy. You must labor hard to find the root of your partiality, so that you may begin the process of casting it aside." She looks up, fixes her eyes on him. "Are you prepared?"

Jim. He is Spock's constant shadow, the ghost at his shoulder, the whisper on the wind - the last thing he sees before he closes his eyes at night, the first thought on his mind when he greets the new day.

Spock does not meet her stare. But he says, "I am prepared."

Chapter 33

They'd talked, briefly, about meeting in San Francisco, but, as it turned out, neither he nor McCoy was particularly enamored of that idea, and so Kirk finds himself, one day in mid-September, stepping off the airtram in Athens into sultry Georgian heat, with a yellow sun piercing the gray-white clouds above and a sense of weightlessness buoying up his weary bones. The seasons are just beginning to skirt the edge of fall, but the summer hasn't yet left the air, and, as he steps through the terminus doors and onto the street outside, the sluggish breeze is heavy with the scent of sun-baked asphalt, of fall-blooming flowers and warm grass, of humid skies that threaten rain.

Kirk stands for a moment, disregarded, as passengers billow around him, greeting friends and family, pulling out their communicators, moving out into the late afternoon traffic and talking easily in a hum of human sound that settles into his skin: noise and motion, life filtering past. He watches them dissolve into the city tides and eddies, and sucks in a breath, centering himself. He needed this.

Bones' erstwhile family home is some forty kilometers south of the city center, brushing the outskirts of the small settlement where his father used to practice medicine in days long gone. Kirk has visited only once before, many years ago, and he's surprised to find, as the taxi glides along the narrow, cypress-lined road, that he remembers the impressions, if not the place. He was a Lieutenant Commander then, not long in possession of his stripes, and filled with the self-assurance of youth and talent. It feels like another lifetime, and yet, as he pulls up outside the tall, wrought-iron gates that furnish a struggling hole in a sprawling hedgerow, he has the strongest sensation that, if he were to turn over his shoulder, he might catch a glimpse of that shadow self, skittering out of sight. There's a certain sense of comfort in that. The past is a river, forever flowing out of reach, but some things don't change.

The house itself is set onto a low incline: a blue-gabled farmhouse that nestles into a comfortable curtain of sweetgum and hickory, and peers reclusively above the high brush that separates it from the road below. Paint is peeling from the shutters, and the decking on the wraparound porch has warped in the last winter chill, but the yard is neatly trimmed and swept, the windows are clean and glinting in the afternoon sunlight, the flowerbeds recently tended. Kirk grins. Bones was always good at this: segueing between lives as though he's shrugging on a different suit.

The door opens as he approaches the stoop, and the doctor appears, leaning his shoulder against the frame and folding his arms across his chest, with that customary ineffable smile of his breaking through his beard.

"Hot enough for you?" he drawls in manifest amusement, and Kirk returns the grin with a wry twist of his lips as he considers the patina of sweat that has settled itself across every exposed inch of his flesh.

He shrugs. "I've seen hotter."

"Don't believe I ever saw you turn just that shade of scarlet before, Admiral," says Bones, levering himself upright from his perch. "You best come inside before you pass out. Lord knows, I don't wanna have to go rustlin' about for a hypo - I'm off duty."

Kirk feels his grin widen, deepen, spread across his face as he climbs the steps to the porch and his friend steps back to clear the door, gesturing with one hand towards the cool, shadowy hallway beyond. Yes. He needed this.

"No Lori?" says Bones, too casually, as Kirk crosses the threshold and moves into the blissful chill of climate control. He feels himself bristle at the careless appropriation of his private life, but, he considers, it's not as though he wasn't expecting the question. He is, in fact, mildly disconcerted that these weren't the first words out of the doctor's mouth.

"She had to work," he says, and focuses his attention on toeing off his boots. The wooden floorboards are polished to a high sheen, and Bones is barefoot.

"Work, huh?" says McCoy conversationally. "And you didn't?"

Despite his brain's best intentions, Kirk's eyes shoot his friend a warning look. "Clearly," he says.

But the doctor's face is open, disingenuous. "Thought you told me you two were working on the same project?"

"We work on a lot of projects, Bones."

"Huh." The blue eyes bore a hole into Kirk's, and he can see the workings of an active mind behind the relentless gaze. Bones misses very little. "I guess you do," he says at last.

A beat, and then he blinks the moment away. "Shame, though," he says amiably. "Might've been nice to offer my congratulations to the woman who made an honest man outta James Kirk. Well, Admiral, sir," he adds, as Kirk opens his mouth to make *some* sort of noise in defense of his honor, "what can we get you to drink?"

Bones misses *nothing*. Kirk feels like he ought to remember this by now. But there's nothing else for it but to let it happen, to flow with the tides of his mercurial disposition and deal with the inevitable fall-out when it comes. For now, they're doing amiable southern gentlemen at their ease. And he *does* want a drink.

So he makes himself grin away the lingering irritation, and says, with an amicable tone that's not entirely forced, "Whatever you're having, Dr. McCoy."

"Only one thing *to* drink, heat like this," says Bones with an ominous smirk. "Picked the mint leaves myself, fresh this morning."

"Ah." Kirk lets his chin drop to his collarbone in good-natured resignation as Bones sets off down the hallway towards the kitchen. "I believe you've been threatening this for several years now, Doctor."

"Wouldn't call it so much a threat as a promise, Admiral." The voice trails behind him as he passes through a doorway that's bathed in rich September sunlight. "Got some of that Aldebaran firewater left somewhere - it ain't bourbon, mind, but it packs a hell of a punch."

If Kirk has learned anything from their years of friendship, it's when to pick his battles. "Wonderful," he calls, and hears a low rumble of laughter from his friend.

"One good, old-fashioned Georgia-style mint julep, coming up," says Bones. "Go on through to the lounge, Jim. You remember where it is, right?"

The interior of the house has been left, virtually unchanged, as it was built some three hundred years earlier: the parlor sits alone and untouched at the front of the house, but, behind it, the second reception room has been knocked through into what was once a formal dining room, to create a long, open-plan living space that spreads along the length of the eastern wall. Summer spills like melted gold through the far French doors that open onto the back porch and, through the doorway that connects the lounge to the kitchen, Kirk can hear the promising sounds of clinking glass and splashing liquid.

"You ever take that trip you were planning back in May?" calls Bones, over the rattle of muddling ice and mint leaves losing their battle with structural integrity. "Out Yosemite way, wasn't it?"

Kirk drops his overnight bag into an armchair, walks quietly across the room to one of the high windows that looks out onto the sloping, tree-dappled lawn to the side of the house, where bright patches of sunlight testify to the afternoon's valiant battle against the encroaching rain.

"Postponed," he says, though he knows better than to think that this is something he's likely to get away with. "Something came up."

Bones chuckles, as he steps through into the room, condensation-frosted glass in either hand. "Figured it might," he says cheerfully, crossing to stand beside his friend. He passes a beaker to Kirk, raises his own. "To old times," he says.

The angry ache is silent now, like an old scar that covers a place where a wound used to be. So there's no strain, no tension, to his voice as Kirk raises his glass in return, clinks it against Bones', and answers, "Old times." And if the smile doesn't quite reach his eyes, it doesn't fall far short.

Bones doesn't miss it, though. Bones misses *nothing*.

He takes a sip from his drink, gaze fixed, unwaveringly, on his companion. "You ever hear from any of the old crew?" he asks pleasantly.

Nothing. Kirk's smile, fraying around the edges, relaxes into something a little warmer, because there is, after all, something comforting in being known so well. "Not really," he says. "Chekov commed a while back."

"Chekov? Thought he was on the *Orleans*?"

"He was. He's been seconded to Luna for twelve months. I think he thought I could get him out of it."

"Poor kid," says Bones, and he turns at last to face the windowed yard, where a light wind is rustling the tops of the sweetgums. "Not much out that way for him, I guess."

"They have a decent weapons certification program at the base in Armstrong," says Kirk, raising his glass to sniff speculatively at the contents. "He'll need to improve his rating before he's eligible for promotion." A tentative sip, and he grimaces, to the doctor's manifest delight. "Bones, is there *any* whisky in this, or did you just heap sugar into water and mix it around?"

“Grows on you,” says his friend with a jubilant smile. “Guess he thought he’d earn his credits shipboard, huh? Well, won’t do him any harm, I guess. Last I heard, Sulu was trying to swing a posting out that way. Those two were always pretty tight.”

“They made a damn good navigation team,” says Kirk, as neutrally as he can. “Well. I guess they’ll serve together again when the *Enterprise* leaves drydock. I’ve recommended them both for the bridge.”

“That so?”

Kirk nods, purses his lips, takes another sip from his glass. Bones is right: it *does* grow on you. “Uhura too,” he says.

“Huh.” In his peripheral vision, Kirk sees Bones twist his gaze sideways, fix Kirk with one of his stares. He doesn’t return it. “Guess the whole gang’s back together then.”

“No sense in breaking up a good command crew,” says Kirk lightly, but he knows what’s in his eyes and he’s not about to share it. So, instead, he keeps his head straight and his spine tight and he stares out into the garden, focusing his gaze on the swaying branches outside as the first spots of rain begin to fall.

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It’s better, now, than it was. Bones stormed out of Starfleet in an apocalyptic rage that Kirk - newly promoted, cut loose from all moorings and adrift in uncharted space - was just not equipped to deal with, and there was something of a release, if he’s brutally honest, in having a steady target for all that simmering, incandescent anger that couldn’t be properly directed up the chain of command. He remembers feeling the last tethers of self-control slip through his fingers; he remembers striking his new desk with enough force to shatter a hairline fracture into his fifth metacarpal; he remembers that one of them called the other a coward and a fool, but he can’t remember which of them it was, and he’s never going to ask, not now. It’s not as though either answer will make him feel any better.

And he remembers, even then, knowing that it wasn’t Bones that he was angry with. He remembers reading and re-reading the message, freshly arrived in his inbox not half an hour before the doctor stormed into his office with tales of insubordination and bullheaded admirals and the willful ineptitude of Starfleet Command, until the letters blurred together and the words stopped

making sense, because Sarek, Kirk could understand, but his wife's intransigence was completely unexpected, and it gouged the heart out of the only hope he had left.

My son is unwell, Admiral, Amanda had written. Please allow us our privacy.

It made no sense, and he didn't know what else to do, and then Bones barged in and announced, in tones of scalded injustice, that he'd tried his damndest to argue away the only thing that remained to anchor Kirk to himself, and expected his wholehearted agreement.

They didn't speak for a lot of months after that. Kirk had to comm Joanna, in the end, just to find out where her father had gone. But it got better, slowly, one message at a time, the way things do between old friends who've fallen into bitterness and recrimination, when both of them want to put it right.

By nightfall, the storm has blown itself out, and Bones has opened the French doors to let in the damp night air, thick with the scent of rainwater and wet grass and late evening blossom. They've moved from syrupy Georgian cocktails onto the more specialist items from the doctor's well-stocked liquor cabinet and, if everything wasn't so utterly changed, Kirk could almost believe they were back on the *Enterprise*, ship settled in for the night and purring beneath his feet, as the Captain and his CMO take their leisure on a quiet evening when there's nothing more demanding to claim their time.

His friend is winding down his sad catalog of the misfortunes that befell him at his daughter's recent birthday celebrations - the reason he's made the cross-sector trip back to Earth - and Kirk can feel his eyes getting heavy as he sips from his third glass of something purplish-brown and surprisingly drinkable, with a flavor like peppered lilac. There's no real grievance behind Bones' story; if anything, it's undercut by a heady current of relief that these things are possible now, that his relationship with his only child has thawed sufficiently that an invitation to her home is now something that can happen, regardless of whether or not that comes tied to three hours in the company of her mother and her mother's extensive family, all of whom blame Bones, unequivocally, for the breakdown of his marriage.

"Who knows?" he says, philosophically, cradling his glass against his chest. The light has left the day now, and neither of them have made any move towards turning on the lamps. There's something soothing about sitting easily in the creeping dark, surrounded by the sounds and scents of the deep countryside. "Maybe she has a point. Can't see as it matters now, anyway."

"She sounds happy," says Kirk quietly, and he can hear the torpor settling into his words even as they leave his mouth. "Joanna. She sounds like she's found..." and he pauses, considering. "...Her place," he says at last. "Where she's supposed to be."

“Yup,” says Bones. “I guess so. And that ain’t nothing.”

“No. It’s not.” Outside, the thin layer of clouds is shifting, chased by the wind to the corners of the sky. The stars are coming out. “She sounds happy,” he says again, and he closes his eyes.

“You okay, Jim?” says Bones quietly, slicing through the blanket of hush, and Kirk realises he’s on the verge of falling asleep in his chair. Maybe purplish-brown drinks that taste of peppered lilac are a bridge too far at this time of night.

“I believe,” he says, and the end of the word telescopes into a wide yawn, “that it’s time for me to turn in.”

“Yeah,” says Bones, and the shadows shift as his face splits into a grin. “Guess we’re neither of us as young as we used to be, Admiral.”

“Please stop calling me ‘Admiral’, Bones.”

“Thought you’d be used to it by now.”

“You remember when you were promoted to Commander?”

“That’s different.”

“And the Surgeon General sent your next certification reminder to *Commander* Leonard McCoy?”

“He oughtta’ve known better.”

“It *is* your rank, Commander.”

“*Was*, Jim.” The voice is light, but there’s a question behind it that Kirk doesn’t quite know how to read. And the darkness falls too evenly on Bones’ face to take his answer there. “No ranks in

civilian practice.”

“Ah.” Here and now, with the conversation flowing as it used to and the doctor’s liquor warming his veins, it’s too easy to forget how much has changed. “My apologies - *Doctor McCoy*.”

A philosophical shrug from the shadows. “I forget myself, half the time.” A beat. “Funny, I guess.”

“How so?” says Kirk, though he thinks he knows where the conversation is going.

“The way things turn out. You ever think...?”

“No.” It’s out before he knows he’s going to interrupt, but there is no way that sentence can end that’s going to take them down a path Kirk wants to travel. “I try not to, Doctor.”

“Yeah.” A sigh. “You and me both, Jim.”

“It is what it is,” says Kirk. He tilts his glass towards him, moonlight shifting on the mobile surface of the liquid. “Things change. We both could have done a lot worse, you and I.”

A gentle laugh. “Speak for yourself, Mr. Chief of Starfleet Operations.”

“You’ll have to try harder than that,” says Kirk, “to convince me you’re not perfectly content to be stationed seven light years away from the nearest transporter array.”

“You read the studies I’ve read,” says Bones darkly, “and then you tell me those things are safe.”

Kirk grins. “Five years in deep space, in the company of Klingons and Romulans and Tholians, on top of a warp coil powered by the violent collision of matter and antimatter, Dr. McCoy, and it’s safety of the *transporters* that keeps you awake at night.”

“Sure,” says Bones. “Maybe you don’t mind scattering your atoms all over the ether, but I’m a doctor, not an energy wave. I’ll pass, thanks.”

“You’re a man out of your time, Bones,” says Kirk fondly. “You always were.”

Across the room, a breath of laughter agitates the darkness. “I guess so, Jim,” says his friend, and he stretches in his chair, shadows and moonlight shifting on his legs as they straighten, lengthen along the floor. “Give me a shuttle dock and one-quarter impulse any day of the week. I like a planet that knows how to do things the old-fashioned way.”

Kirk is quiet for a moment, considering, as he lifts his glass to his lips and lets perfume-spiced liquor flow over his tongue, needling the back of his throat as he swallows, spreading a curtain of warmth across his chest. Ice chimes against crystal as his hand drops back again to rest against the arm of the chair, soft against the blanket of hush.

“It sounds to me,” he says quietly, “like you might have found your place, too, Bones.”

The words settle into the thick night air that ambles through the open doors and curls the scent of moisture and leaf mold through the gloom. From the quiet yard outside, Kirk can hear the first spots of returning rain striking the curling paintwork of the porch, the timbre of the darkness shifting as the clouds begin to break.

“Maybe,” says Bones thoughtfully. “Maybe not. Not so sure I ever had a *place*, Jim.” A beat. “Not like you.”

Kirk purses his lips, tightens his grip on his glass. “My place,” he says, “is where I can be of most use to Starfleet. That’s the way it goes.”

“You know damn well where your place is, Jim,” says Bones, but there’s no fire in the words, only a kind of worn-out resignation. “Lord knows, I wish some other people knew it too.”

“Other people?”

“You know who I mean.”

Yes. Kirk is pretty sure he does. But he’s too tired to argue; too tired to work out what it is his friend wants to hear. So, instead, he says, wearily, “Let it alone, Bones.”

“Some things,” says the doctor, “just fall out wrong. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I’ve done all right. Better than all right, Bones. I have a challenging job, a job I enjoy. I have a chance to do good work where I am. I’m perfectly content.”

“Yeah?” Even in the darkness, Kirk can feel his friend’s close, evaluative stare. But he doesn’t have to return it. “That ain’t the same as being happy, Jim.”

Kirk huffs a tight laugh. “What is this obsession,” he says, “that everyone seems to have with my happiness?”

“Damn it, Jim,” says Bones. “Sometimes, I swear, it’s like you don’t even want to see what’s right in front of your face. It all fell out wrong, you know it did. And just ‘cause it can’t be fixed, doesn’t mean you gotta be okay with that.”

“My life doesn’t need to be *fixed*, Bones. It’s fine. Maybe you’re through with Starfleet, but I’m not. I happen to like my job.”

“I’m not talking,” says Bones, “about the damn job.”

It is, almost word for word, what Lori said to him two nights ago, opening salvo in a battle of words that led well into the small hours and ended in three more shots of whisky than he ought to have had, and a restless night of residual fury spent, sleepless, in the guest room. He just doesn’t have the energy to have the same fight all over again.

“Bones,” he says. “Let it alone. There’s nothing more to say. It’s over.”

“Ah, Jim,” says his friend quietly, and the words are soft and full of regret, breathed out on the end of a sigh. “Don’t look much like it’s over to me.”

The angry ache, so long forgotten, twists without warning, burning brightly against his ribs and tightening his belly. Bones has a talent for feeding it, thinks Kirk, and turns it into motion before it can close off his chest.

“I’m going to bed,” he says, and gets to his feet.

Bones stands with him, draining his glass in one easy movement. “Why don’t you take some time, Jim?” he says. “Take a trip, come back out to Beta Auraculi with me for a few weeks. Lord knows, I could do with the company out there on that empty rock. What do you say - how long’s it been since you took a real vacation?”

“Bones,” says Kirk gently, as evenly as he can. “You know how it is.”

“Yeah,” says his friend, and he shakes his head. His eyes glint in the moonlight; he looks tired, dispirited, every year of his age. “I guess I do.”

There’s a long moment of heavy silence, full of all the things they haven’t said, and then the doctor sucks in a sharp breath, fracturing the stillness, and pads across the room to where the French doors lie open in front of the gathering downpour. But he reaches out as he passes Kirk, presses one hand to his friend’s upper arm, tightens his fingers in a brief grip and lets them fall away.

“Goodnight, Bones,” says Kirk, and his friend, silhouetted against a pale halo of moonlight, nods once.

“Night, Jim,” he answers, but he doesn’t look round as Kirk drains the last remnants of peppered lilac from his glass, sets it quietly on the coffee table, moves across the dark room towards the hallway. And it’s only as Kirk steps through the door, out into the cool, inky blackness beyond, that he thinks he hears his friend say, softly - almost too softly to hear, “I sure hope that green-blooded son-of-a-bitch is happy. That’s all.”

Chapter 34

Dawn is frosting the desert floor in shades of ochre and gold, creeping up the edges of the jagged promontories that scatter the plateau, and pulling long, twisted shadows from the feet of the statues that guard the ancient altar as the acolytes file along the rough path to where the Elders wait. Spock follows T'Sil, white robe bright against the receding gloom; T'Cora brings up the rear; and between them walk Sytek and Staas, who arrived at the sanctuary less than two seasons ago, but whose mastery of the Disciplines has proved superior. Below them, bathed in shadow and the fading light of the Watcher, spreads the sanctuary complex, where a mobile line of flickering torchlight describes the path of the adepts pacing the final hour of the watch; above them, the night opens onto a blanket of stars and darkness, washed in the clear, cold air of a midwinter sky. On the southern horizon, sinking into the thin, silver-gray line of sunrise, a distant yellow star in the constellation of *Bezhun*, the Oculus, is setting out of sight. Spock trains his eyes on the dusty path and resists the temptation to look up, to allow himself to name it or its third, water-rich world.

The Elders are standing on the dais: Master T'Sai in the center, flanked to her right by Solak, to her left by Suvar, three hands raised in the *ta'al*. They have been waiting, Spock knows, since the light left the sky at sunset, standing in silent meditation while they reach inside themselves for the inner silence that they must channel in order to confer *srashiv*, the first step on the path to *Kolinahr*. The altar is as old as the sanctuary itself - curling, High Golic runes shrinking back against the stone under the slow assault of sand and years - and its care and upkeep will fall to Spock and his four companions after today. The altar of *Kolinahr* is, as yet, closed to them, but *srashiv* is a token, a promise of sorts, that the symbol of ultimate logic is within their grasp.

T'Sai inclines her head, and the acolytes drop to their knees before her, forming a rough semi-circle on the dusty ground. She does not speak as she descends the shallow steps to the terrace but Spock can feel the brush of her mind with every footfall, skimming the edges of his thoughts as she paces the arc in front of their down-turned heads. There is no sense of invasion, of being known, of intrusion into the self; not yet - only the simple graze of a mind so powerful that it has already passed into legend. Spock sits quietly and allows the quiet wash of consciousness to blanket him; there is no defense against it. For many hundreds of years now, the Adepts of Gol have spent their days in meditation and instruction, cloistered in their sanctuary quarters where their minds can be at peace, but, as he feels the low hum of psi-energy envelop him like a cloud, he believes he understands why his ancestors once feared the *Kolinahr* above all others.

Spock closes his eyes, steadies himself, prepares to descend inside. *Srashiv* is not *Kolinahr*; it is a way-marker on the path to Truth, nothing more. All that is required is evidence of progress, and he knows that this has been achieved. He is no longer the man who arrived, in desperation and disintegration, at the doors to the sanctuary, and, if true serenity, as yet, eludes him, then it is at least within his reach again. He can fail today and return in a week, a month, a year, to receive *srashiv* again, when his controls are stronger, when the ghosts holler a little less loudly, when it is possible to move easily from sleep to wakefulness after a night untroubled by dreaming. But as T'Sai releases Sytek's mind and moves to enter T'Sil's, he understands that he does not expect to

fail. And, though tradition does not permit to be here to see her confidence rewarded, neither does T'Kel.

When you first came to us, she told him last night, before she left him to keep his pre-ceremony watch in hours of darkness and meditation, it was my counsel that you be turned away. I made this recommendation in the knowledge that you were in crisis and that the imbalance in your katra had already confounded the capabilities of four mind healers of considerable talent. Do you understand my meaning?

He does. As he has begun the process of picking away the debris from his cluttered Path, some things have become clearer, shifting slowly into sharper focus as his mind adjusts. It is possible, now, to view with a kind of detachment the violence he has done to his controls; the emotional erosion he has allowed to proceed unchecked; the gradual disintegration of *Venlinahr*. He knows that *srashiv* is only the beginning of the process of renewal that he set in motion when he arrived at the sanctuary doors, and he knows, even as T'Sai presses cool fingers to his forehead and slides easily, irresistibly, into his mind, that his road will be long, and difficult, and full of danger, but the fact of the matter, he has come to understand, is this: had the Masters turned him away when he fell on his knees to petition for admittance to the path of *Kolinahr*, there was no other recourse for Spock. Had they read his crisis as evidence of weakness and turned their backs forever, he would have been lost.

He almost was.

~*~

There is no one to meet him at the arrivals port, of course; he has not told his parents of his plans, and, truthfully, he's not even certain that they're on Vulcan. This would, in fact, be his preferred scenario: his father is scarcely the embodiment of all that is serene in Spock's life, and he imagines that the opportunity to rebalance himself, to restore his fracturing shields, will best present itself in the absence of Sarek. But it's a stray thought, nothing more: Spock is beyond specifics now. He simply needs a place to be while he tries to fit together the jagged edges of his fractured controls, and he currently lacks the necessary presence of mind to reason through a selection of options. It must be Vulcan. Beyond that, the details are academic.

But as the car pulls up at the gated entrance to Amanda's gardens, it is dismay, nevertheless, that registers as he notes the unmistakable evidence of occupation in the house beyond. The concept of luck is illogical, a human idea, designed to bring order to the bubbling chaos that constitutes every life by instituting a force outside of conscious control that can be neither summoned nor commanded, but, he is obliged to acknowledge as he presses his hand to the sensor at the gateway, it has a certain cynical appeal. Were he human, he might be tempted to conclude that bad luck has been his constant companion these past months.

Taaval opens the door as Spock approaches. If he is surprised at the arrival of his master's son, he gives no sign, simply nods perfunctorily and steps smoothly aside to allow him to enter, folding his hands behind his back as Spock crosses a threshold he had not thought to see again for many years. Jim, he is unsurprised to note, is everywhere: on the heated air; in the scent of roses that drift in through the opened door; a footstep on the stair; a high, clear laugh; a touch; a brush of skin; a grip; the smell of water; a taste of metal and salt and rust...

“Welcome, son of the house of Sarek,” says Taaval now, and the images shatter, collapse, scattering on the negligible breeze. “Your arrival is unexpected.”

There is no need to acknowledge the covert censure in the words. Taaval can disapprove all he likes; Spock is here now, and protocol places him higher on the pecking order, regardless of whose observance of the social niceties is better in evidence.

“I regret...” says Spock, but he finds that the words escape him before he can complete his sentence. He is extraordinarily tired. He cannot remember ever feeling so tired. “I regret that there was insufficient opportunity to advise of my intent. Please inform the Ambassador that I will attend him in his anteroom.”

“I will inform the Ambassador of your arrival,” says Taaval, with a patrician bend of the head. “However, he has been obliged, temporarily, to attend to a matter of business in Vulcana Regar, where he will remain for a further 1.3 days. No doubt he will wish to speak with you on his return.”

“No doubt,” says Spock. The city's cloistering heat is particularly unbearable today, and the loose fabric of his robes does little to mitigate its assault. “And the Lady Amanda?”

“The Lady Amanda is in her study. If you would care to sit, I will announce you.”

Spock nods. “I will await her in the family quarters.”

“As you wish.”

There is no element of the arrangements that is, in any sense, as Spock would wish, but there is nothing Taaval can do about that. So Spock simply nods again and sets off towards the wide living area that occupies the western side of the house, as his father's assistant makes his way upstairs to tell his mother that her only son has, unexpectedly and without warning, returned home. There is

likely to be emotion, he understands, and he hopes that his shields will hold. He is so very, very tired.

The family rooms are cool and shaded, washed in sepia tones by the anti-glare frosting that blocks the worst excesses of the afternoon sun as it spills through the windows. The lower panes are open onto the gardens as Spock enters, and the air is sweet with blossom, freshened by the cool water of his mother's fountain in the courtyard outside. At least the flowers are different. He is not sure he can process, with any great efficiency, the scent of yelas or favinit or waneti and still maintain his controls.

It occurs to Spock to wonder how long it has been since his last meal. That he cannot accurately recall does not bode well for the satisfactory maintenance of his metabolic requirements, and yet the thought of food repels him. A brief scan of his internal systems reveals a distinct caloric deficiency, but, more alarmingly, a level of dehydration that approaches a moderate sodium imbalance. He cannot, however, find evidence of any pressing thirst. This, in itself, is cause for considerable concern.

But as he's crossing to the replicator with the vague idea of ordering something cold and liquid and high in sucrose, he hears the door slide open behind him, and the unmistakable gentle footfall of the Ambassador's wife at the threshold. He would know it was her, even without the sudden spike of psi-noise across the parental bond; the sudden rush of emotion, quickly restrained; the soft intake of breath as he turns. There is something about the way Amanda moves - the lightest of touches, as though she's gliding across the ground, surrounded by the air of quiet affection that she wears like a cloak - that Spock believes he would recognize in a darkened room. He locks down his shields, fights off the dizzying sway of nausea as they fail to hold in any meaningful sense.

"Mother," he says, and he looks up.

"Spock!" she says quietly: a soft sound, a horrified sound, and he sees the color drain from her face as her hands rise, unsteadily, to cover her mouth. Spock steels himself. He is aware that his outward appearance gives voice to his inner turmoil, but her reaction is not exactly encouraging. He wonders how much of his evident disorder is the source of Taaval's tight-lipped disapproval. "Spock," says Amanda. "Are you ill?"

"I believe I must rest," he says.

"I believe you must," she agrees, and he is uncertain as to whether her continued failure to approach him, as she most certainly wishes to do, bodes well or badly for their interview. "Taaval will ask Veshek to make up your room. When did you last sleep, dear?"

“Five point seven days ago,” he answers. And then, “This figure is not adjusted for Vulcan time.”

She nods, but distractedly. “And your meditation?”

It is the obvious question. He expected her to ask. But he finds, now that the words are in front of him, that it is remarkably difficult to make himself answer.

“I have...” he says, and hesitates. “I have been experiencing some difficulty in achieving the trance.”

“For how many days?” asks his mother. Spock says nothing, and her eyes widen, abruptly, in understanding. “Weeks? Oh, Spock...”

“It has been,” he replies slowly, carefully, “an unusually trying period.”

She takes a step forward. It is only with extreme concentration that he is able to prevent himself from taking a mirror step back.

“Spock,” she says, “something is wrong. Please... please tell me. Why are you here?”

It would have been so much easier had his parents been offworld. Veshek would be here - quiet, constant and reliable - and he would require neither explanation nor discussion; Spock would have been free to reorient himself in a universe that has, without warning, decentered, and to do so in the manner of his choosing and in such time as he sees fit. The questions that must be asked would have come in time, of course, but later. Later, when he is equal to the task of answering them.

“Your enquiry is valid,” he says now, as neutrally as he can. “I trust you will understand my reasoning if I defer a full clarification of specifics until such times as I...” Again, he hesitates, and he understands the unspoken meaning it affords his words, but it cannot be avoided. He is so tired. “...as I may be in a position to elucidate further,” he finishes.

She wants to argue. He can see it in her eyes, the set of her expression, the small downturn of her lips. But she has been the wife of a Vulcan for many years. She says, “You must tell me only as much as you are able, Spock.”

He makes himself look up. He cannot speak these words into the floor of her home, and he cannot countenance the implications of his failure to meet her gaze.

He says, "I have resigned my commission. I have left Starfleet."

There is no explosion of disbelief. There is no battery of questions. There is nothing, indeed, except a sharp intake of breath and a spike of something discordant across the parental bond, quickly silenced.

"Oh, Spock," she whispers, and her eyes, as they search his face, are liquid with sadness. "What on earth has happened?"

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for disappearing these past couple of weeks! And to everyone who left such lovely comments on Chapter 34 that I'm only just managing to reply to now - thank you so much, and sorry for the long delay in telling you how much I appreciate it. A few weeks ago, we had a very joyful event in the family which led immediately to the complete and utter disappearance of all my free time (in a way that I probably should have expected but totally didn't) and it's only now that I'm getting any of it back again. So, hopefully that's normal service resumed, with apologies again for the disappearing act.

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Lori toes off her dress uniform boots by the bedroom chair and crosses to the bathroom, unwinding her hair from its complicated knot as she moves.

"Can we not do this tonight?" she says, without looking at him. "I'm too damn tired."

Alone in the center of the room, Kirk purses his lips to bite back his instinctive rejoinder. There is literally nothing he can say right now that won't pour oil on the smoldering embers of this evening's argument, though the fact that he's obliged to concede a point by virtue of the fact that she's already called time-out and anything he says now that's not *yes, dear* automatically makes him the bad guy, rankles enough that he's almost tempted to just do it anyway. But he's too damn tired himself for the inevitable round of recriminations that follow any attempt to plead that case, so he satisfies himself with stalking to the closet and kicking his boots into its depths with a satisfying *thump*.

From the bathroom comes the sound of water spattering on tile and the door slides shut. Another night, he might shuck his uniform into the cyclor and slip in after her, wrap his arms around her in the heat and steam of the shower and nuzzle an apology into the tense line of her neck as she struggles valiantly to stay mad at him, but he's 100% certain that's not a good idea this evening, not for either of them. He's pissed, she's pissed; they'll count it as a win that they manage to share a bed like grown ups, and if it gets talked out - *if* - it won't be until after work tomorrow.

A full length mirror stretches from floor to ceiling on the closet's far wall, nestled between a sparsely populated railing of Kirk's clothes and a scarcely better filled rail of Lori's. He peers at his

reflection now, swaddled in unfamiliar grays and whites, starched and constricted and dark-eyed with residual anger. The new uniforms were not Kirk's idea, but they are practical and comfortable, they allow the female members of the corps to move at speeds above a rapid stroll without risking arrest under local bodily indecency ordinances, and his support of the original proposal has earned him several brownie points with his wife, who does, he will admit, wear them particularly well. But he's just not sure what was wrong with the old color scheme, in the final analysis, and, moreover, he doesn't understand why the dress uniforms *still* have to be so damned uncomfortable.

Nor is he particularly delighted to be wearing one for the third goddamn night in a row, while he and the rest of Starfleet Senior Command argue their way through plans for a venture that has much the same prospects for success as a Candygram peace envoy to Q'onoS.

It's not Lori's fault. He's prepared to admit that, even if he's not prepared to cede the moral high ground: Ilion is personal, it's the one that went bad that he couldn't make good, and he hasn't made any secret of the fact that he thinks everything about the way Starfleet handled it stinks. She was almost certainly right to pull rank in order to shut him up after Admiral Mortimer's poorly judged remark about the need to avoid Veleth Hai-ing their nascent diplomatic contact with the ruling Skhar of Antioch V, because even Kirk knows when he's about to push things a little further than they can safely go without risk of snapping, and he could feel the warning signs before he'd spoken the first word. If Lori hadn't done it somebody else might have, with less delicacy and understanding, and the whole thing could have ended much less civilly than it did.

It doesn't change the fact that it's the one that went bad that he couldn't make good, and his colleagues in the Admiralty are now using it as a transitive verb. It doesn't change the fact that he was the most junior officer in the room and already at a disadvantage, and his wife just handed valuable maneuvering points to Komack, Balkhi and Morgenstern that Kirk will now have to spend months recouping. And it doesn't change the fact that she did this less than seven days after their last row about Kirk doing exactly the same thing to her.

There's an abrupt silence from the bathroom as the shower shuts off, and he can hear the sounds of exaggerated movement on the other side of the door, as of a woman whose activity is still governed by a fiery wash of irritation. Kirk decides that the best thing he can do for both of them right now is take his mood elsewhere, so he strips off his dress jacket with its starched, high-necked collar and its ridiculous complement of medals and stows it on a hanger, seeks out his discarded boots and sets them back on the rack where they belong, and slips out of the bedroom and into the gloomy corridor beyond before the bathroom door opens.

The study is dark, lit only by the soft glow of two idling terminal screens on either side of the room. It made sense for him to move into Lori's place when they married; she was hardly likely to give up her home of six years for a billet in the Residences, and it wasn't as though they gave themselves much time to go house-hunting after the decision was made. It's still supposed to be a temporary measure, but they're eleven months into a twelve-month marital contract now and he guesses that they'll wait to see if they renew next month before they start looking for anywhere

permanent to live. So it is that it doesn't feel as though there's a square inch of the galaxy, on- or offworld, that he can call his own, and the study is not much of a refuge for a man nursing a powerful resentment against a sense of having been managed, handled, stripped of his agency.

He grabs a bottle from the shelf behind his desk and lowers himself into his chair, with a soft command to the computer that fires it to life in a blast of white light. As he pours, he calls up his messages, but immediately thinks better of it and powers down before the screen has a chance to load. He's read the messages he wants to read; he doesn't need to deal with the content of the three dozen fresh missives that will have arrived during his hours at HQ until tomorrow morning, and he *definitely* doesn't need to go searching self-consciously for correspondence that absolutely, categorically will not be there. It's been eighteen goddamn months. He cannot keep doing this to himself.

Kirk takes a gulp of whisky, leaning back in his chair and cradling the glass against his chest. He doesn't know how long it's going to take for his wife to fall asleep - she's good at angry insomnia; they both are - but he's damn sure he's not going back into the bedroom while she's still awake, for the sake of everyone's peace of mind. There are books stacked high on the shelves around him, floor-to-ceiling walls of the written word, and he could get up, lift one at random and open it wherever it happens to fall, let it drift his mind back from the red shores of anger until his eyelids droop and his spine sags and he wakes up, three hours later, with an almighty crick in his neck and the dregs of a glass of bourbon staining the front of his undershirt. But he's not ready just yet to let go of the fires of righteous indignation - more than that, he's not ready to cast this evening's argument into their shared history, move on and forget about it, not yet. This didn't use to be them. They didn't use to have to tiptoe around each other, like they were walking on broken glass and white-hot metal, each waiting for the spike of irritation that would set the other off.

Kirk tries to remember the last time they were easy with each other, content in each other's company. It's not a total surprise when he comes up short.

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She leaves it more than two weeks after his move to Operations before she comes to him - sixteen days in which he's barely left his office for eight hours at a time, and this has numbed his brain back into that focused exhaustion that lets him channel huge quantities of information without stopping to think about anything else. It's a good thing he has a Yeoman who knows what she's doing, he reflects from time to time, or else he'd never eat, never step away from his terminal or his communicator, never rest until his brain gave up and shut down in silent protest. But this is a good thing. He's thinking of putting in a request for a change of billet so that he never has to go back to that goddamn apartment again, but, in the meantime, it will suffice to have his attention occupied exclusively by nothing but endless, demanding, interminable work.

Her arrival problematizes this plan, of course. It works best without external input.

She buzzes for entry late one Wednesday evening as the sun is sinking behind the Headlands in fiery reds and coppers, and he's too distracted by six years of biannual weapons discharge reports to consider an appropriate exit strategy until she's already in the doorway, medals glinting on the breast of her dress uniform, right eyebrow raised.

“Admiral Ciana,” says Kirk. It’s no more than a fraction of a second before his brain kicks back in and gets him to his feet, but he knows it’s long enough to register. “I wasn’t expecting you, ma’am.”

But there’s no sign of misplaced protocol on her face. “Jesus, Jim,” she says, as her eyes take in the discarded coffee cup, cooling on the desk beside his terminal, a half-eaten grilled cheese sandwich that he forgot about some time after lunch, the shades that he hasn’t remembered to drop. “When was the last time you slept?”

He lets that one pass with a twitch of his eyebrows, turns his eyes downwards to buy him the moment he needs to settle the rising tide of irritation. “Is there something I can do for you, ma’am?”

She sucks in a breath, and, when he looks up, her expression is blank. “You could say that,” she says. “I was over this way for a meeting with OpTacs, thought I’d stop by, straighten things out between us. I can’t do my job without Fleet Ops on my side, Jim. So - go ahead. Say what you need to say to me and let’s put this thing to bed.”

He huffs a tight little laugh. “I don’t think that’s appropriate, ma’am.”

“I’m not your CO anymore, Admiral Kirk,” she says, and if there’s a faint emphasis on the Admiral, he refuses to acknowledge it.

“No,” he says, “but you’re still my superior officer, ma’am. And I resent the implication that I’d allow my personal feelings to cloud my professional judgment.”

“I don’t believe that’s what I said,” she counters icily. “But I don’t like being held responsible for something I didn’t do. You know, you’re the first person below the rank of full admiral ever to sit in this seat, Kirk; what, you think I get to tell Nogura how to run his fleet? He wanted you, Admiral, and when he wants something, he makes damn sure nothing gets in his way.”

"You let me walk into that ceremony..."

"Oh, please!" She tosses her head, lips pulled tight into a smile that's completely stripped of humor. "You're pissed because you thought I knew? I lost my goddamn deputy, I lost three month's work in the space of ten seconds, and I had to plaster this big stupid goddamn smile across my face and clap and cheer with everyone else like it was the best thing that could have happened to Xeno, and you think I knew? You're not the only person who got screwed in this deal, you know."

"I guess," he says acidly, "there are gradations of 'screwed'."

She shakes her head with a bitter twist of her lips. "Oh, poor little golden boy," she says. "You got boosted from a standing start into the top thirty most influential people in this goddamn organization in one single move, so forgive me if I'm not queuing up to join in your pity party, Jim."

Kirk's hands close into fists, and the rush of anger alarms him. He tucks them safely behind his back, though he knows she's seen the tension, the whitening of his knuckles, the tremble in his wrists. He says, "For a woman whose job requires her to look between the lines, you seem to miss a hell of a lot, ma'am."

They're ugly words, designed to wound, and he sees them flare brightly behind her eyes: damage done. But he knows her better than to think she'll go down under the weight of casual cruelties. It takes her less than three seconds to come back fighting, and the fact that her answer, when it comes, is level, clear, stripped of emotion, only serves to fuel his anger.

"You know what?" she says, and her smile is like acid. "I can see how it looks like I deserve that. Truth is, I never thought he'd pull this. I thought I knew where he wanted you, and, boy, did I ever call that one wrong. But I'm not going to apologise for a bad call, no matter how much you want to make all of this my fault. Because this isn't about me, and I know you know that. And I guess I know another couple things about you too right now, which is why I'm going to let that last comment slide, and we're both going to blow right through it like it never happened. But if you ever question my professional competence like that again, Admiral Kirk, you better make damn sure you have five PADDs worth of evidence to back you up or I'll see that you live to regret it. Are we clear?"

He purses his lips. "Crystal," he says, and allows just enough time to pass before he adds, "ma'am."

"Good," she says. An eyebrow arches, but the eyes beneath it are as dark as he's ever seen them. "Maybe you did get screwed, Jim, but it wasn't by me. Maybe it's about time you start asking yourself who you're really angry with."

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This is his wife's gift, and it's not one that always serves her well: the ability to cut right through the bullshit and the defensive bluster to whatever's bleeding out beneath. It's her job, but it's also who she is, and she does it sometimes without even realizing, and sometimes he just wants to slam the door behind him and get on the first transport to wherever, disappear for an hour, a day, a week, to somewhere he can walk in a crowd and just be unseen, unknown. She walked out of his office that May evening surrounded by ice and bristles, and he sat in front of his terminal and fumed, glaring at the screen through a haze of cold fury that saw him through to the small hours. He woke in his chair at 0430 as dawn was just beginning to shift the light outside his uncurtained windows from black to navy blue, head pounding and neck aching, and he told himself that he'd managed her, managed himself, and that it was over at least. Whatever had been between them, he thought, it was gone now, and he was glad of that, because he remembered her face, that distant morning in her bedroom, and he remembered her words - *Like nothing's ever been so beautiful* - and they were in her eyes as she stood by his office door. Whatever she thought she knew, he thought, whatever she thought she saw in him, it was over now.

But what are you supposed to do? Time moves forward like floodwater and it sweeps away everything behind it. A week becomes two, becomes a month, and the hollowness closes over, little by little, as the days stitch together the jagged edges of what's left behind. He remembers sitting, boneless, on the floor of his apartment a week after Cochrane Day, head pressed against the window as the sun climbed down the sky and the stars spiked the growing shadows, letting the hours wash over him for lack of any other way to fill them, and he remembers feeling as though inertia had finally claimed him and that he would spend the rest of his life being spun and buffeted by invisible tides that he no longer had the will to fight. But time moves forward, and there's work to do, and every day is a step further away from that sucking blackness; every day is a step back towards the light, and, little by little, things begin to settle. The next time he saw Lori, in a meeting room on Luna, surrounded by representatives of fifteen different worlds, she caught his eye and nodded, and it took him a moment - long enough that he was angry at himself, because he's never been an ill-mannered man - but he nodded back. The time after that, she smiled.

Little by little. It took a long time to mend what had broken so easily, and the first time they tried out the limits of each other's company over coffee in the officers' mess, they were all boundary walls and barb wire and long, uncomfortable silences. But there were ambassadors to host and delegations to impress and receptions to attend, and proximity chipped away at the barricades, little by little, until the evening she sidled up to him as a party was breaking up and nodded at the plate in his hand and said, *Jim Kirk, get your coat, because it turns out I can't rest easy this week until I see you eat something that's not made out of plastic and saturated fat. Cafe Aziz. I'm buying.*

And he protested, of course, that he had work to do, and she shrugged it off with a casual comment

about how he wasn't the only one, and at least *his* office was fully staffed. But she said it with a grin, the old grin that they used to share when things were less complicated, that told him that something had shifted, something important, and that they were back on the road to being okay.

I don't want to be your mom or your confessor or your friend, Jim, she told him. *I just want to make sure the Chief of Fleet Ops doesn't quit or die before he signs off on Xeno's fleet deployments for the next six months.* And maybe there was a comeback to that and maybe there wasn't, and maybe it was just that it turned out that the quality of Starfleet brandy got better when a person achieved flag rank, good enough that it took the sting out of something that, not so long ago, would have opened up a whole world of glacial acrimony.

Maybe it was just that he was so damn tired of eating alone.

It doesn't take a woman of Lori's gifts to see that she's been a lifeboat, a refuge from a storm that was taking its time blowing itself out. He wonders why she allowed him to come over that first night, mid-September: too late for a social call; she had to have known what was on his mind. He made the decision and she made the decision and he wonders if either of them had the first clue what it was they were deciding to do, or if it was just a kind of default reaction to a situation that had been sliding down a very particular path since the day they met. They both needed an anchor, he thinks; a safe harbor, a friend. Is that grounds for a marriage? He doesn't even know anymore.

Enough. He's tired, and the bourbon is coating the edges of his irritation, damping down the fire and flame of indignation. Lori may be asleep and she may not, but Kirk doesn't feel like spending another night in his office chair, and, while sharing a bed with his wife may not solve anything, distance certainly won't. He drains his glass and sets it on the desk, dials down the lights, gets slowly to his feet on tired, thick-muscled legs, stretching his arms over his head as he stands, working out the knots in his spine. Enough. It's time for sleep.

But he calls up his messages before he leaves the room, just in case.

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Massive thanks to penguin_attie for being amazing and beta-ing this chapter in double quick time after my disappearing act!

Routine is useful. The chemical processes of the brain are routine, and, where they are not, there is always something to be learned. Emotions are simply a series of patterns that are not yet obvious, but they all devolve, eventually, into numeric predictability. Fight or flight. Herd mentality. Hormonal responses that foster an imaginary link between individuals based on risk/reward and a collective survival instinct. It's not quite the same thing as waking each day in the long hours before sunrise with an ache like grinding metal in the pit of one's stomach and a shadow hovering at one's shoulder with a voice that will not be silenced, but the principle is the same. Routine. It's the order beneath turmoil. It serves to iron out the glitches. It's an acolyte's refuge.

He managed four hours and twenty-seven minutes of sleep last night, burrowed beneath the thin fabric of his sheet, before a stray thought jolted him out of unconsciousness and ejected him into the chill of pre-dawn on the floor of his drafty cell. The sanctuary was silent, hushed and motionless as the last strands of night teased out the black fabric of a moonless sky, but he knows from experience that there is nothing to be gained from attempting to restart his sleep cycle once his body has made the decision for him, and he has become accustomed to beginning his day in darkness and meditation while his colleagues lie, prostrate and dreamless, on reed mats around him. He has come to prefer this, in any case. The trance is less capricious than sleep, and it is easier to control.

The weeks following *srashiv* are for reorienting the self, readying the mind for the next stage of its journey, and they are a time for solitude, reflection, and preparation. *Kolinahr* is achieved in isolation: days or weeks of nothing but sand and water and whatever can be scavenged from the scattered desert brush, and an acolyte on the second step of his Path requires a quiet place to learn how to keep the body alive while the mind adjusts. And so, as the sun begins its ascent, rippling veins of amber and gold through the shadows that hug the horizon, Spock sets out into the southern wastes of Vulcan's Forge along a path that is marked only by the fall of his own feet. The sand feels cool beneath the thin sole of his boot, but not yet familiar, though he understands that this will come in time.

The place he has chosen is a shelf on the spine of an ancient, rocky spur that spikes a jagged column out of the plain. Already it feels, illogically, as though it is *his*, linked to him by the same instinctive urges that he spends his days in a race to deconstruct, but he finds himself unwilling to challenge the sense of homecoming that settles in his chest as the canyon floor gives out onto flatlands and the familiar shadow slices across the sand. Sheltered on two sides by a cloak of black igneous rock, laid open to the glare and fury of the desert sun as it arches above the plateau, silent enough as the hours linger that he can hear the passage of blood in his veins, it is sufficient for the

needs of an acolyte recently granted *srashiv*. And routine is important. It has been no more than three weeks, but Spock has become accustomed to the lonely desert path, the feel of the rock under his feet as he scrambles up the slope, the contours of the plateau beneath his crossed legs as he passes his days in meditation, burrowing deep within himself for the memories that he seeks to dissolve.

You must labor hard to find the root of your partiality, T'Kel told him once, and he has; he does. It would be simpler if he could isolate the moment itself, the transition between *then* and *now*, but it appears to have taken the form of a gradual process over time rather than a discrete event, and there is, unfortunately, no obvious mode of attack. So, logically, it follows that he must work backwards along the timeline of their connection, like spooling a skein of wool, feeling his way along a path of excessive emotionality and laying it to rest.

This is the theory. The practice is... more complicated.

He begins, as always, with a light trance, easing through the murmurs of protest from that part of his mind that refuses to let go, settling him, centering him, and he holds it for as long as necessary, until the rush of voices subsides. Jim is here, as he always is: a golden smile turned sideways across the bridge, a warm hand on Spock's shoulders, a taste of salt and rust in his mouth, a hollow ache that spreads slowly from the depths of his belly to close a fist around his chest. *Yes*, he says quietly. *You're better at this than I am*. But he is one voice in an unquiet multitude, and his smile is softer now, fainter; his grip on Spock's skin less certain than it was. Once, Spock would have asked his forgiveness as he brushes him aside; now, he simply turns his back and feels a little of the light and warmth subside.

You stubborn son-of-a-bitch, says his friend as the shadows creep in. *I won't let you do this*.

Sometimes, he wonders what the Admiral would say if he knew that he was not the only person to question the legitimacy of Spock's decision. It's a long time since Spock was uncertain of his choice -- truly uncertain, and not simply afflicted by doubt -- but he remembers those early days on Vulcan; he remembers the look in his father's eyes and his mother's whispered words. He remembers the effort it took to continuously recall his reasoning; he remembers the lassitude and the weariness.

He remembers the darkness.

Sarek returns from Vulcana Regar the morning after Spock's arrival, travel-creased and choleric, and, undoubtedly, apprised in full of the events of the previous day. He has kept himself to his quarters, cross-legged on his meditation mat in search of a peace that will not come, and Amanda has not disturbed him, although he suspects that she wants to. Sarek, Spock understands, will display no such discretion. His father is unable, at a very fundamental level, to conceive of any situation in which he does not instinctively know better than his son, and this has been the source of much ill will between them in the past. It was, in large part, the precipitating factor behind the argument that caused Spock to leave his parents' house, and, though matters have slowly improved these past years, it has remained a point of bitter contention between them. Strange, then, that Spock should find himself in a position in which he is not only prepared to make allowances for his father's self-assured disdain, but, he considers, it may actively prove useful. The Elders will, after all, almost certainly take some convincing before they open their doors.

His window is open onto the gardens to admit the late morning breeze, and so he hears fragments of his parents' hushed conversation drifting upwards from the family quarters below. Amanda speaks softly -- quiet, urgent tones that muffle her words but not the anxiety that clouds them -- but Sarek, though he says little, does not trouble to lower his voice.

"But why should he leave Starfleet?" Spock hears his father ask, and he sounds, in truth, less disturbed than confused. And then, in response to an answer that Spock cannot hear: "Perhaps. But he will answer me."

Spock has not slept for more than ninety minutes together in almost a week, and it has been more than four since he was able to achieve anything more substantive than the most superficial of trances. He was scarcely prepared to trade pleasantries with Veshek when he arrived earlier this morning with the pitcher of iced tea that now sits in a pool of tepid water on a shelf by the window; he is certainly not equal to an interview with his father. But he stands, nevertheless, at the sound of a sharp rap at his door, unfolding himself on weary legs and clasping his hands in front his chest, straightening his spine and raising his chin to call "Enter." There is not much he can do to obviate it, in any case, and he would prefer to meet Sarek with at least a semblance of control.

The door slides open on the still figure of his father, stone-faced and forbidding in his ambassadorial robes. Spock raises his hand in the ta'al and Sarek, after a moment's hesitation, mirrors the gesture.

"My son," he says. "We were not expecting to greet you again so soon."

Spock nods. "I thank you for your hospitality, Ambassador," he says. He inclines his head towards the jug by the window. "Will you share a refreshment with me?"

The faintest of glances to his left, and Sarek crooks an eyebrow. "Thank you, no," he says. Spock

cannot blame him; the tea has been sitting for almost three hours, and it looks older even than that. "I wish to discuss with you the circumstances of your arrival on Vulcan."

Belatedly, Spock realizes that his hand is still extended in the sign of welcome. His joints protest as he lowers it, sufficiently aggrieved that he understands that he has held the gesture for entirely too long. He is extraordinarily tired.

"No doubt," he says, "my mother has informed you of the particulars."

"I am given to understand that no particulars were forthcoming."

"I asked her indulgence," says Spock mildly, "and she was generous enough to grant it. I have assured her that I will account for my actions at such time as I am able." It's a convenient statement, designed to obfuscate the definition of able, and he entertains no illusions that his father will fail to notice. "I have, however, informed her of my resignation from Starfleet. Perhaps this is the circumstance to which you were referring."

An unblinking stare from the Ambassador carries his words into a thick silence, but Spock has had many years' practice in holding his ground. He knows better than to fill any absence of sound that his father may create in their conversations.

"Your decision is your own," says Sarek at length. "Though I confess that I cannot comprehend your logic."

"My logic," says Spock, "is also my own."

Sarek acknowledges the truth of this with a nod. "Your mother believes you are unwell," he says.

"She has said as much."

"I share her belief."

It is not entirely unexpected -- sleep has been no less elusive since he arrived at his parents' house, and, though he has had a chance to recover somewhat from the exertions of the journey to Vulcan,

nothing else has changed. If the trials of the past weeks were written into the face that Amanda saw when she greeted him, they have not receded during the long night that followed. It's only that Spock did not expect his father to acknowledge this. And he has no framework, now, from which to proceed.

In the absence of any viable alternative, therefore, he allows an eyebrow to express his hesitation, and he says, carefully, slowly, "I thank you for your concern."

"Concern is irrelevant," says Sarek. "You have neither meditated nor slept. Your health is failing. This is simple fact."

Articulated as such, there is little room for denial, but Spock finds himself, illogically, inclined to try just the same. That he fails to act on this urge, he understands, is less a triumph of logic over filial belligerence than an in-built aversion to allowing his father to score a point. So, instead, he meets the Ambassador's gaze and says, "Indeed. My return to Vulcan is not unrelated."

Sarek nods. "You seek a mind-healer."

"I did not say so," says Spock, and regrets immediately the note of intemperance that has crept into his words. He sees his father absorb it with a raised eyebrow and an air of imperious detachment, and his frustration rises: Sarek looks, for all the world, as though he was expecting as much from his son.

"Your katra has become imbalanced," he says. "There is no dishonor in this. You have passed many years in the company of Humans, and your shields have never been strong."

"My shields," says Spock, "have been sufficient."

"And yet you are here," says his father mildly. "And you have neither meditated nor slept." He takes a step forward, unfolding one hand from the wide sleeve of his robe. "Will you give me your mind?"

The recoil is so violent that it's an effort not to shrink back against the window, and Spock knows it has printed itself across his face. But the thought of his father sinking into his consciousness, sifting through his thoughts and finding nothing but raw emotion, is worse than appalling: it is unconscionable. Jim is twisted through the fibers of Spock's self like the weft of a fine silk, and there is no corner of his conscious mind that does not scream his name, no turn of his head, no

scent on the breeze, no touch or sound or taste that does not conjure him. Spock's thoughts are barely his own when he is alone inside his head; he cannot permit his father access to such disorder.

"I will not," he says, but he does not meet Sarek's eye. There is a lengthy pause.

"That is your right," says his father. A beat, in which Spock does not lift his gaze from the floor. "Perhaps you will reconsider in time. We will speak again this evening."

He turns and steps towards the door, which opens at his approach, but, on the threshold, he hesitates. Spock says nothing, and his father does not turn, and, after a moment, he steps out of the room. The door slides shut behind him.

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He passes the morning on his meditation mat, staring out into the burnt-ochre sky through eyes that refuse to close in a head that is too full of ghosts, while his spine stiffens and his hips turn to stone, and still the trance will not come. The sun reaches its apex above the L-langon Mountains and begins its descent, and Veshek arrives with a fresh jug and a plate of vash g'ralth that Spock considers briefly while his stomach roils, and he can no longer tell if the pains are from hunger or nausea. In the end, he makes himself drink two glasses while the tea is fresh and picks at pieces of mashya and fori, but it's an effort to force them down his throat, and he feels no better for his troubles. So, as the shadows lengthen across the desert floor and the air begins its gradual decline into nighttime chill, he surrenders to exhaustion and lowers himself onto his bed, with the idea of closing his eyes for a moment or two, nothing more -- only so much as his weary mind requires to fortify itself for the trance.

He wakes to the sound of muffled voices, in a room that has turned to shadow. His first instinct is relief, because he cannot remember the last time he descended so completely into unconsciousness, and it has sanded the edges off the dull ache that presses against the inside of his skull. But this lasts only as long as it takes him to identify the source of the whispering: close to the open door, bathed in darkness, stand two figures shaded slate-black by the gloom, one tall and robust, the other small and slim. The sound is coming from the latter, a rapid-fire murmur that is unmistakably Amanda's, which makes the louring obsidian bulk beside her his father. Spock considers closing his eyes again and just waiting for them to go away, but, on reflection, he is forced to question the prospect of such a plan's success.

So he twists his hips and finds them obstreperous after hours without motion, protesting like the creaking of a hull under pressure as they roll him onto his side. His limbs feel like lead; his head

as though it's full of water, and he's not certain, now that he comes to consider it, that he can persuade his body to achieve the vertical. But the motion catches his mother's attention and the whispering pulls to an abrupt halt as she turns over one shoulder, shadows melting across her face as she takes a step forward.

"My son," says Sarek from the darkness by the door, "I have arranged for a Healer to attend you."

"That is unnecessary," says Spock, but he finds that the words are thin, scoured by a dry tongue and cracked lips.

"It is not," says Amanda now, and her voice has taken on that steely, iron-bound aspect that he hears sometimes when she crosses words with that rare diplomat who doesn't know her well enough to understand why this is a bad idea. She steps forward, two rapid strides, and, in a rare breach of protocol, presses a hand to Spock's forehead. Her skin is warm against his: soft and pliant and far too Human. He resists the urge to pull away. "There is no fever," she tells his father over her shoulder. "You were right. It's not that."

Sarek acknowledges her words with a curt nod. "You have slept," he says to Spock. "Have you eaten?"

"I have," says Spock.

"Sufficiently?"

There is no truthful response to this question that will satisfy anyone, so Spock says nothing. Sarek takes his answer from the silence.

"T'Far will attend you at first light," he says briskly. "Perhaps now you will allow me to enter your thoughts?"

"My thoughts," says Spock, "are my own."

"Indeed," says his father. "And yet they remain undisciplined, and you remain debilitated by them. I do not require a full meld -- a moderate connection will suffice..."

"No!" It's more forceful than he intended, and it's too harsh for his parched throat; Spock tastes blood at the back of his mouth, and swallows against the sharp pain of broken skin. He tries again, though he's certain it will take more than soft words to undo the information imparted in that one unguarded syllable: "I thank you for your concern, Father, but I do not require assistance at this time."

He doesn't need to look up to see the brief glance that his parents exchange; it's written into the air around them. Even Spock knows that he requires assistance at this time; denying as much is hardly conducive to persuading them to leave.

"My wife," says Sarek quietly. "My son and I will talk alone."

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His father did not ask what had precipitated his resignation from Starfleet, and Spock did not volunteer the information, which is how he knows that, though there was no way for Sarek to be certain, he had deduced enough to make an educated guess. What he made of this hypothesis, Spock cannot tell; but he finds himself, lately, thinking often of their conversation that first night, stilted and uncomfortable and hamstrung by convention, and what he remembers most clearly is this: however stiffly the exchange might have progressed, however formal their speech and manners, he cannot recall any note of reproach in his father's voice. He remembers sitting bonelessly against a pillow, his head too heavy for his neck, while his father stood two paces from the bed and listened, without any discernible reaction, to Spock's intentions, and, when he'd finished speaking, Sarek simply nodded and said, "*Kolinahr* is an honorable pursuit. But let us speak first with Healer T'Far."

And when Spock protested that his decision was made, and that the Healer's counsel would prevail only inasmuch as it allowed him to prepare himself to face the Masters, his father dipped his head, shadowed by the low light of a single lamp, and spoke of releasing oneself from the bonds of emotion, of the emancipation to be found in pure logic, of the many reasons to follow the path to Truth and the circumstances in which it might be prudent to consider another way, and of whether or not, in the final analysis, freedom could truly be freedom if it were reliant on the strength of a wall.

Yes. Spock suspects that they understood each other better, that night, than they ever had before.

His mother mentioned his former life only once in the weeks that followed, while Spock rested and spoke with Healers and prepared for his journey to Gol: one hot, airless afternoon, when he had quit the stifling heat of his quarters for the shade of a leafy *ic'tan* in Amanda's garden. She found him on his meditation mat, though he had abandoned his efforts in favor of scrolling through a volume of post-Surakian philosophy, and he knew from her bearing and way that she busied herself

with the folds of her dress before speaking that she had something to say that she would prefer to keep to herself.

I've had word from your former Captain, she said at last, and her eyes wouldn't meet Spock's.

He remembers the sharp spike of distress that crumbled the afternoon calm, and he knew that she saw it on his face, even as she read it through their bond. But he forced it down, buried it beneath precarious shields, and made sure that it was scrubbed from his voice before he answered.

He said, simply, *This is an unfortunate breach of protocol.*

Yes, she said. *I haven't told your father.*

No, he agreed. *I believe this is wise.* A beat, and then he made himself ask, *What was the nature of his enquiry?*

He asked... she said, and stopped. *He asked if he could see you.*

Ah. The PADD in his hands was trembling slightly. Spock set it on the mat beside him. He knew she would not have responded to such a request without asking for his guidance, but he suspected that he knew very well what she wanted him to say, and he was not certain he could bring himself to say it.

This is your home, Mother, he said at last. *The invitation is not mine to extend.*

Spock... she said softly -- an appeal, a petition -- and he remembered her words from the night before, caught on a stray breeze and delivered to his ears as he lay on his bed and waited for sleep to claim him: *He is my son, Sarek. If he goes to that place, who knows what manner of man will come back?*

Spock had wondered as much himself, but more pressing was the question of who would be left if he remained as he was.

I believe, he said, *that I must return to my meditations. Starfleet's concern is acknowledged, but I*

do not believe that I will remain in ShiKahr long enough to receive a visitor.

It was the right decision. He knows it was, though her face, as she nodded and turned away from him to follow the blossom-lined path back towards her house, told a different story. But the choice was made, the die was cast; what profit was there in second-guessing himself now that it was done? It could only serve to throw him back into the same disorder that haunted him for those dark days that followed the ceremony, the days when his resolve failed him and all he could count was how much he stood to lose by leaving. He knows his decision was correct; he knows it was his only possible recourse once his controls were so comprehensively shattered. He cannot remember a time when he was not in love with James Kirk, but it means nothing: they are biologically incompatible, and it would be unethical to risk his health and wellbeing over an infatuation that ought to be eminently controllable. Since it is not, since Spock's emotions remain ungovernable, there is only one logical solution: emotion itself must be excised. Perhaps one day he will see his commander again, but he thinks that many years will pass between that day and this. He will be another manner of man by then.

Spock folds his legs beneath him on the sun-warmed rock as the trance settles, deepens, extends into his center of self. Jim is here, as he always is, but he is one voice in an unquiet multitude, and his smile is softer now, fainter. *Yes, he says, you're better at this than I am.*

And Spock thinks, *Ah, Jim. If only you knew.*

Chapter 37

A/N: I'd rather warn than risk ruining someone's day, but I know some people hate them, so here's my compromise: hover over this WARNING SIGN if you want to know, read on if you don't.

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She asks him to move out three weeks before Christmas, which is two weeks later than Kirk expected, but, he guesses, when it comes to calling time on their marriage, Lori is no better at letting go than he is. It's not that it's a surprise — far from it, in fact — it's just that he thought he knew how he'd feel when it finally happened. And it turns out he was completely wrong.

He comes home to find her in a chair by the window, an overnight case on the floor by her feet. A bottle of Laphroaig sits on the table in front of her and she's cradling a half-empty glass against her chest, curled in on herself and staring out over the lamplit city below. It has been a long, unsettled day: crisp and clear, but buffeted by a strong west wind that has swept in from the sea and shaken the bare branches of the trees that scatter the Presidio, and, Kirk thinks, as he pulls to a halt in the doorway in this last, fragile moment before everything changes, there's something fitting about that. His marriage is bookended by storms.

He watches her from the threshold for a long moment, leaning against the doorframe as he works out how to start a conversation that he doesn't want to have. "Are you going somewhere?" he asks at last.

Lori doesn't startle at the sound of his voice, simply turns her head towards him. If her husband's arrival takes her unawares, there's no sign of it in her manner; no sign, in fact, that it's any kind of a surprise to her to find that she's not alone. Always she's ready for whatever comes next; always she's one move ahead. In another world, Kirk thinks, he could have fallen in love with this woman.

"Jim," she says. "You're... are you late? I'm sorry; I've lost track of time."

He is, of course, late: the frostier things have gotten at home, the more effort he has put into avoiding it, and, though he hardly sees enough of her to know for certain, he's fairly sure that his wife has adopted a similar strategy. There came a point, not so long ago, when he realised that it took more work for them *not* to argue with each other than it did to just go ahead and let it happen, and that was the first night he spent on the couch at his office. Kirk doesn't want to be that guy, but, so far, the only way he's found to stop it happening is to make sure he's somewhere else.

“I had a conference call with Margolis and Biedermeier,” he says, and he doesn’t know why he’s lying. It would be the work of thirty seconds for his wife to discover that the meeting ended three hours ago, though he knows she won’t check. “Where are you going, Lori?”

“Ah, Jim,” she says, and closes her eyes. “Let’s not... let’s just make this easy, all right?”

“Easy?” His coat is damp from the fine mist of rain that soaked into it as he moved from the aircar to the door of their apartment block, and he shrugs it from his shoulders as he crosses into the room, low-lit from a lamp in a distant corner. She doesn’t turn to follow him as he moves; he doesn’t expect her to. “How would you like to make it easier than it already is? We stopped being married November 24th, dear, and neither one of us has made any move to do anything about that. I’d call that pretty damned *easy*.”

“Fine.” She drains her glass, sets it on the table. “I was going to try and do this like a reasonable adult, Jim, but I guess your way’s good too. I’m booked into the Fairmont until Sunday. I’d like you to be gone when I get back.”

Kirk grabs a glass from the cabinet and stalks to the table, helping himself to a generous measure of whisky from her bottle. “Just like that?” he says, and he can’t strip the bitterness from his voice.

But they’ve gotten good at this, these past months: segueing effortlessly from civility to antagonism in the time it takes to draw breath. Kirk can do it without thinking now; it’s like a kind of armor: strike first and catch the other off their guard, maybe win a couple of those oratorical points that always seem like they matter in the heat of the moment. He sees it flash across her face — the same spark of animosity that’s massing a storm-surge of ugly words in his chest — and, without missing a beat, Lori answers in kind.

“Oh, please,” she spits. “Like you ever actually moved in. Show me one thing in this room, in this goddamned apartment, that tells me you live here, Jim. This isn’t your home. This is just some place you stayed while you worked out how to tell the landlady you were already gone.”

Kirk snorts a humorless laugh as he paces to the side of the room, out of the circle of acrimony and into neutral territory. There’s a pattern to follow, like the steps of a dance, and they’ve both learned their moves well enough by now that it’s easier just to let the familiar take over, to see them through one more struggle, one last time.

“‘Landlady’,” he says. “I like that. That’s exactly what this is, Lori — *your* home. Not mine.”

A single, fluid movement carries his wife to her feet, and she spins to face him, her face a dark cloud of hostility.

“Don’t pretend — don’t you *dare* pretend,” she snaps, “that *that’s* what this is about. Jesus Christ, Jim, can we have one, just *one*, single, honest conversation in this marriage? It’s over now; it’s done — we don’t have to keep on pretending that we both don’t know what’s going on here. So don’t you *dare* try and play this like it’s because I hoarded all the closet space or you didn’t like the color of the bathroom tiles. I deserve more than that. We both do.”

Kirk purses his lips, tilts his glass towards him. A fine tremor in his hand has set up a trembling in the surface of the liquid, almost imperceptible in the half-light, and he can’t tell if it’s caused by anger or by the implication buried in her words. Quietly, he says, “I’ll speak to Estates tomorrow morning about a temporary billet. I’ll be out of here by Friday evening.”

Lori shakes her head, and a hand rises to pinch the bridge of her nose. “You can’t even give me that, huh?” she says. “After all this time — after everything, Jim? You can’t even tell me it wasn’t me? That this” — a vague flick of her hand, designed to encompass the entirety of their life together — “this thing of ours never even had a chance?”

An eyebrow arches, and Kirk can feel a wave of something vicious, something ungovernable trying to force its way out past barriers that are starting to show the strain.

“You seem very certain that our marriage was never likely to work,” he says. “I wonder why you agreed to it in the first place.”

Lori laughs: a dry, cynical gesture laced with something that might be resentment, might be regret. “Yeah,” she says sourly. “You and me both, Jim.”

She reaches for the bottle on the table, unstoppers it one-handed and pours a generous measure that brushes up against the edges of the glass. For the first time, it occurs to Kirk to wonder just how long she’s been sitting here, bag packed, waiting for her husband to make an appearance so that she can have this one last battle with him that finishes something neither one of them had the strength to fight for. “Goddamn it,” she says now, and it’s almost a whisper. “How stupid do you have to be to marry a man who’s in love with somebody else?”

The angry ache twists viciously, spiking poison beneath Kirk’s ribs, and, to cover it, he raises his glass to his lips, swallowing the contents in two gulps that scald his throat and bring tears to his eyes. He pivots on one heel, but there’s nowhere to go — he’s already at the edge of the room — so, instead, he spins back to face her, though he knows his face tells a story he’d rather she didn’t

read.

“There is *nothing*...” he starts to say, and his tone is like ice, but she cuts him off with a shake of the head.

“Don’t,” she says. “Just... don’t. I’m sick of hearing you deny it, Jim. I know what I saw. I know *you*.”

“Is that so?” He can feel the anger massing at the back of his throat, a dangerous momentum clamoring to be set free. He can hear it in his voice. “You know me well enough to tell me what I feel, but you were quite content to bury your misgivings twelve months ago when it suited you. So tell me, Lori — which one of us is denying anything? Or perhaps it was politically convenient to...”

“Don’t you dare!” she yells. Whisky splashes up and over the edges of her over-filled glass, darkening the carpet beneath her hand in a Rorschach scatter. “Political? *Political*? Jesus, Jim — just when I think you can’t sink any lower...”

“You’ve always been Nogura’s woman, Lori,” says Kirk coldly. “Starfleet first and Ciana second, isn’t that it? I believe it’s served you very well, though maybe not so much those around you...”

“Oh, don’t give me the ‘wounded innocent’ routine, Jim!” she shouts, and her voice is trembling on the edge of control. “Like you’ve never played the game? Like your motives are always so goddamn pure! You don’t think I read your files? You don’t think I knew *exactly* who I was getting when the *Enterprise* hit Spacedock? I could name a half dozen women right now, women you sweet-talked, women you charmed, women you had eating out of your hand because they were *useful* to you. You know how many days of the week I’d put myself right at the top of that list?”

“Useful?” says Kirk. “Please tell me, Lori, how *useful* I found it on Cochrane Day last year when I got a promotion I didn’t want that cost me my ship!”

“Damn it, Jim!” She slams her glass on the table, whisky pooling on the lacquered wooden surface. “Your *ship*? You want to make this about your *ship*? You think we’d be having this conversation if you didn’t lose a whole hell of a lot more than the *Enterprise* that day?”

Unbidden, unplanned, Kirk’s hand stabs the air in front of him: a sharp, violent gesture.

“Don’t,” he says, quietly, fiercely, and there’s a weight of menace behind that one syllable that

unsettles even him.

“And still we can’t talk about it!” He knows she saw the fury in his eyes; he saw her momentary recoil. But her own anger has made her reckless: she wants, he thinks, to see him break. “God forbid one of us should speak his name!” she snaps. “God forbid we should acknowledge it! No, we’re going to just pretend that nothing happened, because that’s the way we do things in this marriage. Goddamn it, Jim, everything fell apart for you; everything you had just came apart at the seams in the space of two weeks...”

“Don’t,” he says again, but carefully, more evenly. He will not lose control.

“Why, Jim?” Two small words, but there’s a note of desolation creeping in now, frosting the anger with a sorrow so deep he can only wonder how long it’s been eating out the heart of her. Kirk glances up, meets her eyes, and finds them liquid with a sadness he can’t quite read. “Why can’t we just say it?” she demands. “He left you. You loved him and he left anyway, and you can’t get past that.”

“For God’s sake, Lori...” says Kirk, but his voice is hoarse. It sounds like someone else’s voice, and she acts like she doesn’t hear him.

“He left you,” she says, softer now. “And you — you just kind of... stopped. Maybe if you’d fallen apart, maybe if you’d stopped functioning, I don’t know — if you’d disappeared for two weeks, if you went off the radar, and then you show up in jail in some godforsaken backwater on the other side of the galaxy looking for someone to bail you out... That might’ve made some kind of sense. You can see that, you know? You can quantify it. I don’t know, maybe you can start to fix it. But you?” A soft laugh, and she sinks bonelessly into the chair beside her. She looks, suddenly, exhausted, and another time, another day, he might find himself crossing the floor to her, lowering himself onto the seat beside her and wrapping his arms around her. But they’re a long way past that now. “You just kept right on going, one foot in front of the other, with your meetings and your decisions and your command distance, and, damn it, you were so *good* at it. You know? I never expected you to break down, Jim. That’s not your style. But I damn well should’ve *known* when you never even broke stride.”

Silence settles on the room, like dust. Kirk peers into his empty glass, looks towards the table where Lori’s sits in a spreading pool of whisky, and, without a word, he crosses to the the bottle, lifts it and pours two fingers for his wife, another two for himself. He passes her the beaker, damp-bottomed and dripping a disregarded trail of liquid onto the carpet, onto her knee, and lowers himself into the chair beside hers.

“He was my friend,” he says quietly. It’s the first time in more than eighteen months that Kirk has acknowledged even this much, and the angry ache flares so sharply that, for a moment, he’s not

sure he can catch his breath. “He was my friend and he left. Is that what you want me to say? I wish he hadn’t. But he was not the only one.”

Her eyes are a gentle heat on his skin. Kirk doesn’t meet them. “He might as well have been,” says Lori softly.

Kirk shakes his head. “No.”

“Just say it, Jim,” she says, and her words are heavy, weary. “It meant more than Bones. It meant more than the *Enterprise* or command or deep space or any of it. Damn it, it took me all of four weeks to figure it out; why is it so hard for you to see this? You won’t ever get past it until you stop burying it.”

“I’m fine, Lori,” he says.

“Yeah, sure. You’re fine,” she says. “Goddamn it, Jim, I love you, you stupid son-of-a-bitch...” Her voice cracks, but his wife has never cried in front of him before, and he can’t imagine she’s going to start now. “I love you,” she says again, “but I’m done watching you break your heart over someone that’s not me.”

Kirk lifts his glass to his lips, sips, swallows. “If I’ve hurt you,” he says at last, “then I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention.”

“What do you want me to say — it’s all right, Jim?” Anger flares, but listlessly, as though she doesn’t have the energy for it. “It’s not. It’s not all right. It’s a long way from all right.” A sigh, and the fire leaves her voice as quickly as it came. “Maybe I shouldn’t have married you,” says Lori quietly. “But you damn sure shouldn’t have married me.”

Kirk says nothing. He drinks his whisky and stares straight ahead, through the dark windows and into the moonless sky, where the stars and the orbital traffic are veiled behind a thick blanket of cloud. The silence rings in his ears and burns at the back of his throat, but it’s easier than trying to find the right words. He doesn’t think the right words exist.

“You remember our first argument?” says Lori presently; soft words against the stillness of the quiet room. “The day after the wedding; how the hell did I not see this coming?” A gentle, rueful laugh, but there’s no bitterness in it anymore. “I told you, everyone thinks we’re crazy, Jim; are we crazy? Did we rush into this? And you said — you remember?”

“It’s a one-year contract,” says Kirk quietly. He remembers very well.

“It’s a one-year contract,” she agrees. “Good answer, Jim. Wow, just — yeah. Great answer. Are we crazy? Well, yes, Lori, maybe we are, but that’s okay because we already put an expiration date on this thing, so why worry?” Her head drops back to rest against the chair and she closes her eyes. “You shouldn’t have asked me,” she says. “That’s on you. You knew how I felt and you knew how you felt and you shouldn’t have asked me. But I knew. I knew, and I did it anyway. So that’s on me.” A beat. “I saw the way you looked at him. I knew.”

“Lori...” says Kirk, but he doesn’t know what comes next and so, when she flashes him a hooded glance, he allows it to silence him.

“It doesn’t...” she says, and shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter anymore. Let’s just get out while we can, Jim, okay?”

She drains her glass and sets it on the table, leaning her head forward to rest against her hands. For a moment, she sits quietly, elbows braced against her knees, hair hanging loose in a curtain of yellow around her face, and then she exhales deeply, and, slowly, listlessly, gets to her feet. She doesn’t raise her eyes to his.

“I’m going to go now,” she says. “I think we both could use some sleep.”

“I’ll carry your bag down to the car,” says Kirk, but his wife shakes her head.

“I’ll manage,” she says. Her coat is slung over the back of the chair, and she lifts it, slings it over one arm, but she doesn’t shrug it on. Kirk has to resist the urge to remind her that it’s cold outside, and threatening rain again; the time for that kind of care has passed. So, instead, he stands with her, follows her as she moves across the room to her case, and he wants to reach for her, to pull her towards him and keep her here, the way he should have done a thousand times these past months, back when it still mattered. He was a fool to think he knew how he’d feel when this was finally over.

Lori turns to face him, and, for a long moment, she stands in front of him, not speaking, not moving. Then she takes a step back, meets his gaze, makes herself smile.

“Take care of yourself, okay?” she says. One hand rises halfway up his body, hesitating by his

lower arm before it closes on his flesh in a cursory, fleeting grip. "I'll see you around."

Her fingers fall away, and the skin beneath them registers their absence with a faint chill of remembered touch. Kirk stoops, lifts her bag, passes it to her without a word, and she slings the strap over her shoulder with a nod of thanks. He watches her leave, hands folded behind his back, and, as the door slides shut behind her, he clears his throat, turns back towards the window, and reaches for his glass.

And for all the times Kirk has sat in this lounge, staring out across the city and wishing like hell he was alone with nobody to consider but himself and the service, it turns out that, when the apartment is as still and silent as the black skies above the Bay, it's far too big and cold and empty for just one man and his memories.

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Two chapters in one go this time because my beta is very, very awesome.

The dreams come less frequently now: lonely strangers in the night that settle briefly on Spock's unguarded mind, and he's surprised to note, in their absence, the low ache of regret that brushes his controls as he wakes most mornings from an untroubled sleep. It is illogical, but, as his journey towards Truth has widened and deepened and carved itself into the bedrock of his self, he has learned to be content with these irrational longings. They are artefacts of his biology, he understands, but they no longer hold any power over him, and he need no longer dread them. And, as the fear has receded, it has become possible to view this lingering sadness with equanimity, to acknowledge its presence, accept it as fact, and set it gently aside, to be broken down, deconstructed, and dispersed — a little further every day.

Still, he finds that he misses his nighttime ghosts. He is beginning, now, to feel as though he is truly alone inside his head.

In the quiet space, where the memories used to clamor, his mind counts the passage of the days, like footsteps shuffling forward along a dark and uneven road. Winter is drawing to a close, the soft sun gathering its strength once more as the days lengthen, and it will soon be two Earth years since he arrived at the sanctuary gates. Marking time by the Terran calendar is a habit that Spock has not yet been able to break, although he refuses to find this strange: he has, after all, measured more of his life by the revolutions of that water-rich world than by the cycles of the planet of his birth. It is simply that, with his mind so fixed, it is impossible not to be aware, from the first moment of wakefulness, that today marks Jim's thirty-ninth birthday. The knowledge is not enough to unbalance him, nor to cast up images from another time and another place — *a smile, a warm press of fingers around his arm, the knowledge of care* — but he is aware, nevertheless, of a kind of hollowness, a tenderness, like the beginnings of a bruise, that surrounds that part of him which still keeps time to the beat of another heart.

T'hy'la, he whispers in the privacy of his head. There is no point in attempting to ignore it. One word and then it is done, and he is free to begin his day.

It is easier the next time: April 17th, by Terran standards; early spring in the desert, with the first harvest approaching and the sanctuary orchard heavy with flowers. Spock spends the day in meditation and emerges refreshed, as though he has immersed himself in cool water in the heat of the midday sun. Later, in conference with T'Kel, she notes his composure and questions him, and Spock is able to answer, truthfully, that it comes a little easier to him with every passing day. He falls asleep that night in silence and peace, and he does not wake until the pre-dawn skies begin to gray.

This is the source of neither surprise nor relief. This is as it should be. It will always be the anniversary of *something*, after all: the memories of one man make not the faintest mark on the relentless passage of time.

Kaiidth; the past is out of reach. There is only what comes next, and he is ready to let go.

~*~

T'Sil is the first of their peers to achieve *Kolinahr*, ascending to the altar as the final, fresh shoots of spring are giving way to the harsh glare of summer. It has been clear for some time that her journey is nearing its close, and so it comes as no surprise to anyone to learn that her long absence from their sanctuary cell is the prelude to her final trial, but still Spock hears in the meld the echoes of his own dissatisfaction in his colleagues' thoughts. There's a certain comfort in this. Frustration is antithetical to the pursuit of Truth, and the fact of its presence is enough to give an acolyte pause at this point in their path, so it is gratifying to learn that his instinctive response is neither unique nor, by extension, invalid, illogical though it may be. He knows better than to make any attempt to conceal it from T'Kel, but T'Cora, he thinks, is another matter: she is diligent, she is conscientious, and yet she has plateaued in her progress and cannot hide her discouragement from him when their minds are joined. He hears the whispered threads of self-doubt and discontent curling through the depths of her consciousness and wonders if she reads him as clearly: T'Sil has ascended; why do Spock and T'Cora remain cloistered within the bonds of emotion, unable to take the final steps?

He is almost there, but Spock is tired of *almost*. It feels, at times, as though *almost* is his life.

He has become accustomed to spending nights outside the compound's walls, locked in the depths of meditation on his desert retreat, and days will pass, sometimes, in which he will see no living creature but the birds that circle on the thermals high above him, and the *sa-te kru* that prowl the dusty floor below. It is not unusual to return to his cell after two, three days in seclusion and find that his colleagues have disappeared into the empty sands in search of their own peace; many nights, more than he can count, he sleeps alone. And so he cannot say, now, why the vacant space where T'Sil's reed mat used to lie disturbs him so: it has been almost five weeks since they shared this room, longer still since they melded, and her absence now is no more significant than the restless drift of feet that pass through the sanctuary every day, every week, every month. And yet it disquiets him, as simple solitude does not, for reasons Spock prefers not to examine.

Summer approaches on wings of flame and fury, and with it come the sandfire storms. There will be no further ascensions now until the seasons change: an acolyte's journey is their own, and no two are the same, but the final test must be equal, and the savagery of the desert at the height of the seasonal cycle creates inequities that do not accord with the principles of Gol. Though there have always been those who are lost to the sands during the final steps on their Path, ten days' meditation in the relentless blaze of the summer sun with nothing but a waterskin and the robe on one's back is considered, in most circles, to be throwing the game. Spock understands this, of course: last year, and the year before, it seemed like a sensible precaution. But now, as his feet pick their way across a familiar path in the swelling heat of sunrise, he's forced to admit that it feels like one more obstacle on an endless avenue of discouragement. Perhaps it's just as well that he's obliged to observe this temporary hiatus. His reaction to T'Sil's achievement bears the distinct signs of emotionality, and this does not bode well for his progression.

It is early August in San Francisco, he knows: midsummer in a city by the ocean, where sea mists blanket the Bay and a yellow sun struggles to reach the streets beneath. It is a lifetime away; another world that belongs to another man. And yet, as he climbs the rough path that leads to his retreat, his skin remembers the touch of fog, the careless brush of vapor on flesh, as though it were no more precious than the asphalt below his feet or the fabric of his uniform. He remembers the fascination and the misery: the careless, almost wanton extravagance of a world where water could be cast so wastefully onto the air; the unexpected chill, and the sensation that the damp was a great weight trying to press itself into the marrow of his bones. The memories are not troubling to him, so long as he does not give them a face, and they carry him as far as his ragged shelf, cloaked with a thick layer of sand from the previous night's storm and bluster. Below him, a mobile shadow on the red desert floor, he sees T'Cora, winding her way onwards towards her own place of seclusion. Spock folds his legs beneath him and reaches inside himself for the trance.

~*~

He is deep in meditation when some ancient instinct registers an insubstantial *not quite right* from his immediate vicinity, but it's a moment before his conscious self is able to isolate the cause. *Auditory*, says that part of the evolutionary imperative that has been keeping Vulcans alive since time immemorial, and, as he surfaces into the gray light of dusk, he is able to narrow the reference to a female voice: low and urgent, and unquestionably belonging to the figure seated on folded legs directly in front of him. Her face is shadowed by the creeping twilight and the voice is unfamiliar, but the word it speaks is not; it's only that Spock has never heard it spoken by T'Cora.

"My breach of protocol is unpardonable," she says now as she registers his return with a brief nod that causes the setting sun to flash fire on her hooded eyes. "I ask your forgiveness. However, there is a storm approaching, and I believe we must seek shelter."

"There is no offence where none is taken," says Spock carefully. He is aware of an inconvenient haze in the center of his conscious thoughts, relic of the abrupt termination of the trance, and he

would be glad of a little privacy to shake the cobwebs from his skull. He cannot imagine T’Cora engaging in such an irrational activity and it occurs to him, now that they are engaged in their first conversation of all the long months that they have known each other, that he knows her only as a cipher: a wall of caged memories, emotional transference and artifice. They are mirrors to each other, nothing more. Strange that he has never noticed this before.

Spock glances up towards the horizon, speared by jagged hulks of dark rock, and sees a low cloud in the far distance, obscuring the line of the desert floor. It is moving rapidly, though he cannot, as yet, see the tell-tale flash of sandfire lighting it from within. It is, however, unquestionably blocking their return to the sanctuary.

“I believe you are correct,” he says. His voice, so little used these days, sounds hoarse in his ears; almost unrecognisable as his own. “There is a cave system 1.27 *mat’drih* to the south that may offer adequate protection.”

But T’Cora shakes her head. “I have had the opportunity to observe the storm’s approach,” she says. “At its current speed, I do not believe we have sufficient time to cover such a distance.”

An eyebrow arches. “Are you aware of an alternative?”

“I am,” she says.

Spock inclines his head. “Very well,” he says, and rises to his feet.

~*~

T’Cora moves quickly but gracefully, urgent but composed, as she leads him along the desert floor at a pace that takes account of the advancing threat but refuses to sacrifice a kind of fluid, dispassionate elegance that Spock has had no previous opportunity to observe. If it were not for the fact that he is obliged to lengthen his stride to keep up with her, he might believe that she is unaware of the faint trembling in the ground beneath their feet as the storm draws closer, the greasy taste to the air that tells of a relentless static build-up, the silence of the canyon floor as wildlife scatters in search of safer ground. But then she glances over her shoulder, eyes widening in a manner that is the opposite of reassuring, and her voice, when she speaks, is harsh with labored breathing.

“This way,” she says simply and, though the words are scarcely needed — he is, after all, already

following her, and their direction does not change — he understands the imperative behind them. He has seen sandfire before.

She leads him to a cliff-face, ochre crags shaded black by the advancing night, and onto a crumbled pile of stones at the bottom, which she scales as easily as a *le-matya* in pursuit of prey. Spock scrambles after her and finds that they open onto a narrow set of steps, rough-hewn and smoothed by the passage of years, that lead sharply upwards towards a wide, flat ridge some 700 meters above them, where it's just possible to make out the dark hollow of an entrance. The wind is picking up as the storm draws closer, air humming with a gathering roar, and, above him, T'Cora breaks into an indecorous run that Spock is pleased to copy, fisting his hands around the folds of his robes as he scales the steps two at a time towards the promise of shelter. Ahead of him, he sees T'Cora disappear into the cave mouth as the first flash of lightning slices through the gloom behind him, entirely too close for comfort.

“Come!” she shouts over the howl of sand and fury, though the injunction is entirely unnecessary. Spock clears the ridge with the kind of speed he has not been obliged to summon for more than two years, and stumbles into the darkness beyond.

T'Cora is already moving, head bowed and arms outstretched to brush the tunnel walls as the light fails. She is shorter than Spock by at least a head and, as they move further into the cave, he is obliged to bend almost double to follow her. Lightning streaks blinding white light through the shadows, casting her silhouette in zoetropic gray on black, and he is aware that the storm is now close enough to seriously threaten their safety while they are near enough to the entrance that the light can still penetrate. The roar fills the narrow passageway, bouncing off the walls like an echo chamber, but, gradually, Spock becomes aware of a dampness beneath his fingertips, the scent of water and mold and stale, ancient air, and he realizes that they have circled deep into the cliff itself: where the blistering heat of the desert sun cannot sear away the moisture that clings to the cave wall, sandfire is unlikely to reach.

Spock can see nothing, and he can hear little above the roar of the storm outside. But T'Cora, close by his ear, says, “We will be safe here. The temperature is regrettable; however, the cave entrance provides a more temperate environment, should we be obliged to remain here for any period once the storm has passed.”

“You know this place?” says Spock, although he is beginning to suspect that his presence here is every bit the invasion that hers was when she broke protocol to approach him at his refuge.

“I do,” she says, simply, and it's enough to confirm his theory: she has brought him to the place where she seeks her Truth. Spock has literally no idea of the etiquette under the circumstances; it seems likely, in fact, that there is none, because he simply cannot imagine that the Masters of Gol have ever envisaged a situation in which it might become necessary to determine a set of rules to govern the behavior of an acolyte inside another acolyte's retreat. The directive has never been

specifically issued, but it is understood: the place chosen by a *srashivu* is inviolate and entirely private. It is not for others.

So, in the absence of anything more informed or productive to do, he finds his way to the edge of the tunnel and drops to a crouch, leaning back against the damp wall. Moisture soaks through his robe with an alacrity that is certain to make for uncomfortable wearing before very long, and he regrets at once the impulse that led to the action. Still, it's done now and, as it turns out, he is exceptionally tired in a manner that advises against attempting to maintain spinal integrity. There's no etiquette for emerging from deep meditation and breaking immediately into a headlong dash for one's life, either, as far as he knows, although that one, he feels, the Masters might have seen coming, given the nature of the locale.

"I believe," he says, "that I owe you a debt of gratitude, *oko-kai*." The honorific feels arbitrary and slightly forced, but addressing her by name, when they have never been formally introduced, is unthinkable. "Had you not returned for me, I would have been caught in the storm."

There is a pause that Spock cannot decipher. Then T'Corra says, "It is conceivable that your altitude would have been sufficient to shield you."

"Nevertheless," he says, "you returned."

Another pause. "Perhaps, then, I should be asking your forgiveness," she says at last. A beat. "*Osa-kai*."

Spock cannot tell if the hesitation before the title is born of a similar indecision, or if his companion is making a point. So, since there's not much he can do about it in either case, he decides to ignore it.

"There is no offense where none is taken," he says. "The circumstances are extenuating. And I am grateful for your intervention."

"Thanks are unnecessary."

"I extend them nonetheless."

A brief, faint glow from far along the tunnel casts afterimages onto his light-starved eyes, and he

feels the brush of residual warmth from the lightning-scorched air outside. Spock remembers the sandfires of his childhood, circling ShiKahr like an angry predator for hours on end, in a manner that now seems positively restrained compared to the three-day squalls that blanket the sanctuary at the height of summer. This storm is too early in the season to truly sink its teeth into the desert air, but they are probably here for the night at least.

“Perhaps,” he ventures, “it would be appropriate to utilise the period of our confinement in a productive manner?”

He does not need to see her face to know that T’Cora’s eyebrow arches; some things are written into the silence. “How so?” she says.

“I propose a meld,” says Spock. “I believe it would be an appropriate use of...”

“No,” says T’Cora abruptly. A beat. “Forgive me, *osa-kai*, for my interruption. But I do not believe a meld would be appropriate at this time.”

It would be illogical to ignore the sting of rejection that her words engender: a more sensible approach is to examine the root of the emotional reaction and attempt to cauterize it at its source. It does not, however, take any great deductive capacity to determine its cause.

“You object to joining my mind, *oko-kai*?” says Spock as levelly as he is able, as his mind seals over the scars of a thousand childhood cruelties. “We have engaged in this activity on numerous occasions and I do not believe your participation has, at any stage, been coerced.”

“Of course not,” she answers, and her tone carries the faintest hint of reproach. “It is an inevitable component of the path to *Kolinahr*. My objection is not the act of melding.”

“Ah,” says Spock, and, though the sentiment is familiar, he cannot yet claim to receive it with equanimity. This, clearly, is something to be addressed in meditation, and he welcomes the opportunity to observe and correct it. “It is my mind, then, that you find distasteful, in the absence of others.”

Hesitation. “Distaste is illogical,” says T’Cora at last.

“True,” says Spock. “And yet I have frequently been reminded that my hybrid biology is inferior to

that of my full-Vulcan peers.”

“Then your full-Vulcan peers have not observed the true capacity of your mind.”

The words, calmly spoken in a manner that admits of no possible opposition, are, nevertheless, entirely unexpected. Spock feels both eyebrows reach for his hairline, and is glad of the cover of darkness.

“I am gratified by your confidence, *oko-kai*,” he says slowly. “And yet,” he adds, before she can remind him once more that his thanks are unnecessary, “I remain at a loss as to your logic in refusing the meld.”

Silence. And then a sharp intake of breath, so deep and pronounced that Spock is forced to call it a sigh, though he is certain that T’Cora would disagree.

“I must acknowledge,” she says, “that my logic is difficult to defend. Perhaps, then, you will allow me a moment to recenter myself before we join minds. My controls have been weakened by this evening’s events.”

Spock nods, unseen. “As have mine,” he says. “However, I believe it is likely that a meld will allow for a rapid and more efficient stabilization of the adrenal response. It is, after all, no more than an artefact of the proper working of the endocrine system, and may benefit from the focus afforded by a dual effort.”

“Your logic is, of course, undeniable,” says T’Cora, and, though her words are soft against the howl of the wind outside, Spock thinks he hears a trace of bitterness to her tone that he cannot account for. “Very well. I have no valid objection. Let us proceed.”

It may be that there is a slight emphasis on *valid*, and it may be that Spock’s reservations over the nature of her acquiescence are filling in data where none exists. Regardless, she has given her consent, and there is no denying that a meld is a profitable use of their time, nor that he finds himself, meditation interrupted and protocols unceremoniously abandoned, in need of the fortification afforded by the presence of another consciousness schooled in the Disciplines. He cannot see her in the darkness, but the sound of her voice is enough to locate her with reasonable accuracy and, in the chill of the cave, he can triangulate her presence as he approaches by her radiant body heat. His fingers find her hair before they discover her face, but she obliges him by turning into the meld points, letting them settle before she seeks out his cheek in a mirror gesture.

“My mind to your mind,” she says, and it is disconcerting, slightly, to hear the words spoken aloud; they have been accustomed to melding in silence.

“My thoughts to your thoughts,” finishes Spock, and he feels the world slip away as they descend into the quiet place between selves...

...and finds himself swallowed by chaos. There is no order, no possible means of classifying the swirling tidal wave of emotional discord, white hot and crowded with a thousand hollering voices; it's scarcely possible, even, to remember that it exists outside of his head, in a place that he cannot navigate. Spock feels himself dragged under, into the darkness, before he can orient himself, and, amongst the hollering clouds of distress, he thinks he can hear one voice: lonely, desperate and inconsolable, crying out a name he does not know...

It lasts for no longer than a split second, stretched telescopically into infinity, before T'Corra pulls away, severing the link before it can properly form. Spock falls backwards, catching himself against the damp cave wall, and finds himself leaning heavily against his arm, bracing himself against a sudden weakness in his knees and a lingering dizziness that disorients him as he struggles to separate his consciousness from the meldspace that he's just left. This has been, he reflects, a particularly trying day for his psi-center. Perhaps he'd have been better advised to attempt a period of sleep instead.

They stand in difficult silence for several long moments. To his right, turned into the belly of the cave, Spock can hear T'Corra's heavy, labored breaths as she wrestles her controls into place. It's many minutes before she can find the words to speak, but it seems important to let her go first.

“My apologies,” she says at last, and her voice is gruff, frustration laced with chagrin. “My controls, as I indicated, are not strong.”

“The apology is rightfully mine to give,” says Spock, but she silences him with a single word.

“No,” she says. “Your challenge to my logic was correct. It is unconscionable that I remain so deficient in my application of *Venlinahr*, or that I should attempt to conceal this from a fellow *srashivu*. You must, of course, report this to Master T'Kel.”

She's right, of course: he must. Even if Spock were so inclined, there would be no way to keep it hidden from the Elders.

“The path to Truth is frequently uneven,” he says slowly. “I see no reason for you to reproach yourself for a momentary lapse.”

“I do not reproach myself,” says T’Cora sharply. “I simply observe what is. When we were first paired, I believed that my command of the Disciplines would naturally be the stronger, and that this would facilitate my progress towards ascension. It seems,” she says, and the bitter note has returned to her voice, “that pride is one manifestation of the emotionality that I have sought to purge.”

Spock says nothing. Her words confirm what he has long suspected — that she expected from the first that he would fail — but he finds that he does not resent them; the Elders themselves have made no secret of their hesitations in admitting him, and he was, after all, a particularly poor student for many months. Moreover, she is unquestionably correct: the rush of ungoverned emotion that assaulted him through their mindlink bodes poorly for her progress and speaks of many years’ work to come. If nothing else, it is clear now that Spock will ascend before her, and he understands, suddenly, that she knows this very well. This alone advises against breaking the silence that has descended between them: he has no platitudes to offer, and she does not want to hear them. But, more than this, he remembers the name he heard and the voice that spoke it: a low wail of despair that told him, in two syllables, more than she would ever want him to know. And he understands that she is aware of what she showed him, and he understands, because she has spent so many weeks and months building walls to keep her past self tucked away — as Spock has buried the man he used to be — that it is information that she would not have chosen willingly to share. She knows that he knows, and she would take it back if she could, and so Spock says nothing, because the information is now his, regardless, and there is nothing he can say that will change this fact.

“He was my bondmate,” says T’Cora now, as though she hears the question that he does not ask.

“Svorek,” says Spock. It is illogical to feign ignorance.

“Yes,” she says simply. “The bond will be severed, ultimately, by *Kolinahr*, but it has already atrophied beyond use. He is free now, no matter the length of my path to Truth.”

“He was injured.”

“Yes. He came close to death.”

“And you believe,” says Spock carefully, “that you are responsible for this.”

“I do not believe,” she says. “I know. He was obliged to erect unusually robust shields around our bondsite in order to protect himself from my emotionality. When the injury came, too much of his psi-energy was devoted to their maintenance to enable his healing trance to proceed effectively. He is alive now only because I left for Gol.”

“But he lives.”

“Yes.”

“Then,” he says slowly, “your path was correct. *C’thia* demands that you no longer castigate yourself for what is past.”

“And yet,” she says, “had my performance of the Disciplines been adequate, I would have no reason to castigate myself. I thank you for your words, *osa-kai*, but I prefer to discuss the matter no further.”

Spock bows his head. “As you wish,” he says. In truth, he prefers as much himself, and so, to draw them towards safer ground, he attempts to fill the silence with something that is neither meld nor memory. “Perhaps,” he says, “it would be of benefit to engage in a period of private meditation? It has been a long day, and I believe we both require rest.”

T’Cora hesitates for only a moment, and he wonders if she’s counting the cost to her *sochya* of a confession not freely given, calculating the likelihood of achieving the trance. But her answer, when it comes, is decisive.

“Your suggestion is acceptable,” she says. A beat, and then, firmly and conclusively: “I believe it will be a productive use of this time. The storm will pass before dawn; we will speak again at this time.”

Perhaps she sinks to her knees, perhaps she lowers herself cross-legged to the damp floor, perhaps she simply closes her eyes and descends inside in search of a peace that is sorely lacking in her conscious mind. Spock cannot tell, and T’Cora says nothing more. In the storm-tossed silence, he rests his chilled spine against the ragged cave wall and stares into the darkness for a long moment, listening to the sounds of an angry desert and feeling the chill seep into his bones in a manner that cannot help but reference a mist-soaked city by the sea, where a pale yellow sun sits in a sky of midsummer blue, and struggles to filter through a haze of vapor to the streets beneath. Perhaps, he thinks, he and T’Cora are more alike than she knows: she, too, relied on someone else for

emotional stability; she, too, basked in the reflected warmth of being known and accepted; and she, too, understood in the end that her own contentment came at too high a price. But for T’Cora, the knowledge came late; too late, perhaps, for her to learn how to remake herself in the absence of that secondary glory. This may be her tragedy, Spock thinks: to have loved too long now to ever truly let it go. He was fortunate to have found his own way when he did; he sees more of himself in her, now, than he ever has before, and the knowledge is... unsettling.

But, as he closes his eyes and attempts to descend into his unquiet center, Spock cannot disperse the cloud of regret that hovers around the memory of her story: a face, eyebrows slanted upwards in an unspoken question that needs no words; an understanding, deep and primal; a sense of being one half of a greater whole, the way that things were meant to be. There is something rare, something fragile, something indefinably beautiful about it, and he cannot help but wonder if, when T’Cora’s journey is complete and her bond is finally severed, her freedom will, in truth, be equal to the value of what will be lost.

Chapter 39

December blows itself out in watery grays and browns and a series of vacuous, self-important Fleet parties at which Kirk's attendance is not optional, but, on the whole, he considers, it could have been worse. It has been a strange sort of year, and he won't be sorry to bid it farewell in a couple of days, but, he thinks, though the past twelve months have seen the sands shift again beneath his feet, the shape they've formed as things have settled feels like something he can finally get a handle on. Marriage was a mistake, that much is clear, and the fallout has been predictable: silent acrimony that stretched into black and sullen months, a hollow pit of loneliness and regret, a series of questionable decisions made too late at night, and a tension strung so tight that, for a while, people stopped inviting them both to the same meetings. January was a bad month: the initial relief at finding himself cut loose from conjugal ties that had begun to feel like a noose turned out to be short-lived, and, as the practicalities of separation — a new billet, the packing and unpacking of his things, the legalities of moving from *married* to *unmarried* — faded into the background, suddenly there was just silence and solitude and the creeping suspicion that what he'd wanted, after all, was not an end but a change, though he had no idea what that was supposed to look like.

The truth was, he missed her. Not the marriage, not the intimacy, not the company, but Lori: her care, her concern, the security she represented. He's not so self-absorbed that he can't see that what he was prepared to offer her in return wasn't precisely of equal value, but he guesses he'd gotten used to the idea that, whatever happened, he still mattered to at least one person. He missed that, after it was gone. He missed her. And Kirk was just so tired of missing people.

But there were courtesies to be observed and there was work to be completed, and their joint Xenon/Fleet Ops projects didn't disappear just because their relationship did. The more they practiced pretending that everything was all right, the more it began to feel as though it might be, and, besides, their pattern was drawn long before they made it official. Advance, erupt, retreat and rectify; they'd done it before, and, he realises now, he just assumed that, one way or another, they'd find a way to do it again. But January rolled into February and on into March and nothing was better, nothing was different; they maintained an air of basic professional civility during business hours, but that was all. It wasn't until the middle of the month, when she still hadn't made a move towards a more substantial reconciliation, that it suddenly occurred to Kirk to wonder if it was, perhaps, neither sensible nor legitimate to expect her to make all the effort again this time, just because she always had done in the past. It was different this time, and that was, in no small measure, his fault: he might not have broken the marriage, but he'd certainly been content to let it fall apart, and, in his ex-wife's shoes, he's not so sure he'd have even felt like meeting him halfway, let alone reaching out the lonely hand of friendship. And so, after a series of internal debates, second-guessing and equivocation, he sent her a short message, deliberately casual, asking if she'd be prepared to meet for drinks at the Casa Lavanda after work on a day of her choosing.

Her reply was six words long and took twelve hours to arrive. *What the hell*, she wrote. *But you're buying.*

Later, weeks later, once they'd fallen back into a kind of wary entente, she told him how close she'd been to refusing. *I wanted to tell you where to stick your drinks*, she said, and her smile, though gaining in conviction now, did little to gloss over the residual anger in her eyes. *The Casa Lavanda, Jim? Really?*

In vain, Kirk tried to protest that it had seemed appropriate: once upon a time, they'd sat in those same jacquard-covered seats and toasted the tentative beginnings of a new friendship, but that, it seemed, was her point. He's not a whole lot clearer now than he was then about where he went wrong, but he's played it safe since then. The next round he bought them was in Trombino's.

She's likely to be at tonight's reception, he knows, and, if not, she certainly can't avoid Nogura's New Year's Eve shindig, where the appearance of the Chief of Starfleet Operations is also mandated by convention, politesse, and the deceptively affable smile of their commander-in-chief. But this is no longer the source of any particular consternation. This time last year, Kirk might have found himself inclined to concoct some lengthy reason to be elsewhere based solely on the fact of her presence, but things are better now, and they've spent the months between then and now carving out a space between them that's not quite friendship, not quite collegiality, but something undefined, somewhere in the middle. They've got to a place where it's possible to seek out each other's company without artifice or expectation, to be honestly pleased to see one another again, to spend time together because they once enjoyed spending time together and it looks like they've managed to claw that back. She's better at it than Kirk is, as he'll freely admit, and so he'll let her take the lead when he sees her tonight, let her dictate the pace and the terms of their interaction, let her decide when to approach and when it's time to retreat. But he knows how it will go, because they've done it before: she'll be there already when he arrives, and she'll smile that golden smile of hers when she catches his eye, sweep over to him with a couple of drinks and raise a glass to his health with an enthusiasm that, as far as he can tell, is, these days, entirely genuine. She'll see that he's alone, and she'll make her joke, the one she always makes, because her ex-husband's continuing solitude makes her uncomfortable and it colors their conversation unless she allows herself to address it up front, and the only way to do that is with humor. *Jim Kirk*, she'll say, *one of these days you're really going to have to get over me, you know*. And he'll laugh, and she'll laugh, and the tension will break a little, and, though she'll introduce the man on her arm — *you remember Arne Ostergard, right, Jim?* — she won't call him her date, and nobody will know where to look until Kirk sticks out a hand for the young Commodore to shake with an air of manifest relief. And Kirk will feel her gaze on him — liquid with some kind of unnamable sadness — but she'll look away when he meets it, take a sip from her glass and smile brightly, tell him he's looking good and that they have to do lunch some time, and she'll mean it, enough to have her Yeoman make arrangements with his office some time in the New Year, on a day she'll know he has no excuse not to be there. Because she's better at this than Kirk. She's the reason they get to be okay, and he's glad of that, even if, every time he sees her, all he can think about is how simple things used to be between them before he went and screwed it up with marriage.

He hopes Ostergard is better for her than he was. She deserves that much at least.

Kirk leans back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head, and lets his gaze fall on the darkening city beyond his office window. In a few weeks, he thinks — early spring, maybe — he's

going to take a vacation: a real one, the kind with a destination and an itinerary and a PADD full of guidebooks; the kind that's *going to* and not *running from*. It has been a long year, and it's time to get out of San Francisco for a while, find somewhere to make a whole new set of memories that have nothing to do with the shadows that wait for him here around every corner. He remembers, years ago, in an old copy of Homer that he found on the shelves of his uncle's cabin, reading Tiresias' instruction to Odysseus to walk inland, carrying his oar on his shoulder, until he found a place where the people knew nothing of the sea and mistook it for a winnowing fan. Kirk wonders if there's anywhere left, now, where he might be able to say the same of his Starfleet insignia. He doubts it, but he'd like to maybe see about finding out for sure.

In a few weeks. March, maybe, for his birthday, or April; God knows, he'd rather not spend another Cochrane's Day on his own, drinking more than he intended to in a bar he didn't even particularly like just because there wasn't one damn thing in his apartment that day that didn't make him think of things he'd rather not remember. He doesn't like his chances of convincing Nogura to let him go incommunicado for the day of Starfleet's biggest annual PR opportunity, but that's another problem for another day. For now, he has three more painfully political soirees to grin his way through, sweeping him neatly past the dying hours of one year and into the first breaths of the new, and then a grateful Admiral Kirk will have a half-dozen perfectly legitimate and scrupulously professional reasons to make his way off-world for a while, into the black oceans above where feels like he can finally catch his breath. He's been asked to officiate the graduation ceremony at the Academy on Psi Upsilon III; he has a seat at a week-long negotiation program on Mareotis VI; and he needs to spend some time at the Utopia Planitia shipyards with a red pen, Admiral Heng, and about six dozen PADDs of biannual fleet-readiness reports. And, somewhere above him, one shimmering point of light in a sea of industry, a ship named *Enterprise* is nearing the end of her refit: computers sparking, life support systems breathing oxygen into freshly painted corridors, antimatter chambers humming with latent energy. It's about time her former commander paid her one last visit before she's finally set free.

Funny how things change. Three years ago, he would never have imagined that this would be his life. But, he thinks, he's found his rhythm at last in this brave new world of his, and that's all it takes: one small shift of perspective, and things start to slide into place, and suddenly you wonder what you were fighting so hard against for all those months. Stripped of the constant hum of discord and the sense that everything was one misplaced word away from falling apart, it turns out that life is better than Kirk thought. Heading Starfleet Operations is not deep space command, but there's a lot to be said for membership of Nogura's inner circle, and it certainly doesn't hurt to wake up every morning absent the threat of explosive decompression, warp core destabilization, or death by photon torpedo. His ship will continue the work he started, and that's what matters. Kirk carries his old life with him like a locket around his soul, an old lover who left their mark in a scar that won't quite heal, but it's easier, now, to run into reminders of days past, and the Admiral's smile, which used to stretch so tightly across his face sometimes that it left his jaw aching, feels less like artifice now and more like the gesture of a man who's made his peace with the world.

What is, is; the past is out of reach. There's only what comes next, and Kirk is ready to let go.

Night is falling on his city: a rich mantle of indigo and gunmetal gray. Kirk pours a fresh cup of

coffee and carries it to the window, where the first stars are pricking through the velvet skies above the bay, scattered among the flash-burn of propulsion engines, the glint of the last rays of sunlight on sparkling metal, the flicker of headlights in the hazy twilight. Low on the horizon and almost invisible against the dusk, Eridanus is rising, a serpentine coil of light against black, ghosted by wisps of winter cloud. Kirk sips from his mug and stares into the dark vaults above, and, just for a moment, he allows himself to wonder, briefly, if anyone looks back at him from across the void.

Sometimes it feels as though he's never further away than the shadow at Kirk's shoulder; sometimes it feels as though he never knew him at all, as though he's faded into the shadows of history, like the heroes of the books on his uncle's shelves. It could be that it's easier that way: a face without a name, part myth, part fantasy. He belongs to another life.

Find a way to live with it, Lori told him as she left that night, but there's only one way to do that. Kirk does it every day.

Alone and unseen, he allows his head to drop forward so that it's leaning against the chill glass in front of him. It's late: too late to be at the office, too late to have time to go home and change before the reception, but too early yet to make his way over to the Pacific View for martinis and pleasantries. He ought to sit back down at his desk, open up a few files, make a few calls before everyone ranked Commodore and above simultaneously checks out for the night, but there's nothing on his desk right now that isn't going to require the application of diplomatic patience under extreme duress, and he just doesn't have the energy to dive back into that kind of fight this evening. What he wants, what he *really* wants, is to go home, lock the door, pull the drapes, and crack open the bottle of Armagnac that Bones managed to find on some godforsaken outpost at the tail end of the sector and send back to San Francisco in time for the holidays, along with a sardonic little note speculating on how much more in need of fine liquor Kirk might be than a man not currently chained to his desk as per Starfleet Regulation 24-7-365. He may have a point, though Kirk's not likely to admit as much any time soon. But, since brandy and solitude are two things that are not going to happen this evening, it's possible that his response to a buzz at his door — the only thing standing between Kirk and a ninety minute exercise in personal karmic growth — might be a little more enthusiastic than the situation necessarily warrants. It's certainly the impression he gets from the slightly startled expression on the face of his second-in-command as the door slides open to admit her.

"Commodore Kaplan," says Kirk pleasantly, because there is something comforting in the knowledge that, if the hours he keeps are somewhat unhealthy, he's not the only person keeping them. Although, he supposes, as he moves away from the window, gesturing to her to take a seat as he drops into his own, there's probably something to be said for pastoral care and example-setting. It's just that he remembers how well that used to work for his former CO back in his Xeno days, and he can't really see the point of insulting anyone's intelligence by pretending to try. "What can I do for you?"

Kaplan has been Kirk's Deputy for a little under a year, ever since her transfer mid-February from Material Supplies: smart, capable, ambitious, and, he suspects, increasingly resentful that her CO's

workaholic reluctance to ever leave his office affords her little opportunity to show what she can do. But she's far too practiced at the Starfleet game to let it show, and, besides, Kirk's gotten to know her well enough during their months together to understand that, goal-oriented and industrious as she may be, she's also, in the final analysis, someone he can trust.

"Sir," she says, lowering herself into a leather armchair and folding her hands neatly in her lap. "I've just come from a meeting with Admirals Strong and Boudin and Commodore Pelton."

Kirk nods. "The upgrades to the communications array."

"Yes, sir," says Kaplan. She hesitates, turning her gaze towards the floor, and Kirk can see her brow furrow as she considers her next words. "Sir," she says at last. "This is... a little delicate."

Delicate. Sometimes Kirk wonders if the whole damn organization doesn't run on *delicate*: whispers, gossip and rumors, back-scratching and favors and friends in the right places. He smothers a sigh.

"Very well, Commodore," he says. "Rest assured that, if anyone asks, I didn't hear it from you."

"Due respect, sir," she says, "but I think it's best if you carry on as though you haven't heard it at all for now. Admiral Boudin wanted me to make it very clear that he was passing it on as a matter of professional courtesy, but that the decision had been taken at the top level to keep Fleet Ops out of the loop for now."

"Is this about 47 Tucanae?" says Kirk, who has already spent more hours than he cares to count this week trying to explain to a non-governmental attaché with the Department of the Exterior why rumors of an insurgency on the sister planet of a Federal protectorate aren't sufficient cause to scramble a Dreadnought-class warship to investigate. "Because I would have thought Admiral Boudin was in no position to comment on the situation right now. I've made Fleet Ops' position very clear. There is absolutely no justification for..."

But Kaplan is already shaking her head, even before he's finished speaking, and there's something in her expression that brings him up short.

"Ilion, sir," she says quietly. "It's Ilion."

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Every year (okay, there have been multiple years now; that's not good...), I have this fantastic resolution that I'm going to get less sucky at Spice updates. Sometimes it even works for a while. This year has been less than impressive so far, but that means that I can only get better, right? *ingratiating smile*

~*~

Storan ascends as the summer sun is fading into a softer autumn haze, though he's barely able to walk when he returns from the desert, and he collapses as T'Sai places the symbol of ultimate logic around his neck. Whispers echo through the sanctuary meldspace like sand on the wind — a previously undiagnosed case of *pa'nar* syndrome has ended his journey in its final steps; he has unexpectedly entered his Time and been banished from Gol; he has been overcome by his final trials and died in the night — but, Spock is gratified to note, his engagement with rumor and intrigue is dispassionate now, distant, and fed only by a scientist's curiosity. When the news arrives from the Elders that Storan has recovered, though he will be obliged to spend his convalescence in the more temperate climate of the coastal village of his birth, Spock finds that he greets it with equanimity: it is information, nothing more. Storan is his comrade and a gifted practitioner of the Disciplines, and his loss to the ranks of the *Kolinahr* would have been eminently regrettable, but death is the inevitable consequence of bodily decay and it is illogical to mourn that which cannot be altered.

T'Kel receives his explanation without reaction, hands folded in her lap, face impassive, and, when Spock has finished speaking, she tells him that his journey is approaching its close.

He inclines his head. The information is not unexpected. “May I begin my preparations, Master?” he asks.

Her answer comes without hesitation: clear, considered and certain. “You may,” she says.

T'Cora no longer makes any effort towards shielding her emotionality when they meld. They have not spoken about what passed between them in her retreat, but it would be illogical, now, to proceed as before and, he thinks, now that she devotes less of her psi-energy towards concealing her shame, she is able to apply the principles of *Kolinahr* more effectively and her progress is accelerating. The measure of resentment that she harbored towards him in the weeks following the storm has dissipated in the face of her increasing proficiency in the Disciplines and, gradually, they

have arrived at a place of understanding, of respect, so that when they meld it is no longer a function of their pursuit of Truth, but an acknowledgment that this is a process that benefits them both. Their minds, as it transpires, are more similar than dissimilar and they fortify each other when they are joined. In another world, Spock thinks, they might have made suitable bondmates.

She reads the change in him immediately and he is aware of her consternation as the link develops, but it takes her a moment to discern its source.

//Ah, she says at last, as the buried knowledge flows into the meldspace. It is time.

He expects an air of bitterness, perhaps chagrin, but there is none. An edge of sadness, a faint haze of vicarious satisfaction, and a deep cloud of regret, but her habitual antagonism has long since vanished. Perhaps, he thinks, she has finally found her footing on the long path ahead.

//I will begin my preparations at first light, he says.

T'Coranods.

//Your success is an example to those who struggle to find their way to Truth, she tells him. Your journey has been difficult, but you have prevailed. This is as it should be.

There are no secrets in the meldspace. She sees the boy that he was, the man that he became: the knowledge of his difference, the understanding that there was no place in the universe that Spock could call his own. And he sees the truth of her words, the openness, the honesty. She does not seek to flatter him and she does not seek his approval: her words are fact, nothing more, and he must accept them as such.

//One day, says Spock, I will say as much to you.

She acknowledges his answer impartially: it is a recognition of her progress, and she receives it in the manner in which it was bestowed.

//Will you permit me to help you weave your robe? she asks.

And there is no hesitation, no question and no equivocation in Spock's mind; the answer comes as easily as the breath in his lungs.

//It would be my honor, he says.

~*~

“She’s straining at her leash, Mr. Decker,” says Kirk, and the new captain’s smile, so like his father’s, covers a hunger that Kirk knows very well.

“Yes, sir,” he says. “Just like the rest of us. This latest delay has come as a blow.”

Kirk considers putting a fatherly arm around the young man’s shoulders, but thinks better of it. He’s not *that* old, no matter what his bones might have told him after his run this morning.

“She’ll fly, Will,” he says. “Let’s just see what we can do to keep her in the air when she does, all right?”

Nothing about the *Enterprise* feels like his anymore. Kirk realized as much the first time he made this trip, twelve weeks into her refit, when he discovered that he couldn’t pick her out of the huddled masses of metal shells crowded into the orbital drydocks until her insignia came into view. He’d always thought he could find her in an empty sky just by the hum of her engines, but, it turns out, stripped of what made her familiar, she’s just another vessel, an empty hulk of tritanium alloy that he doesn’t quite know.

It makes it a little easier to stand at the airlock each time, smile plastered to his face, and ask for permission to come aboard his own damn ship.

She’s re-emerging in stages now, the silver lady that stole his sleep more nights than he can count, and it’s an effort, as he follows Decker along the stripped, gray-washed corridors, not to reach out a hand and brush his fingers along the walls as he walks. She has a heartbeat again, wanderer’s soul awakening from its long sleep, and there’s a restlessness to her halls and walkways that feels like more than the passage of a couple of hundred hurried feet. The truth is, Kirk is no more convinced than Decker that these latest modifications to the matrix restoration coils are strictly necessary, but R&D will keep coming up with improvements to their improvements, and she’s not so patched up yet that they can’t cram in another couple of circuits where it won’t show. Scotty’s had a few words to say about it in Kirk’s hearing; no doubt, Decker has heard several more.

“I know she’ll fly, sir,” says Decker now, as they round a corner and Kirk finds himself, abruptly, at the entrance to the recreation deck, which is very much not where he thought they were. “It’s just that we were hemorrhaging staff *before* the latest setback, and now, on top of everything else, it looks like I’ve just lost my science officer to the *Reliant*. I’ve got a great bridge crew and I’d like to keep it that way — I’m just not sure how much longer I can hold this team together on a promise.”

“Lieutenant Commander Fazekas’ transfer was nothing to do with the ship’s readiness, Mr. Decker,” says Kirk, though he doubts it sounds any more convincing now than it did when he heard it directly from the officer in question. “Captain Liu needed someone with a working knowledge of Kinarian marine ecology. That’s why you lost him.”

“Yes, sir,” says Decker, with a patience that would very much seem to vindicate Kirk’s suspicions. “But if we’d been in deep space — as we were supposed to have been five weeks ago, sir — Captain Liu would have had to find someone else. And I’d still have Fazekas on my staff.”

Kirk purses his lips around a grin. Decker was not only the right choice for the *Enterprise*, he was a damn near *perfect* choice. He’s Kirk, ten years younger, and with slightly floppier hair.

“I’ll find you a new science officer, Will,” he says.

“I have a list of names,” says Decker. “Ranked in order of preference.”

“Yes,” says Kirk. “I’m sure you do.”

He has already made the decision not to be around when the *Enterprise* launches. It’s not that he holds onto any particular resentment anymore, and it’s not that he thinks he’s going to find it difficult, particularly, to watch her go — she’s ready now, and he wouldn’t keep her caged up any longer than she needs to be. It’s just that it doesn’t feel right, somehow, to stand on the Centroplex and shake hands and slap backs and trade tired jokes and good wishes, and then watch her take her leave of Terran HQ from the wrong side of the glass. It’s not the way the story’s supposed to play out, and that superstitious part of him that will forever remain an explorer wonders if there isn’t something unlucky about allowing a ship to leave port under the gaze of envious eyes.

But a man who spends his life in his office is a man who stockpiles leave at an alarming rate, and it occurred to Kirk last week, as he was glancing through an old volume of Shakespeare that he thought he’d lost until it turned up, unexpectedly, at the bottom of one of the boxes that he hasn’t

gotten around to unpacking yet, that there's a whole planet beneath his feet that he's barely seen. The disconnect, when it hit him, was startling: he's crossed the barrier of the galaxy itself, he's made First Contact with worlds where no Human feet had ever before trod, he's traveled backwards through time itself and into the shadowy dimensions beyond our own, and yet he's never been to Europe. It's time, Kirk thinks, to do something about that. Verona, Athens, Vienna, Rome: they are pinpoints on a map, names on a page, woven through with mystery and romance and tragedy. He wants to make them real.

Kirk leaves Decker on the bridge of his changeling ship, where wires still spill in complicated knots from open panels and technicians color the air with invective in a dozen languages as sparks fly from trailing filaments, and beams back to HQ with a head full of thoughts. Whatever her new captain may think, the *Enterprise's* captivity is nearly at an end, and, when she streaks out into the black unknown once more, it will lay something to rest for Kirk. It's time to let her go, he knows, but the knowledge is heavy, uncomfortable, and it feels less like settling a ghost than letting something precious slip away forever. It feels like watching something die.

Maybe it'll be different when she's finally gone. He hopes so. He has too much still to do to waste time on regrets.

~*~

The weaving room is built to catch the daylight: set at the far end of the sanctuary's north wing, its walls are filled with wide, high windows that open onto the plateau on three sides and filter the glare through pale linen drapes, thin as tissue paper, that billow softly in the slight breeze. It is little-used in the summer, when the heat of the day rises early and the bright, sun-soaked air catches and holds it from morning until dusk, but in the winter, when the gardens are tended and the millet has been ground, acolytes pass the early afternoon cross-legged on the mats that scatter the sand-dusted floor, loom strap wrapped around their lower backs, spinning the rough fabrics that clothe the *Kolinahru* and their followers. The gentle, rhythmic thud of beaters against weaving lines, the *clack* of rattling loom rods against the floor as shuttles glide through warp threads: these were the sounds that sang the year to a close for Spock as he took the first steps along his Path.

But *srashivu* do not weave. Their days are spent outside the sanctuary walls, deep in the trance that slowly, gradually, washes away the traces of their past life, like water over bedrock. The robes Spock wears in his desert retreat — a simple tunic of gray wool, with a plain, undyed smock to cover it — were fashioned by other hands, just as he once wove the robes that sheltered *srashivu* before him as they made their way towards Truth. But when an acolyte at the end of their journey returns from the sands of Gol, freshly purged of emotion, they are reborn into the ranks of the *Kolinahru*, and their old clothes, torn and heat-stained and shaded red with desert dust, are taken and burned in a fire of *elmin'lak*, *mevak* and *sh'rr*. The robes they wear as they set out to keep the last watch on the night before they ascend to the altar, then, are completely new, never before worn, and woven by the acolyte's own hand in the long weeks of preparation that signify the end of their journey. When a *srashivu* takes up the loom again, it's because their final trial is near.

The trance comes easily now, and the plain brown cloth that will form his tunic requires little input from his conscious mind: the shuttle moves without instruction, the heddles part the threads, the warp rods rise and fall, and his mind is free to trace the edges of the Disciplines while his eyes drift, unseeing, over the lengthening roll of thick-spun fabric that coils around the end rod on his lap. A low breeze rattles the curtain weights as he works, slapping them against the rough stone sills, and the early afternoon sunlight spills like warm buttermilk through the thin fabric, settling into his robes like tepid water, and casting long shadows behind him and to the east. Outside, bleached by contrast, the gardens stretch and simmer in the afternoon heat, the earthy scent of warm leaves and late blossom drifting through the unglazed windows and calling up memories of childhood contentment that will soon belong to another man.

T’Cora’s loom lies to his left, untouched during her hours of meditation, and Spock can see the beginnings of the heavy, intricately patterned cloth that will make up a section of his smock. The design has meaning only to her, and he doesn’t look for it in their melds; it’s enough to know that, when he climbs the path to the altar, he will carry with him a part of her story, stitched alongside his own into the fabric on his back. If there is anything left in him to regret, it is only that he will not be able to help her weave her own robe when the time comes.

It is acceptable, T’Kel assures him, to retain some measure of ambivalence, to know doubt or even distress as the long desert walk approaches. The body’s emotional core may cry out as it drains away to nothing, and it is often the case that the final trial becomes an avalanche of sorts, a sensory assault that can drown the unprepared: nothing but the solid fortification of meditation and Discipline will see him through the last hours of his bondage before he is reborn to pure logic. This is a source of some comfort. Having come so far, having labored so long in search of freedom from the face that haunts him, to fall at the last hurdle to a knot of anxiety in the pit of his stomach and the sense that he is, once again, followed by an unquiet voice from somewhere inside himself that he cannot reach, is more than he can bear to contemplate.

The sheds open, the shuttle moves, the beater tightens the weft. Cloth emerges, coarse-woven and simple — the cloth of a man of logic — and Spock’s journey is nearing its end. He will be *Kolinahru*. He will set himself free. He will carve out the only future he can from a past he will lay to rest.

He will not allow his ghosts to claim him.

~*~

“Rumor has it,” says Lori, lowering herself into one of the leather armchairs across the room from Kirk’s desk, “that the Chief of Starfleet Operations suddenly remembered there’s a big old world

outside the Presidio. That can't be right, can it?"

Kirk, whose eyes have drifted out of focus as they scrolled through the seventeenth instalment in a vicious battle of words that has broken out between Vice Admiral Girvan and the Ga-Rulian attaché over the phrasing of a commemorative plaque in one of the Centroplex conference rooms, and which involves Kirk simply, as far as he can tell, because it does, glances up from his terminal and smiles.

"Admiral Ciana," he says. "How far, exactly, does your network of spies extend?"

She grins. "You were married to me for a whole year," she says, "and you still have to ask me that?"

He acknowledges the truth of her words with a wry twist of his lips, and unfolds himself from his chair to make his way over to the synthesizer, where there's a half-full pot of coffee that's still fresh enough to serve. Lori's hair is shorter now than it was when they were together, hanging loose about her shoulders where once it would have been scraped back off her face into a complicated knot, and her skin is shaded with a healthy bronze glow from a New Year's excursion to Risa with Ostergard. She looks good, Kirk thinks, but he keeps it to himself.

"Coffee?" he says.

"Sure," says Lori. "No cream, though."

"No cream?"

"New Year's resolution. So — come on, Jim. Italy?"

Kirk hands her a cup as he carries his own back to his desk, dropping into his seat and darkening his terminal with a word. "I haven't decided on the destination yet," he says.

"I see." Her grin widens, but she covers it with a sip of coffee. "That sounds a lot like the kind of vacation that never gets out of the planning phase."

Kirk's not 100% certain that they're at a place where gentle teasing is back on the table just yet, but he buries the faint trickle of irritation that rises irrepressibly from that part of him that's still stuck in the last months of their marriage.

"I'm simply aware," he says, "that Federal crises have a habit of failing to develop until just after I've submitted a leave request."

"Yeah," says Lori, with the conviction of a woman who had originally planned her visit to Suraya Bay for last September. "About that..."

Kirk feels an eyebrow arch as he leans back in his chair, coffee cradled against his chest. She has, he knows, just come from a meeting with Nogura, Boudin and Strong, and the reason he knows this is because Strong, on a call with Kirk yesterday morning, was surprised to hear that Kirk hadn't been invited too.

"A little premature, isn't it?" he says, and his voice is pleasant but his gaze is pointed. Lori meets it without hesitation, which is fair enough, he supposes. She's doing him a favor and she knows he knows it.

"What's that?" she says.

"This hitch in my vacation plans you're going to tell me about. Doesn't it usually wait until they're finalized?"

His ex-wife grins: the golden smile that lights up her face, the one that once made him think he was in love with her. It doesn't much matter that he never was; that smile still makes him wish he could be.

"There's no hitch," she says. "It's hardly even an update. But I thought you ought to know just the same — they've confirmed the origin of the signal. It's definitely Iliion."

This is not exactly news, of course: he's been expecting to hear as much for several weeks now, and the main surprise is how damned long it has taken the information to filter back to Fleet Ops. Kirk smiles, though it's largely stripped of humor, and sets his mug down on his desk, steeping his hands.

“I believe,” he says drily, “that Admiral Boudin was the only man in Starfleet who thought it might have come from somewhere else.”

A loaded twitch of the eyebrows tells him exactly where Lori stands on the subject, but she’s too consummate a player to put that kind of thought into words. Instead, she says, “You’d be surprised, you know.”

“I doubt that.”

“Now now.” The grin widens. “Don’t be cynical, Admiral Kirk. It doesn’t suit you.”

“I prefer to call it ‘realism,’” he tells her. “As far as I’m aware, it doesn’t usually take Boudin’s department the best part of a month to determine the source of a sub-space distress call. I’m certain it never has before.”

“That’s not fair, Jim,” says Lori. The smile has disappeared, replaced by the cool steel of command. “You know it’s not. That signal is poorly aimed — if it’s aimed at us at all — and it’s erratic. I’m still not prepared to put my hand on my heart and say it definitely didn’t come from a natural source. There’s no reason to think it’s a distress call.”

“There’s an excellent reason to think that it *is*,” says Kirk coldly.

“And that,” she says, “is why they’re keeping you out of the loop for now. Jesus, Jim — you play a better game than this.”

“If this were anybody else,” says Kirk, “we’d have scrambled the nearest light cruiser to the edge of the system by now.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. They’ve agreed to send out a couple of sensor probes, see what they report back. Whatever you might think, Jim, nobody in the Admiralty wants Starfleet to stick our heads in the sand right now. We’ve just got to make damn sure we know what we’re doing before we do it, that’s all.”

“Fine,” he says. “My vacation can wait a couple of weeks. I haven’t made any definite...”

But Lori is already rolling her eyes before he's finished speaking. "Jim, we're months away from anything on this," she says. "Maybe it's something; maybe it's nothing, but whatever — it's barely a blip on the radar screen right now. I didn't tell you so you could rush off to fight the good fight — I told you because I thought you should know. Please don't make me regret that."

Kirk looks up sharply. "My leave plans are my concern," he says.

"Sure," says Lori evenly, though her eyes flash fire. "Until someone wants to know why Admiral Kirk is still sitting at his desk in San Francisco instead of sipping Campari Sodas in the Piazza San Marco, and why he's asking a bunch of questions about something he's not supposed to know about yet. Then it kind of becomes my concern too, don't you think?" Her gaze is steady, relentless, defying him to look away. "Right now this is nothing. And I wouldn't have said anything to you if I didn't think I could count on you to be discreet."

He meets her stare and holds it, and there's a long moment where the silence could go either way. But she's right. She's right, and he knows she is, even if the knowledge does nothing to mitigate the frustration firing in his chest. Kirk purses his lips, turns back to his blank terminal screen.

"I am always discreet," he tells her.

Lori lets her gaze linger a moment longer, but it's thawing around the edges now. "I know you are," she says quietly. A beat, and then she sighs, turns her head towards the floor. "Look, Jim, I know what this means to you," she says. "I do. But you need to let it go right now. It's not the next big thing that's going to come beating at our doors — it's not even in the queue. We've got a protectorate on the edge of a brand new civil war, we've got a possible Romulan incursion on the edges of a major trade route, we've got negotiations falling apart on at least three and possibly five different planets, and we've got the New Humans raising hell every time we so much as put a foot out of place. And those are just the ones we can see coming right now."

"Yes," says Kirk. "I get the same memos as you."

Lori glances up, half-smiles. "Not all of them," she says.

"Oh?" An eyebrow quirks. "Is there something I should know?"

But he knows her better than that and she knows it. The smile widens, turns into a grin.

“Plenty,” she says. “But nothing that won’t keep until you’re done taking holos of the Sistine Chapel.”

Despite himself, Kirk finds an answering smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I told you,” he says, “I haven’t decided on the destination yet.”

“Oh, come on,” says Lori. “That’s not what my network of spies are saying.”

“Then perhaps,” says Kirk, “you need to find some new spies.”

Lori shrugs, but her eyes are laughing. “Italy, Luna, Ganymede — wherever, Jim,” she says. “Just go. Get out of here. Take some deep breaths, go for walks, eat food that didn’t come out of a computer. You look like you haven’t seen direct sunlight since last Fall.”

He’s not sure how Luna or Ganymede is supposed to help with that, but he lets it go. “I’ve seen sunlight,” he says.

“It doesn’t count,” says Lori, “if there’s an office window in the way.” She drains her mug, sets it on the table. “And don’t give me that *I spent five years on a starship in deep space* routine either,” she adds before Kirk can open his mouth to protest. “I’ve read your logs, Mister. You made planetfall more often than you leave this building.”

Kirk gives up. “I’d thought of Africa,” he says, standing with her as she gets to her feet. “The north coast, perhaps. Some of the old Roman territories.”

Lori tilts her head, considering. “You’ve been reading Virgil again.”

“Amongst others.”

“There are worse tour guides, I guess. I once followed Confucius around China.”

He knows. It’s one of the things they learned about each other, once upon a time, but Kirk’s not sure he can remember all the stories he’s ever shared with her, either, and so he’s not about to let her know that it’s a tale she’s already told. Their past remains contested ground.

So, instead, he says, carefully neutral, “You’ll keep me updated?”

“Sure,” says Lori, and her easy, even tone tells him that she hasn’t caught the note of caution in his. “I’d tell you to keep your communicator on, but I know you better than that. If I hear anything you need to know, you’ll hear it too.”

That’s a pretty heavy qualification, but it’s not unexpected. Kirk decides to let it slide. “Thank you,” he says, and, if the sentiment is somewhat equivocal, he knows she’ll understand.

The door glides open onto the muted buzz of the corridor beyond: the businesslike bustle of Fleet Ops central command in the calm between crises. On the threshold, Lori closes her hand in a brief grip around his lower arm, their standard post-marital gesture of leave-taking, and Kirk feels the skin beneath her fingers react as it always does: a brief frisson of energy layered in a residual attraction that has never quite left, and soft, unnamable regret. He leans against the doorframe, arms folded across his chest, as she steps out into the hallway beyond, but, just as she’s about to move out into the tides and currents of Fleet HQ, she hesitates, turns back over one shoulder with a flash of her golden smile.

“Hey, Jim,” she says, and her eyes are soft, warm; a look he remembers from better days. “Wherever you end up — make it count, okay?”

Kirk’s not sure what that means, but she’s gone before he can ask her. And, besides, he thinks, as he steps back into the room, settles into his chair, reopens the communiqué he was reading when she arrived, he likes the sound of it regardless. Maybe there’s something, maybe there’s nothing. But he’s going to be ready for it if it comes.

~*~

It does not get cold in the temple during the long hours of silent meditation, but in the evening, as the sun drops low on the horizon, the shadows suck the heat from the day in a moment that the acolytes call *i’karil*, the tipping point between desert sun and desert darkness. They do not talk — at least not to each other — but Spock hears their thoughts in the meld as he prepares to take his leave: the soft brush of envy, the hope, and the background hum of anxiety that wonders if hope is illogical, and what its presence within them might mean for their progress. His robe is stitched and hanging in T’Kel’s private quarters; his hair hangs loose at his neck in the manner of the ancients; his tunic is light enough to endure the desert heat, his cloak sturdy enough to shelter him from the desert night. A waterskin hangs from his belt, and his mind is clear. It is time.

T’Kel is waiting for him at the sanctuary gates, a black shadow against the gold and amber blaze of the setting sun. Spock can feel the eyes of the acolytes follow him as he paces the final feet to where she stands and drops to his knees in front of her.

“Spock,” she says, and her soft voice echoes against the silence of the plateau. “Your path towards Truth is almost at an end. Are you ready to go into the desert and cast off the shackles of emotion, that you may be born again into pure logic?”

“I am,” he says.

“Do you take this journey in the full knowledge of the danger that lies ahead?”

“I do.”

“Will you return to this place to receive the symbol of ultimate logic, as our ancestors have returned for generations unnumbered?”

“I will,” he says.

“Then go as Spock,” she says, “and return as *Kolinahru*.”

The sands stretch out before him, endless and ageless and sinking into shadow. It does not get cold in the sanctuary, but the desert night is merciless and filled with a thousand ways to die, and the sun, when it rises, can scour the skin from the scalp of a man without shade. But T’Sil returned. Storan returned, however broken. And before them were Soras and T’Sina, Venak and T’Ling, T’Faar and Sanekar. Eight acolytes have gone into the desert since Spock’s arrival at Gol, and eight acolytes have found their way back to the altar, to T’Sai, to the peace beyond bondage. In ten days’ time, he thinks, as he steps through the great gates and into the arid wastes that stretch to the darkening horizon, he will become the ninth. He does not yet know what manner of man will make his way back to the sanctuary when his trial is over, but he does know this: he will gladly trade whatever measure of himself that he will lose, if it means that he will finally be free.

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It’s early evening when the airtram touches down in the Ras al-Tin quarter, and the air is fresh with a gentle breeze that drifts down across the roofs from Lake Mariot, hidden in the hills above, and

carries with it a hundred scents of the city at dusk. To the east lies the fifteenth-century citadel of Qaitbey, nestled comfortably into the eastern corner of the harbor from which, in the time of kings and legends, the lighthouse of Pharos rose like a spear into the Egyptian sky; to the west, Alexandria, or at least this small section of it, crowds onto a narrow stretch of land that was an island, then a peninsula, and finally a raised bed above the empty Mediterranean basin, where fields of wheat and corn sway in the wind and jostle for space with fallen palaces and ancient treasures.

Kirk steps onto the sidewalk, tarmac softened by the day's sun, and flips open his communicator in case it's stopped working in the seven minutes since he last checked. It flashes to life with a series of reassuring beeps, but nothing more: no messages, no missed connections, no word from the world he's left behind. He knew there wouldn't be, of course, but information, as it turns out, is habit-forming, and he feels stripped, dispossessed, adrift without it. But, in the end, he guesses, he trusts Lori to hold up her end of their agreement: he takes the damn vacation, she gets to decide if a blip on the radar screen is the sort of thing he needs to know.

He has booked a room in the old palace quarter — the Bruchion, buried beneath salt water for almost a millennium before the hydroelectric plant at Gibraltar finally drained the seabed — and the tram's navigation program tried very hard to deposit him at its doors, but Kirk insisted: he wanted the walk. He's here to see the city, and not just with his eyes: he wants to feel its heartbeat beneath his feet, to feel the hum of three thousand years of history rise through his bones, his muscles, the blood in his veins. He wants to turn his head and see the shades of men and women whose names have been carved into myth in the faces that pass him on the street; he wants to hear the echo of drums and legions and great ships on the water; he wants to smell oil lamps and incense and the smoke of a hundred burning books. He wants to feel like he's one link in a chain that stretches into infinity; like he's part of something bigger than himself.

Marrakech was beautiful, woven through with a rich, old-world charm in its hidden gardens and quiet arches that spill into great muqarna-hung alcazars of blue and white tile. Casablanca's Art Deco splendor hints at the faded romance of days gone by; Carthage was like being suspended from a great height over a deep canyon of years. Everyone he has spoken to about this trip has had a different recommendation — *you must see Timbuktu, it's like stepping into the pages of Leo Africanus; the medina of Essaouira is just so peaceful and beautiful, an oasis by the sea; Lalibela is simply breathtaking, you can't afford to miss it* — but it's Alexandria he has been waiting for, he thinks. A phrase from Shakespeare, never far from his mind as the tram closed in on the city of the Ptolemies, drifts through his head as he walks: *Egypt, thou knew'st too well, My heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings, And thou shouldst tow me after*. Something about this place speaks to his soul.

These streets were designed by Alexander the Great and walked by Cleopatra and Caesar and Antony. In the old palace harbor, the greatest library then known to mankind caught fire and burned as a brother and sister struggled for supremacy. In the barren desert to the east, Augustus met and ended a legend, and in the bay before him, inside a splendid monument long-destroyed and reconstructed now in holographic light, a queen in despair put an asp to her breast and waited for the long sleep to claim her.

Hers was a love that spanned an empire, two worlds united by a connection that time and war and death could not sever. Apart, they were diminished; together, they were greater than the sum of themselves. Little wonder it has moved poets and playwrights to literary ecstasies for the two thousand years that have passed since they were laid together in a tomb now lost to the sea; it describes everything that is best about the Human spirit, everything that makes him proud of who he is.

And Kirk looks up into the darkening skies above, where a pale white star, nestled into a winding constellation that was named in this very city, is just beginning to peek through the gathering dusk.

END OF PART III

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

PART IV: HOME

Warp and weft. The warp is the thread stretched over the loom, the weft is the thread that weaves and fills in the holes. He's not sure which of them is warp, which is weft. But he knows Spock is tightly woven into the fabric of his existence.

“The Man Who Fell To Earth” by louiseb

~*~

— *Is he alive, Bones?*

A pause while the tricorder whirs: seconds only, but it's as if they hover on the edge of a singularity, disappearing into all possible futures. Later, he'll remember it as a stray thought that hit an accidental target, because that's exactly what it's like: as though time sits on a razor's edge, poised to fall according to a single syllable from the doctor's mouth.

And then Bones nods.

— *Just barely, he says, but it's enough. It's enough. — Jim, I'm going to need you to move.*

— *I'm seeing some evidence of trauma to the somatosensory cortex, says Chapel. —There's some swelling around the postcentral gyrus that might indicate a bleed, but it's difficult to tell without a full bioscan...*

— *We need to get him to sickbay, says Bones. His face is gray, unsmiling, and there are lines of*

worry around his eyes. — *Jim, I need you to let go of him; I have to get him onto a stretcher.*

— *I think... I think he opened his eyes...*

— *It's a trick of the light, Admiral Kirk; his brainwave activity indicates coma...*

— *Spock. Spock! Open your eyes. Look at me, goddamn it...*

— *Jim, I need to move him right now.*

— *Open your eyes—that's an order, Science Officer!*

— *Jim! Jim, you need to step away...*

— *Admiral, please—we need to get him to sickbay immediately...*

And it's only when Chapel's hand closes gently but firmly around his upper arm, her soft voice deferent but insistent in his ear, that Kirk realises that he's still clinging to his science officer's body as tightly as when they fell through the airlock.

— *Of course, he says, and he releases his grip, long Vulcan limbs slackening against the floor as the medical team close in to take possession of their patient. Kirk steps back, forgotten, to stand by the bulkhead as they work, and he tells himself that it's command duty that keeps him fixed in place, that it's his responsibility to apprise himself of his officer's status before he returns to the bridge, that his decision to remain is predicated on the need to know what Spock has learned as soon as it can be known; nothing more. Nothing more. And so he waits, and he watches, and he asks himself no questions because he has no answers, and all he's certain of, all he knows for sure in that moment, is that there's an emptiness against his chest, a vacancy, a coldness where, just a moment ago, there was connection and life and warmth...*

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to louseb for allowing me to quote from "The Man Who Fell To Earth."
It's a truly gorgeous fic and I love it more every time I read it.

Chapter 42

Kirk's hand is tingling.

It's something of a surprise to find that he's aware of this small fact, buried as it is beneath the strata of chaos that have layered over these past three days of triumph and confusion and discovery and loss. If he's honest with himself, there's something fascinating about the way that of everything that has happened since he took back his command, it's this in particular that his conscious mind has chosen to fixate upon: not Lori, not Decker, not how close they almost came, but the memory of cool fingers closing around Kirk's; of dark eyes that locked onto his; of a grip that latched their hands together like an anchor. He doesn't know what to make of that, and so he's let it slide into the background: one long note in an orchestra of white noise and voices that's clamoring for attention inside his aching skull. But it's dark now, though the lights are dialed up to full in this room that he doesn't recognize, and he's alone with far too many thoughts, and one of them—a particularly vociferous and insistent one; the Leonard McCoy of thoughts, if you will—is demanding that he pay attention to the network of nerves that stretch beneath the skin of his left hand. Because they are alive with remembered touch.

The ship is quiet now: the thick, focused silence of post-mission exhaustion, with only the thrum of warp engines echoing through the bulkheads and the occasional fragment of conversation from the corridor outside to break through the hush. It's both vaguely familiar and completely unknown, and this unsettles Kirk in a way that is itself disturbing: this ship has a heartbeat, but it's not the one that he remembers. All this time, all those many nights when he lay, sleepless, in an Earth-bound bed and stared through his window into the black depths above him; all those hidden, furtive dreams; all the memories he pretended to store in some disregarded archive of his mind—they were for another vessel, he thinks; both *Enterprise* and not. Maybe Thomas Wolfe was right: maybe you really can't ever go home again.

He left Sulu in the center seat, returned to the bridge after a medically mandated eight-hour recharge break that probably ought to have included Kirk as well, but for the fact that everyone's circadian rhythm has been thrown out of whack these past few days and, so long as he wasn't quite ready to fall face-down onto a mattress and drop like a stone into thick, dreamless sleep, Kirk preferred to stay where he was and wait for the senior crew to get back before he left his ship in someone else's hands. As avoidance strategies go, it's failed to exhaust him quite as much as he'd hoped, but it has achieved the dual benefit of keeping him away from his quarters and unwelcome introspection for a little while longer, and of introducing him to the bewildering array of new faces that make up what's going to be, he guesses, his new beta shift. There is virtually no chance that Nogura's going to say no, now, when he asks for the *Enterprise* back, though the longer he stretches out the shakedown, the more trying that conversation is likely to be. Truth be told, Kirk was somewhat surprised to encounter so little resistance from his CIC to what was, in all honesty, something of a harebrained scheme; he blames an excess of adrenalin and not enough sleep, and to be fair, it's at least partly Nogura's fault that Kirk's not used to this combination anymore. They were in Low Earth Orbit when the intruder disappeared, with a ship that had almost wormholed them out of existence the day before yesterday; it was not only reasonable to expect that her captain would park her in the nearest drydock for a proper check-up, it was, in fact, the only rational course

of action. And instead Kirk sat back in his seat and ordered the least-specific course heading in command history, and not only did his entire crew not look at him like he'd lost his mind, they have, to Bones' poorly feigned exasperation, actively colluded with him.

Oh, sure, he'd said with one of his patented McCoy scowls as the warp field coalesced into bright white ribbons of starlight across the viewscreen. *Don't anybody ask what in blazes we think we're doing...*

Another communication from Starfleet, sir, said Uhura, and, though her face was perfectly composed, her eyes were dancing. *They're requesting clarification on your report, Captain.*

I'll bet they are, muttered the doctor, close by Kirk's ear, and Kirk, whose head was presently feeling light enough to escape terrestrial gravity all by itself, opened his mouth to reply, though he had no idea what he was planning to say. In truth, he wasn't sure what more he *could* say—*that's correct, Starfleet; request for immediate beam-down and debrief is denied. We're taking your ship out for a joyride; see you in a couple of days...*—but he'll never know the answer to that one now.

Because Spock answered for him.

Spock.

Spock, who should be on Vulcan right now, surgically excising the last traces of Kirk from his thoughts and stitching over the scar with a web of logic and denial. Spock, who turned away from Kirk in a haze of acrimony and words that couldn't be taken back and disappeared into another life, another world. Spock, whose name has not passed Kirk's lips in almost three years, whose shadow has followed Kirk's every footstep, whose memories poured into the cracks of Kirk's marriage and broke it into tiny pieces. Spock of Vulcan, acolyte of Gol and almost-*Kolinahru*, who was, absurdly, unbelievably, gloriously standing on Kirk's bridge as a decorated admiral of several years' standing prepared to make off with the flagship of the fleet—and he went ahead and lied to Command as though he'd been doing it all his life.

Starfleet Control, this is Acting First Officer Spock, he'd said with that quiet, regal dignity of his, and, just like that, it was as though they were back in those easy, mid-mission days when what they had was well-defined and stable, before Vulcan, before Cochrane Day, before the whole stupid mess of years had ever happened. They'll have to have a word about the Acting First Officer thing, thinks Kirk, but it's for the show of things, and he's not going to bother pretending to himself that it's not. *Vessel status is fully operational; however, warp core status remains precarious and I have requested a full space trial in order to collect further data. It is my opinion that this maneuver is essential to the maintenance and ongoing space-worthiness of this ship, which, as you know, was untried and operating at sub-optimal efficiencies when it was scrambled to meet the Intruder known as Vejur.*

And Kirk knew without Bones' acerbic eye-roll or Chekov's blank-faced disbelief that his own eyebrows had reached for his hairline, because, no, Spock had not requested any such thing, nor was the warp core operating at anything below maximum capacity, and even if it were, the most logical course of action would be to put in at Spacedock, let the engines cool, and tell Scotty to go nuts. Starfleet know this too, of course, and their next question was a very reasonable enquiry as to why the *Enterprise* wasn't doing exactly that, but it cut off halfway through with a clipped acknowledgement of their coordinates and warp trajectory that essentially legitimizes the entire madcap endeavor and strongly suggests that, whatever may wait for Kirk back on Earth, Nogura is humoring him for now.

And Spock... Well, that's a little more complicated. What Spock is doing, Kirk is not entirely sure.

When he stepped, unannounced, onto the bridge two days ago, it was as though someone had switched off the sound inside Kirk's head. Nothing about that day feels entirely real. He knows he caught three, maybe three and a half hours' sleep that night because Bones made noises about nervous exhaustion and command fitness and the incompatibility of the former with the latter, until the captain gave in and took himself to this new bunk that ought not to be his, decorated to another man's specifications, but of the seven hours that he was off the bridge, he knows that no more than half of them were spent in anything approaching actual rest. He'd opened his eyes to Mediterranean sunlight more than twenty-four hours earlier, sheathed in 800-thread Egyptian cotton sheets and swallowed by an ocean of thick, downy pillows, and his future had been painted in uniform shades of gray, one day after another: a series of small compromises and smaller victories that carried him further and further from the man he used to be. And somewhere in that day, a crack had opened up in his world that let the light back in, and it was like he was waking out of a long and restless dream. *Enterprise*, command, purpose, desire; it was as though somebody had lit a fire in his blood, and he's not even clear about what he said to Nogura to convince him to let Kirk take his ship back, he only remembers the certainty—absolute and unassailable—that it was the right thing to do. This at least hasn't changed in the hours that followed: it was the right thing to do. It wasn't only Kirk who needed the *Enterprise*, he thinks; the *Enterprise* also needed him.

That part he can rationalise. Just about. It takes a little chewing over, but he thinks it's sunk in: he has his ship back. That trembling beneath his feet, that's the restless hum of an engine at warp. If he switches his viewscreen to *exterior*, it's going to show a starfield disappearing into infinity. The mattress he lies on can only have come from the sadistic fever-dreams of the soft-furnishings experts in Material Supplies, and the faint trace of ozone on the air speaks of oxygen that's been through at least one set of lungs already. This thing that was gone forever, this impossible fantasy that could never come to pass, it's here, it's back, it's all around him once again. That in itself is plenty of *unthinkable* for one mind to wrap itself around.

He has no idea how to process the rest.

Because Spock stepped, unannounced, onto Kirk's bridge two days ago and it was like someone

had switched off the sound inside his head. He remembers standing, he remembers finding his voice from somewhere and speaking a name he never thought he'd speak again, and he remembers feeling as though a missing piece had slotted back into place, as though he'd been cold for so long that he'd ceased to notice until he felt the sun on his skin again. He remembers this now, but only because of what happened in between. Spock turned away again so quickly that whatever it was that Kirk felt in that moment was gone before he could look at it properly, locked down and buried with the closing of the turbolift door.

He thinks that he decided that the hollowness, the emptiness that hung like lead in his chest as he fought a losing battle with wakefulness that night, was for Lori, and he's still not sure he was wrong, not completely. At some point, he's going to get back to Earth and find that a woman called Alisoff is in charge of Xeno; that Ostergard's arm is empty at the Polemius Conference ball; that the light has gone out of the eyes of an old Admiral and his wife with the golden smile that can light up the room, just like her daughter's used to do. She never did get her deep space assignment, and he never did find out why. He had nearly three years beside her and not all of it was fighting; there were many, many months in which she was the only bright point of color in a washed-out wasteland, and, he thinks, in the end, she knew him better than any woman ever has. He wishes he'd thought to ask her why. He wishes it didn't feel, now that it's much too late to change this, that he never really knew her at all.

Newton's third law of motion states that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Push and pull. Attract and repel. Friction and motion. If Kirk has learned anything at all from his long years at the very limits of Human knowledge, it's that love is the universal constant that underpins all sentient thought: call it comradeship, call it family, call it friendship or brotherhood or *eros* — it defines the bonds that bind consciousness to consciousness, that create cities out of sand, that reach out into the black vaults in search of connection. And if love is just another force, then maybe it has to be lost on one hand to be regained on another.

He doesn't know. All he knows is that, two days ago, he watched one ex-lover die on a transporter pad and another appear out of the vacuum as though they were different sides of the same equation, with Kirk as the equivalency that shackles them together. And there was no time for either of them, no time to let his breath catch in his throat, to feel the sharp burn of grief both old and new, to miss his footing and collapse into a wall on legs that wouldn't hold him; there were moments, nothing more—a stiff twist of the head, a name breathed out on the edge of amazement—quickly contained by the pressing need for action, the mantle of command, and he knew even then that a part of him was glad of this. He has no idea what to do with it. And now that the anger is gone, the outrage and the purpose, he realizes that he just... doesn't know how he's supposed to feel anymore. For either of them. He has no idea at all.

Kirk considers pulling on a fresh uniform, striding down the corridors like he knows where he's going in the hope that he'll find himself at the doors of sickbay before anyone notices that he's lost, banging on Bones' office door and baptizing his new ship in whatever violent shade of liquor his friend has managed to smuggle aboard. It's a plan that has *Guaranteed Psych Eval* scrawled in watermark across every hastily scripted page, but he's not completely sure he cares about that right now. For the first time in his life, he thinks, he might actually be prepared to voluntarily allow

someone to sluice out the darkest corners of his soul; this constant hum of potential energy, rattling through his blood with nowhere to go, is starting to make him uneasy. It's not, he's painfully aware, Bones that he wants to talk to, nor is it the want of Bones' company that's dancing across his weary brain on stilettoed feet, but he can't—he just can't go there right now. *This simple feeling* is all very well, but he has three years' worth of regrets to remind him that feeling, simple or not, is capricious: it's uncontrolled, it's ungovernable, and it's dangerous. He knows what he wants, what he'd like it to mean, and, if he closes his eyes and feels those long fingers curled around his, cool skin pressed tightly to Kirk's, he can believe that it does, but that's always been their problem: wanting has never been enough.

He crossed a line before and the world dropped out from underneath his feet. He needs to be very, very sure that Spock's simple feeling is the same as Kirk's before he risks crossing it again.

And what are the chances of that, really? Spock ran away once—more than once—from what was offered; he has made himself very clear. He's back now, and this has to be enough: Kirk's world just doesn't work the way it ought to unless Spock is by his side, and if it's a choice between having him and wanting, and not having him at all, then that's hardly a choice at all. He has done this before and he can do it again—he just needs to handle it better this time, that's all.

And yet... He reached for Kirk's hand, fingers closing around his bicep, sliding across his forearm to fix their hands together, and he clung to him like a man waking from a long and fevered sleep. Kirk's skin burns at the memory, as though the touch has branded itself into his flesh, and he remembers the words, low and clear and certain, and the way Spock's eyes searched for his, locked their gaze together, refused to look away. He knows what was written into his face then, because, no matter that he'd spent three years trying to carve it out and burn it, no matter what else may have passed between them, he knows—he *knows*—that he saw it written into Spock's. He has never been so certain of this: not on Vulcan, not in his apartment on Cochrane Day, not in the long months that followed when he was hollowed out, lost and empty, trying to walk on ground that shifted beneath him with every step and determined not to know that half his world had been cut away.

He remembers being so certain in that moment—but then that moment ended. And now? Now Kirk is acutely aware that he probably ought to be calibrating their conversation for the proximity of a recent brain injury, and that, consequently, he has no idea how to interpret the soft words and comfort that have flowed between them since then without a clear understanding of what the revised baseline might be. Now all he can see is that there are a hundred ways he could have misread what happened in sickbay, a hundred ways he could be mistaken, and the only thing he's certain about any longer is that Spock left once before and he could do it again, and pretending not to need him when he's gone is not a viable option anymore. The odds are stacked against this one; they always were. The only difference is that, this time, he knows what he stands to lose if he's wrong.

And yet...

And yet...

Kirk sits up, straightens, stretches, stands. A couple of steps take him towards the head, a couple of steps take him back towards his desk, another couple move him towards the door, restless energy rattling in his veins, skittering through his muscles, buzzing just below his skin. Goddamn it all to hell. He's going to have to go and talk to Bones. He has no idea what to do next, no idea what any of it might mean, and, if he's going to make a decision, he needs some answers first.

He just hopes he doesn't have to ask any actual questions in order to get them.

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Spock is eleven years old, and he knows when his mother is lying.

"It's nothing, dear," she says as they disembark their private transport at the ShiKahr terminal, and she flashes a warm smile over her shoulder, but, though it's warmed as ever by ungovernable maternal affection, it's brittle, sharp as frost, and it's cracking at the edges. Spock's enquiry after her health, his eleventh of their short journey from the station at Kir, was prompted by an unmistakable stiffness in her bones as she found her feet, a graying of her face and a tight intake of breath, but she is determined to dismiss his concerns. This is not logical, but, as he has cause to know very well, his mother's logic does not always bear close scrutiny.

They have barely spoken since leaving his grandparents' house, and this is not unusual: though he is aware of her Human disinclination towards conversational lulls, she has been married to a Vulcan for more than a decade, and she is content to allow her husband and son to practice silence as they require. It's only that Spock has a lifetime's experience of decoding his mother's many expressions, and every reticent shift of muscles, every furrow of her brow, tells a story without words. He believes she is ill, though she has now denied it so many times that a trace of irritation has begun to cloud her tone when she answers him. Spock cannot understand why she insists upon refuting what is manifestly true, but he is old enough to know that she will have her reasons, and that they are likely to be uncomfortable.

He is experiencing some difficulty with his controls.

Amanda does not reach for his arm as they descend the steps of the transport to the sand-scattered ground; she will not breach protocol so flagrantly in a public space. But her movements are taut, labored, and her knuckles are white where they grip the handrail. Her son watches her carefully, eyes fixed on her feet, alert for the first sign that her balance has become unstable, and so he does not see the look that crosses her face as she scans the concourse, the flash of unexpected and unrestrained joy as she finds a face there that she does not expect to find. He doesn't see it, but he doesn't need to see it: he hears it in her voice.

"Sarek!" she says, and her tone is like a Terran summer: caramel-soft, warm and rich. "Spock, look. Your father has come to meet us."

He feels his Vulcan self lock down all traces of Human distress, like armor snapping into place,

and he glances up in search of the ambassador, but his eyes flash first to his mother. It's an old habit, a child's habit, and he knows he must break it as he approaches adulthood, but for today at least her frailty is his absolution. Spock raises his gaze to meet Sarek's, all steely Vulcan decorum, and they exchange the ta'al as formally as if they had met this morning over breakfast, but that stolen glimpse, a brief impression caught in the moment before he becomes his father's son once more, is a window into a private world where Spock does not belong. Amanda's face is open, bright-eyed and shining, and the love that she turns on her son when she thinks he doesn't see is woven like gold and silk into her smile.

"He should be resting," she says in an undertone, but there's no censure in her voice; only a kind of indulgence that Spock recognizes from the way she speaks to her husband and son when she's pretending to agree with them. "I shall have to have a word with Taaval when we get back."

She won't, though. Spock understands this as he understands that the slight falter in her step, her uneven stride as she crosses the bustling terminal lobby, belongs to a part of Amanda that he will never really know; the part of her that was a wife before she was ever a mother. Whatever her instructions to her husband's assistant, however flagrantly they have been ignored, it's not displeasure that she's trying to conceal as she enters the glass-walled waiting room where the Ambassador stands alone, face impassive, eyes darkened by shadows, cheeks more hollow than Spock remembers. It's not exasperation that twitches at the corner of her mouth; it's not irritation that quickens her step as she approaches. It's the opposite of these things, the bright light that crowds out their shadow: it's love, the simplest of feelings, and it's shining from his mother's face.

But Spock is tired and anxious and eleven years old; it will be many years before he understands this. And it will be many more again before his mind's eye sees it in the answering look that his father turns upon the woman he chose to share his life.

~*~

In the privacy of his quarters on a ship that he barely recognizes, Spock sits alone, cross-legged on the floor, and, in the absence of an *asanoi* on which to focus, contemplates the wall. The trance will not come, but he's not surprised; he really wasn't expecting that it would. Moreover, he finds that this is not a source of any particular concern. He needs to think, and meditation, he is coming to realize, is not the same thing.

It is a little under four days since the galaxy was a simpler place. Four days ago, he knelt at the altar of Gol and prepared to step into another life, and the world was comfortably monochromatic: a clear division of black and white, logic and illogic, emotion and serenity. Four days ago, the *Enterprise* was an unquiet memory on the fringes of thought, an old wound that needed from time to time when he relaxed his guard too far, but no more substantive than the whispers of other consciousnesses that drifted to him on the meld. It was an idea, a cipher, a pictorial representation in the vaults of his mind of a time and a man which had slipped into history: it might exist,

somewhere, in physical form, but not for Spock. Four days ago, this was not a state of affairs that he ever expected to change.

Four days ago, he knew who he was--or at least he thought he did. He was certainly clearer about what he wanted.

Everything is different now. He is surprised and somewhat unnerved to find that this is not the source of greater disquiet: the work of almost three years of constant struggle has been lost in the time it took for a voice in the darkness to breach the walls of his mind, and everything he has labored to achieve is gone. He has failed *Kolinahr*; not only failed, but actively abandoned, and he cannot even begin to imagine how that's going to play over the dinner table back home. But in a strange and manifestly illogical way, Spock suspects that a sizeable portion of his father's inevitable tight-lipped disapproval will be for show--Ambassador Sarek didn't raise a quitter, after all--and that the silent reproof, when it comes, will be not for the fact that he has left the sanctuary with emotional imbalance intact, but that he set out for Gol at all. He's not sure how he knows this, but there are many things that Spock's not sure about right now, and most of them make no sense. Everything is different now, but, in a manner that Spock is entirely at a loss to explain, it is also just exactly as it was.

A feeling is not much to go on, he remembers telling Kirk many years ago, in another time, on a different ship, words spoken from the lips of a different man. And the captain's answer--*sometimes a feeling, Mr. Spock, is all we Humans have to go on*--was as predictable as a warp equation, and so comfortable, so expected, that Spock allowed it to fall, uninterrogated, into the general pattern of their discourse. Now he wonders if perhaps it's something he should have put a little more effort into pulling apart, considering, interpreting and understanding. It has not been far from his mind, these past few hours, and it's quite bewildering, really, the connotative difference that a small shift in aspect can make. Captivity, he told his friend in a cafe by the Bay, is often a question of perspective, and he's beginning to understand that he has been a prisoner for the past three years; it was only that he did not have the sense to see his chains.

He loves James Kirk. He is in love with James Kirk. So it has been for eight years; so it will continue to be, and there is no force in the universe that can change this. And he is done fighting. He no longer has the energy.

What remains, then, is to work out what to do next. Is it possible, he wonders, that he has spent almost a decade wrestling with this problem and yet completely neglected to contemplate a solution that *didn't* involve running away from it or pretending it didn't exist? It seems... unlike him, but the facts are what they are. Approximately two hundred yards along this corridor stands the door to the captain's quarters, inside which, despite the lateness of the hour, serenity or repose is unlikely to reign, and yet it might as well be on the other side of the sector for all that Spock can begin to contemplate the journey from here to there. That sounds very much like *running away from* to any analysis that meets with scientific rigor, and he's not sure that the fact that he came back to the *Enterprise* of his own accord mitigates significantly against this.

Spock's eyes drop to his lap, where his hands are resting neatly on his thighs, and he spends some moments considering the beginnings of a hangnail on his left index finger. He wonders, absently, if he ought to wander down to Engineering and check that the recalibrations to the antimatter conversion chamber are holding, but he finds that he cannot face the soft-eyed look of understanding that will cross Mr. Scott's face when he notes the return of the ship's First Officer no more than 2.7 hours after Spock's most recent visit. If the Commander could be relied upon to assume that Spock's continued interest indicates some measure of skepticism about Scott's ability to maintain his own warp coil, that might be acceptable--Spock has coped with enough aggrieved Celtic protestations in his career aboard the *Enterprise* to be assured of his ability to manage another outburst--but the fact is, he probably won't. Far too little remains private on this ship, and, if there's one thing Spock has learned from forty years' close proximity to Humans, it's that their preoccupation with determining the exact nature of oblique non-verbal cues verges on the obsessive. If there's one thing he *hasn't* learned, it's how to give them nothing whatsoever with which to work.

Enough. He's exhausted and he's supposed to be convalescing, and if he happens to forget either of these things, then the inside of his skull is always ready to remind him with a low-level burst of throbbing pain that spirals out from his psi-center like a shallow earthquake, whiting out his vision for the moment that it takes to make its point. Left to his own devices, what he'd really like to do is lie down on his bunk, engage the privacy settings on the doors to his quarters, and settle into a day-long healing trance while a couple of thousand bruised and reeling neural pathways stitch themselves back together, but the circumstances are hardly opportune. In the first place, he very nearly died yesterday, and this is not something that has passed unremarked in the *Enterprise's* sickbay; it was nothing more than operational necessity that got Spock released back onto the bridge once his eyes were open and words were coming out of his mouth, and the only reason he didn't get shipped straight back into a biobed the moment they warped out of Earth's orbit was because he continued to stand up straight and function appropriately during the hours that followed. Any comfortable illusions he might have entertained that his corporeal performance was no longer of any particular interest to Doctors Chapel and McCoy were unceremoniously shattered by the appearance of an orderly at his door 3.5 hours ago, carrying a tray of *barkaya marak* and an urn full of hot, spiced tea and an admonition from the *Enterprise's* CMO concerning the lack of activity on Spock's diet card in the past twelve hours. It seems not only likely but actively guaranteed that any descent into kappa waves on his remote-monitoring readout screens will have him readmitted to sickbay before he has passed the second level of the *tow-kath*. In the second place, he suffered a major psionic injury fewer than twenty-four hours ago, and, so long as the inside of his brain continues to feel as though it's pumped full of water and startled birds, his mastery of the Disciplines is proving capricious. Spock is not actually certain that he *can* achieve a healing trance right now, acolyte of Gol or not, without the presence of a mind-healer, and he is not inclined to aggravate his headache by trying.

And, in the third place... Jim.

Jim. It is not logical to base the decision to forgo the *tow-kath*, even in small part, on a disinclination to surrender to unconsciousness any moment of this newfound proximity to his erstwhile friend, but nor is it logical to pretend to himself that he doesn't know that this is exactly

what he's doing. And the rationalization, as it turns out, is less traumatic to his sense of self than he might have expected of a man who was almost *Kolinahru*. It is less than one Terran week since Spock knelt on sand-dashed flagstones to watch the dawn break over the desert basin on the last day of his old life, but it might as well have been a thousand years. The memories feel as though they belong to another man, as though he's heard the story second-hand: the legend of the acolyte whose Path ended as the Elders prepared to place the symbol of ultimate logic around his neck. He left the altar in a haze of confusion and shame, a cloud so dark that he could barely find his way back to the sanctuary, and all he remembers from his passage across the plateau is the understanding that the *srashivu* at least would not be there to greet him, and the attendant rush of relief that he lacked the energy to suppress. He remembers making his way through empty corridors that echoed to his unsteady footfall, to the cell where T'Kel waited to receive him, and he remembers that he could not speak to her of what had happened; she had to read it for herself in the meld.

She was silent for many minutes after that. Spock kept his eyes fixed on the floor, his hands clasped in his lap, and attempted to seek his composure in the silence. But where was composure to be found when the world he thought he knew had shifted, collapsed, crumbled into dust?

I once named this bond ashaya, she said after a moment. Her voice was cool, soft in the shadows of her cell, and he thought he caught, on its edges, the faintest trace of reproach. It was only much later that it occurred to him to wonder which of them it was for.

Yes, Master, he answered, and the words felt as though they were carved from stone.

He caught her faint nod in the shift of the still air. *Together*, she said, *we worked to break its hold over your katra*.

Yes, Master, said Spock again. He could not meet her eyes.

And T'Kel sat back on her knees, head bowed, face shadowed in the half-light of her cell. She sat back, hands folded in the sleeves of her robe, and motes of dust danced on a shaft of sunlight that pierced the high window above: the first breath of a new day.

Perhaps, she said quietly, *we were wrong to do so*.

His knees, un-cushioned by the cradle of meditation, have begun to protest the severity of the cabin floor; it's time to acknowledge that the trance has defeated him once again. Chapel, who apparently served her Xeno rotation on his homeworld, warned him when he was discharged from sickbay that it might prove elusive for a day or so, while his mind rebounded from the neural shock of a

meld with the sum total of all knowledge contained in the universe, and this is logical, but there's a great deal of associated baggage that the Human half of Spock's subconscious attaches to a failure to achieve the *tvi-sochya*, and so he has tried a little harder than, perhaps, is sensible. The last time this was a problem for him, he ended up in Gol, and that was not precisely a thundering success; he can know, rationally, that the two situations do not bear close comparison, but there's a part of him that will forever be his mother's son, and this is the bit that's currently responsible for the creak in his knees that almost bends him double as he gets to his feet. Perhaps there is something in the doctors' injunctions after all, though, barring further acute neurogenic shock and the associated liberation of his emotional reserve, neither McCoy nor Chapel will ever hear these words from Spock.

The urn that arrived with his dinner tray has long since cooled, but he has reprogrammed his synthesizer to approximate a herbal blend that that he used to favor back when he was in the habit of taking tea in the evenings, and he crosses the room now to dial in a request for a fresh pot. Some incomprehensible failure of spatial logic has caused the ship's designers to devote a substantial portion of his living quarters to the placement of a wide, low table, the purpose of which escapes Spock, but the chairs that surround it are his only option in terms of seating unless he counts the bed, and drinking tea in bed just seems a little too like something a man who belongs in sickbay might do. It's alarming, really, the speed with which his thought patterns have reverted to metaphor and symbolism after three days in the company of his mother's people, but, nevertheless, when a tinny buzz signals the production of something not entirely unlike *theris-masau*, it's onto one of the rigid, uncomfortable stools that he elects to lower himself, steam curling in twists of *bar-kas* and *kh'r'fal* from the mug in his hands. Sleep is likely to be no less evasive than a meditative trance; at least at the table he can maintain the illusion that he has some say in the matter of his wakefulness.

In fact, it has been several days since that has been the case. Four, to be precise. Four days since the universe veered abruptly off course and carried away with it any prospect of serenity or rest.

When his transport docked with the *Enterprise*, Spock still believed he was following a troubling theoretical conjecture to its logical conclusion and that, afterwards, emotional revenants silenced at last, he would return to Gol, unfurl his reed mat on the floor of the neophytes' cell, and begin his Path anew. He thinks he continued to believe this--or, at the very least, ignore all evidence to the contrary--right up to the point where he opened his eyes to the bright, clinical lights of sickbay, buoyed by the kind of certainty he'd spent three years searching for in all the wrong places, and it was suddenly no longer possible to pretend that *Kolinahr* was an option. The truth is, though, that his shields were fraying well before the turbolift doors slid open onto a bridge on which he'd never thought to set foot again, and it doesn't take a near-death experience to understand that it was always going to be this way; that it could be three years or three hundred, but the sight of his captain's face lighting up with a kind of radiant joy, the sound of Spock's name breathed through incredulous lips, would always be enough to break through those frozen walls he's constructed so painstakingly over nine long seasons.

Perhaps, said T'Kel, *we were wrong*, and she spoke of the rarity of a bond strong enough to carry across the empty depths that separated worlds. Her voice was low and even, the stripped monotone of an Elder of Gol, but there was a hush to it, a restraint, that Spock could not name at the time but

which he has come to think of as a kind of reverence. An awe. The bond that she described was known to few, a scientific curiosity found scattered indiscriminately throughout the pages of history, but all Spock could think of as she spoke was that he would trade the stars in the sky above him if he could only be free of it.

Many things have changed between that moment and this. He feels freer now, lighter, as though he's been wearing a cloak woven from iron and clay for many years, and he has finally worked out how to cast it away. He loves James Kirk. He is in love with James Kirk. This is no longer in question, and he is no longer prepared to deny it. The problem is, he already knew that. He's known that for years. What he doesn't know is what to do about that, since, no matter what he's managed to make himself believe, *love* has never actually been their problem.

Reaching for Jim's hand in sickbay was an act of instinct--more than that, it was an act of necessity, in a manner that he cannot adequately explain to himself. It was not so much that he forgot that they were not alone, it was simply that, in that moment, everything suddenly fell into place with a clarity that he'd never known before, and any lingering objections were silenced by the magnitude of his discovery. Love, it seemed, was both the problem and the solution, and he'd laughed because he could not believe that he'd never seen it before. He knows this is correct, and yet... the truth is, it's a little more complicated than that. If *Kolinahr* turned out to have no answers for Spock, it's because his questions were wrong: it seems that he ought not to have been asking how to purge himself of the misery of a love that had woven itself into the very fabric of himself, but, instead, how he'd allowed that love to become the source of misery in the first place. His error was in mistaking suppression for control; small wonder he failed. But that doesn't change simple biological fact, and the fact is that love is only the basis from which the larger issue grows. He'd shrouded it in Discipline so as not to have to examine it directly, but, if it turns out that love is neither illogical nor incompatible with the scientific method that underpins the very essence of his identity--if the reverse, in fact, is true--then all that does is throw the physiological problem into ever starker relief. And no matter what else has changed, he still doesn't know what to do about this.

In some ways you are my son, said his mother, once upon a time. *In other ways, you are Sarek's*. If ever Spock has had cause to doubt the truth of her words, he has three long years of frozen denial to remind him that some things cannot be wished away. His parents' marriage is an error of compatibility that should never have been allowed to happen, and he has understood as much since he was a boy of eleven, watching his mother's footsteps falter as she descended the steps of a transport in ShiKahr: the focused scrutiny of a lonely child without peers or friends, whose world was constructed around the certainty of Amanda's regard. Since the moment Spock identified his attachment to Jim as *love*, the fear has haunted him that he will be driven, inexorably, to follow the path of his father's mistakes, to ignore the simple facts of biology in favor of a desire that, by any reasonable exercise of logic, ought to be intercepted, dismantled, and repurposed to more productive ends, and it has been so sharp, so insistent, that he has never stopped to examine it directly. Spock has carried it with him, wrapped in layers of filial disdain, and assured himself that he knows better, and, if he does not, that he, at least, will not fail.

You're right, Mr. Spock, he remembers Jim saying that last time they spoke: bitter words, designed

to bruise, as sharp and final as the slamming of a door. *You are nothing like your father. At least your father had the courage of his convictions.*

Spock's spine was so straight, so rigid, that his muscles were trembling with the effort of holding himself in place. *My father's convictions*, he'd answered in a voice like frozen steel, *were fuelled by an illogic equalled only by its capacity to do harm. This is what you refuse to understand.*

Jim had barked harsh laughter at that, and, before Spock had finished speaking, he'd turned and paced three steps across the room to his desk. His head was bowed, his eyes hooded, unreadable, and he'd gripped the back of his chair so tightly that his knuckles had been points of white in the shadows.

And what you refuse to understand, he'd said, *is your own arrogance in acting on decisions that are not yours to make.*

Bitter words, designed to bruise, and they had, because James Kirk is nothing if not proficient at getting under Spock's skin. But they'd said a lot of things that day. Anger clouded the room and poisoned the air between them, and this made it possible, afterwards, to reject the recrimination that had fuelled it as artifacts of acrimony and frustration. He's certain that he's not the masochist he was named in an early shot across the bows, nor is Jim wilfully blind to nuances of cultural sensitivity, as accused by Spock in a moment of intemperate spite. Bitter words, designed to bruise, fuelled by regret and terror and love and the certainty of loss.

But not, perhaps, without merit.

Because the truth is, he just doesn't know anymore. This confidence, this absolute absence of doubt, has been an article of faith for so long that he has never thought to question the reasoning that sustains it. A child's reasoning; a conclusion drawn without context and blind to everything but the fear that the ground on which he stood might crumble while his back was turned. For years, Spock has assumed that his father's logic was uncertain when it came to his mother, and he has held onto this as though it were scientific doctrine, without ever stopping to wonder if, in fact, his mother would agree.

And he remembers her smile in a terminal station in ShiKahr, the joy in her voice and the way it lit up the air around her when she saw the man she had chosen to share her life, waiting for her in a glass-walled reception room across the concourse. He remembers the exhaustion on his father's face and the way he walked a half-step behind his wife as they made their way out of the terminal; the protectiveness of that small gesture; the care. Spock remembers all of these things now, and he wonders why it has never occurred to him before that there were two people in the marriage, and that both of them had a choice.

Both of them had a choice. That's something that, on further examination, he might have considered earlier.

He is *definitely* not getting any sleep tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Many, many thanks to the talented and generous penguin_attie, beta-reader extraordinaire, who has been keeping this fic in order for more than two years now, and to the talented and generous miloowen (author of one of the best damn TNG fics in existence - if you haven't already checked out A Million Sherds, quick, go find it, it's here on AO3) who has agreed to take over beta-reading duties as of this chapter. I am so lucky with my beta readers! They are the warp coil that keeps this ship running and I am more grateful than I can say.

Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bones' office ought to be a blue-shadowed desk tacked onto the edge of sickbay, with just enough surface area to accommodate a terminal, a couple of glasses and two sets of stockinged feet in comfort before they're forced to compete for space with the PADDs and the vials and the hypos, and this arrangement has served both the CMO and his commanding officer more than adequately in the past. It's the image Kirk has on his mind as he approaches the medical quarters on his fourth attempt, by dint of falling into step behind an orderly with a purposeful-looking walk, and so it's somewhat disconcerting to walk into the clean white lines and sterile strip lighting of his ship's refitted hospital and be reminded once again that this is not the *Enterprise* that has haunted his dreams. With a full complement of healthy crew, the biobeds are deserted this late into the evening, overhead lights shut down to thirty percent, and the only sound in the hush is the gentle hum of the machinery of life, idle in the quiet hours, singing softly to itself in the shadows. Kirk stands for a moment in the middle of the room, eyes determinedly turned away from the neuroimaging suite at its far end, and seeks out a likely-looking door. He knows Bones well enough to know that, even at this time of night, it'll be the one that leads to the room with the light on.

The doctor glances up as the door slides open, eyes heavy but alert, and he nods briskly and reaches behind his desk for another glass.

"Took you long enough," he says, sliding it across the table and lifting a bottle of Antarean brandy from its perch behind a stack of PADDs. It flashes blue in the half-light of an old-fashioned table lamp that Bones has dredged up out of who knows where, and Kirk wonders briefly if it was Chapel's; if this office, like his own quarters, was designed to somebody else's specifications. "Only so many times a man can type up a medical report on a crew this sensible before it starts to look like stalling."

Liquor, the shade of melted sapphires, trickles into the tumbler in front of Kirk, and Bones nudges it forward, before topping up his own generous measure. He lifts his hand in a toast.

"To absent friends, Jim," he says, because he's always known Kirk far too well. Another man might have drunk to the *Enterprise*; Bones will drink to what had to be lost to bring her home again.

"Absent friends," answers Kirk, and lifts his glass to the memory of a young man with his father's eyes and a fire in his blood, and the long-lost love of his life. And to a woman with hair the color of sunshine and a golden smile that lit up every room she entered.

The doctor swallows economically and leans back in his chair, drink cradled against his chest. One hand reaches up to stroke his chin, and his fingers curl over empty skin, absently, as though they're expecting to find themselves tangling through hair.

"I miss the beard," he says wistfully, and Kirk grins into his glass.

"I think the beard," he says, "was a biohazard."

A roll of the eyes fails to convey affront. "This is what I get for re-enlisting."

"I thought I had you drafted."

"Well." Bones grins, lifts his glass to his lips. "I was gonna let that one pass."

Kirk privately doubts this, but he's content to let his eyebrow telegraph his skepticism as he joins his friend in a healthy swallow of brandy. It tastes like times past, like a shared history that he's closed up in a corner of his mind, and the spreading warmth it trails behind as it slides down his throat feels like the gentle wash of a temperate ocean wave.

"You know..." he says after a moment—carefully, quietly—"if you don't want to stay, now that the crisis is over.... The terms of the reactivation clause are specific. You're free to go."

He's not sure how Bones will take it, nor is he sure, in the final analysis, that he wants to know. There could be exasperation. There could be anger. There could be a healthy sense of violated boundaries, and all of these things and more, Kirk will have earned. There's a fine line sometimes between *mission critical* and *personal*, and this one skated damned close to the latter; a little bit of righteous indignation is the least that Bones is owed.

But in the end, the doctor only sighs and twirls his glass, crystal sparkling in the refracted light of a distant bio-readout.

"Figure I may as well stick around, now that I'm here," he says. "See if I can't make the place look more like a sickbay, less like a damned warp core. That room out there's got more circuitry than the central cortex; what am I treating, a Human being or a duotronic relay?"

Kirk purses his lips around a smile that masks a heady rush of relief. More times than he can count, they have sat in these chairs—or chairs a lot like them—and Bones has waxed lyrical grievances about the inadequacy of Starfleet’s medical provision aboard her flagship; half of the machines whispering soft beeps into the silence of the empty room outside were created to the doctor’s specifications. Bones isn’t dissatisfied with sickbay—quite the contrary—but the fact that he’s pretending that he is is one more link between a calcified past and an uncertain present. It occurs to Kirk to wonder if the complaint isn’t one of Dr. McCoy’s patented captain-pacifying mind tricks, designed to remind him that, whatever else may have changed, they’re home again.

For now, at least. Something about the air of serenity, of order restored, ruffles the edge of Kirk’s calm, warns against complacency. Perhaps it’s fatigue; perhaps it’s the brandy; perhaps it’s the two forging an unholy alliance inside a mind that’s already working three warning lights past overload. And perhaps it’s just the renewed sense of how much more he stands to lose, now that he’s here again, than if he’d never stepped back aboard his ship.

Quietly, he says, “There’s no guarantee they’ll give her back to me, Bones.”

But his friend shakes his head, buries it in another gulp of brandy. “Think Nogura’s gonna say no to you now, Jim?” he says. “Not this time.”

It’s no more than Kirk has been considering himself for the past twelve hours, but it sounded better in the silence of his own head. “Your confidence,” he says, “exceeds mine, I think.”

A soft nod from Bones; eyes that read him like he’s made of crystal. “That’s because you’re scared to death of what happens if I’m wrong.”

“Perhaps.” Kirk raises his drink to his lips, sips. The liquor scalds the back of his throat. “For better or worse, this ship is a part of who I am. These past few years have been... well. You know. Things just feel... clearer on the *Enterprise*.”

“Uh-huh.” The doctor’s stare is unreadable. “Because of the ship.”

“You saw what happened when they took her away from me, Bones. I’m... not sure I can do that again.”

“Damn it, Jim!” Glass strikes the polished surface of the desk with enough force to send a clipped wave of blue liquid cascading over the lip. Kirk looks up, startled, but the anger that he’s expecting

to find on his friend's face is absent, and in its place is a kind of weary exhaustion. "Are you being deliberately obtuse? Or are you just too damned stubborn to see what's smacking you in your face?"

Kirk feels his eyebrow reach for his hairline. Sickbay drinking sessions with Bones have traditionally been informal affairs, but he wonders if this is an appropriate moment to remind his CMO about the niceties of the chain of command. "Excuse me?" he says, though he finds that his voice lacks the requisite chill.

Bones shakes his head, downs his drink in a single gulp, and there's a fire behind his eyes that Kirk recognizes very well. It's just that it's been many years since he's seen it. "Jim," says the doctor slowly, as though he's as though he's summoning divine patience with every word, "it's not the *Enterprise* that you can't live without."

So. Here it is. Kirk tries to keep his stare level, but he manages fewer than five seconds of that steely, blue-eyed scrutiny before it becomes uncomfortable. Well. He came here for answers, after all.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," he says, because it's important to be certain. The world feels as if it were dissolving into smoke around him, and it is vital that he walk out of here with something solid to hold onto. If he is going to do this, he needs to be *sure*.

"What is it, Jim?" says Bones now, as though he hasn't heard him. "You're not going to tell me you don't get it, because that ain't going to wash, not this time. You and I both stood not twelve feet from where we are now, and what happened in my sickbay don't leave a whole lot of room for doubt. So what is it? I know it's not because he's a man, or a Vulcan, or a fellow officer. Not once in all the years I've known you has any of that mattered a good goddamn to you. So how about you tell me what it is, and then I'll tell you why it's bullshit, and then maybe both of us can get our first good night's sleep in three damn years."

Thin light patterns the surface of Kirk's brandy, glistening tremors testament to a slight tremble in his hand. He opens his mouth to explain that it's more complicated than this, that if it were as simple as just knowing--if it were nothing more than uncertainty that had built the bridge between them--then he and Spock might have left Vulcan two very different men and the years between then and now could have forged a very different life for them. But he closes it again before he's drawn breath to speak, because Bones, he suspects, knows at least some of this as well as he knows his own history. The rest of it, he's probably guessed.

So instead, he huffs a quiet laugh, eyes canted into his glass, and the bitterness in it surprises him; he didn't know it was going to be there.

He says, quietly, "Not all of it will be bullshit, Bones."

"No." A lengthy sigh, and Kirk doesn't have to look up to know that his friend is sagging into his chair like a discarded marionette. He wonders when they all got so damned *old*. "No, I guess we both know that." A beat. And then, more gently: "But he came back, Jim. The bullshit lost."

So tell me what to do. Years of command have taught Kirk to silence any whisper of uncertainty, and he cannot remember the last time he spoke these words while in full possession of his faculties, but they sting the back of his throat now, clamoring for release. *Tell me what to do*, he thinks fiercely, and buries it with brandy before it can escape.

"Nothing is certain," he says gruffly, but he can't meet Bones' eyes.

"Nope," says his friend, "it's not."

"I could still lose the *Enterprise*."

"Maybe. But you won't."

"Damn it, Bones. I took off with the flagship. I could lose my *command*."

That prompts a sputter of derisory laughter. "The hero of the hour? I don't think so, Jim. And that ain't what you're scared of losing either."

"They're valid concerns," says Kirk. "They can't just be dismissed...."

"Jim," says his friend, and there's a weary exasperation behind that single syllable that speaks of a depth of knowledge more profound than Kirk is necessarily happy to concede. "I'm just an old country doctor, and, let me tell you, these days that emphasis is firmly on the *old*. I don't have the time or the patience or the goddamn energy for another eight years of this. I just don't. Whatever the hell is going on, you need to fix it. You need to go out there and *fix* it, because I'm damned sure he ain't gonna do it and seems to me neither one of you can afford to let this go. You ain't never been a man to back down from a challenge because it was too hard, or too complicated, or you didn't like the odds. Who knows; maybe *that's* what you see in that goddamned green-blooded

hobgoblin, but let me tell you something for free: you don't do this, and there's no coming back from it again. You know that. And you better believe he knows it too, if he wasn't too damned stubborn to admit it. Now, here"--and a finger of cerulean brandy splashes unceremoniously into the glass at Kirk's hand--"I got a prescription for skittish commanders in need of a dose of Dutch courage, though I can't say as I ever thought I'd have to use it. So I'm gonna need you to drink up and get going. I'm a doctor, not an agony aunt, and I'm shutting up shop for the night."

A flick of the doctor's wrist, and Kirk's tumbler slides the three inches across the desk, connecting with his palm with a jolt that scatters droplets the color of a summer sky onto the plastic surface. He feels his fingers close around the cut-crystal face, feels them raise it to his mouth without conscious instruction, feels warm liquor bathing his mouth, his lips, as he downs it in a single gulp. His head feels light, airless, as though it's encased in vacuum, and he's aware of Bones' evaluative stare as he knocks back his own drink, eyebrows raised in a gesture that's part question, part challenge. Yes, there is a comfort in being known so well--a comfort that Kirk has come close to forgetting--but there's also freedom there. He should have known there would be.

He came looking for answers, and he's leaving with more questions. He has never felt less certain of anything in his life. But this, at least, is the sort of uncertainty he knows how to handle.

~*~

It's not that Spock is not expecting the buzz at his door; not really. He's had an idea that it might come, although, had he permitted himself to consider the details of a hypothetical visit that meets the criteria of at least three of his projected patterns for the course of the evening, he might very well have predicted the request for entry into his quarters would arrive at a much earlier hour, and certainly well before the chronometer had begun its slow ascent towards alpha shift. So it's not that he's *not* expecting it--it's simply that there is expecting and then there is *expecting*, and, if he might previously have quirked a sardonic eyebrow at the idea that the semantics of a word could be so fundamentally altered by rendering it in cursive, he is now prepared to acknowledge his error of linguistic imagination. Expecting is not the same as *expecting*; if it were, he would not have startled so badly at the sound that he loses his balance on his meditation mat and strikes his elbow painfully against the side of the bed as he struggles to right himself.

The rush of panic that assaults him as he finds his feet would have been extremely unsettling even had he not stood in front of the High Elders of Gol four days ago and prepared to receive the symbol of ultimate logic. For a man who'd planned to leave emotional deficiency behind forever, he thinks, there seems to be an alarming preponderance remaining in the shadows of his conscious thought. But that's another reflection for another time: right now, he has more than enough to cope with in the fact that there is somebody standing outside the doors to his quarters seeking admittance, and he's really not prepared to deal with what that might mean. He thought he was, but

Spock has thought many things these past few weeks and months and years, and almost all of them have turned out to be wrong.

He considers asking the knocker to identify themselves, but thinks better of it. That sounds inescapably defensive, and the moment's preparation it will buy him will certainly not be sufficient to reinstate his shattered controls. So instead, he folds his arms in front of him, and calls, as evenly as he can, "Enter."

The door slides open with a barely perceptible breath of air, revealing the diffident figure of the ship's commander, still dressed in his duty uniform, haloed by the half-light from the night-darkened corridor outside. Really, there was only ever one person likely to be knocking at Spock's door at 0104 hours, but the confirmation of his suspicions spikes a disquieting rush of emotional discord that several hours of attempted meditation completely fails to ameliorate.

Yes, he loves James Kirk. He is in love with James Kirk. And faced with the sight of the admiral in Spock's doorway, light ghosting through his dark hair, hands folded smartly at his back, face unreadable in the shadows, Spock has no idea how he has ever managed to convince himself otherwise. Or, for that matter, why he even tried.

Kirk fails to step inside, fails to meet Spock's eye. He says, "Oh--were you meditating? I'm sorry; I didn't mean to disturb you. I know it's been a long day..."

"You have not," says Spock, before he realises that Kirk has not finished speaking, and their words collide, tangle, and stutter to a halt.

There is a moment of silence. Kirk's eyes slide to the right, skimming over the stripped beige walls of Spock's quarters, skittering over the bed in something like alarm, before reluctantly fixing on a point some three centimeters below Spock's eyes. "Are you sure?" he says. "I can come back later if it's not convenient."

It is the small hours of the morning. Spock is aware that Human standards of privacy are considerably more relaxed than the Vulcan protocols with which he was raised, but he sincerely doubts that there are any circumstances in which a post-midnight social call might be classified as *convenient*.

"I assure you, Admiral," he says, with whatever equanimity he can muster. "Your arrival causes no interruption in my affairs. I am presently unoccupied."

The ghost of a smile plays at the corners of Kirk's mouth. "Indolence, Spock?" he says, with a twitch of an eyebrow. "That doesn't sound very Vulcan."

He's right, of course. Too late, Spock realizes that he's backed himself into a discursive corner, because there's nowhere to go from here besides confessing to the fact that he has passed the ninety-two minutes since his decision was made in a completely abortive attempt to seek the inner peace that he requires to speak of it with the man standing in front of him, and he finds, illogically, that in a choice between a humiliating truth and a humiliating concession, he prefers to accept the slight against his heritage. This is... troubling. It probably doesn't bode well for the rest of the conversation.

So, at something of a tactical loss, he permits himself an impassive nod and settles for an imperious, "Indeed." It is far from satisfactory, but he's not operating at capacity right now. Allowances must be made.

Another period of silence worries at the edges of comfort, stretching into a foot-shuffling awkwardness, and belatedly, Spock notes that the door remains open, and the admiral remains in the corridor beyond. As ship's commander, Kirk requires nothing so formal as an invitation to enter a crewman's quarters, and that blanket admission has in any case already been granted, but still he hovers on the threshold, and Spock realizes abruptly that he's waiting to be asked to step inside. He is uncertain as to how to accomplish this without acknowledging the peculiarity of the situation: verbalizing the offer is both redundant--since it has already been made--and further serves to call attention to the fact that a secondary confirmation is required. But, more than this, it telegraphs the disquiet that lingers between four meters of air, and he's aware that it's there because of Spock's own actions. Worse, he's aware that he may be about to aggravate it.

But before he can make any potentially inflammatory maneuvers, he needs to resolve their current dilemma. In the absence of a workable alternative, Spock takes a step backwards, opening an implied passage into his cabin. It is not much, and for many years it would have been unnecessary, but there is something profoundly gratifying about the ease with which his friend interprets the gesture. The briefest of hesitations, nothing more, and then Kirk's eyes drop to the floor and he moves forward: one clipped, wooden step, then another, and a third, until he's closed a little of the space between them; until the door slides closed behind him, sealing them inside with the silence of words unspoken, thoughts unheard.

Until he's standing inside Spock's quarters, alone together for the first time in nearly three years.

Kirk's eyes are pointed resolutely downwards, and there is a moment in which it looks as though they will stay that way: a long, precarious moment in which Spock cannot find words to break the hush. He keeps his own gaze level, even, his hands clasped in front of him to hold them steady, and feels a little of his tremulous confidence ebb. Inasmuch as he's certain of anything, he has been building his intentions around the assumption that Kirk has understood what was offered in the

hand that reached for his two days ago in sickbay; that, no matter what bitterness may remain to be discharged, Kirk's reciprocal grip signalled at the very least a willingness to open up a path towards resolution. But now, faced with this prolonged failure to speak, Spock is forced to speculate as to the accuracy of his hypothesis. He wonders if he should comment on the lateness of the hour, voice some words of concern at the admiral's failure to achieve the period of rest that he clearly requires. He wonders if he ought to make an offer of liquid refreshment, or ask after his friend's health, the status of the ship, the duration of their shakedown; anything to break the silence that hovers like a third presence in the room. He wonders how he has spent hours thinking of nothing but this conversation, and yet still manages to find himself completely unprepared.

And then Kirk lifts his gaze from the floor--slowly, like a man waking from a long sleep--and lets it drift over Spock's chin, his nose, his cheeks, before it settles on his eyes. And Spock knows. He *knows*.

His hypothesis was not inaccurate. Everything he thought he'd offered is reflected in that look. Everything he's tried to bury, everything he's feared, everything he's run from, and everything on which his future now depends--it's all there. His hypothesis is sound.

"Tell me I'm wrong," says Kirk quietly. "Tell me I'm wrong, and I'll walk away and that will be an end to this; we'll never speak of it again. If I'm wrong... this ends now. But I need to hear it from you."

Spock feels his hands tighten their clasp at his stomach, fingers pressed so tightly together that the tips are chill with restricted circulation. The admiral is a brave man, a man who has never lacked for courage, but there is a strain to his voice that speaks of what these words have cost him to voice. It's an escape route for a man who wants to run, and he knows this, and yet he has offered it anyway. All Spock has to do is claim ignorance of his meaning, and a door will close behind Kirk's eyes and his answer will be given without so much as acknowledging what is offered, and they will find... something. Some way to coexist, to be a part of one another's lives in a manner that admits of no possibility of fracture, of pain, of loss or grief, and it will be satisfactory because Kirk will make it so, because he is a brave man, a man who has never lacked for courage, and he will always do what has to be done. And they will cling to it together like drowning men, as though it is the blood in their bodies and the air that they breathe, as though nothing has ever been so beautiful. And it will be this way for the rest of their lives, and it will never be enough.

It will never be enough.

He needs to do this. The courage in Kirk's words, Spock needs to find inside himself; he has never considered himself a coward. And so he holds his friend's stare, and he keeps his voice steady, and he says, simply, quietly, "No, Jim. You are not wrong."

Kirk's eyes close. He exhales, soft against the hush. He says, "Thank you."

Stillness. Silence and motionless air. If Kirk were to animate now, to cross the room with the wide, rapid stride that he employs in those moments when the need for action appropriates his motor cortex and his body becomes just another tool in the arsenal of command; if he were to reach for his friend with hands that Spock has tried and failed to deny too many times before, he is certain that he would be lost. There's only so much self-control a man can muster, even an acolyte of Gol, and he's been sailing at close to capacity for more than a day now; he's running on fumes and promises. But Jim has been bruised once too often in the past, in situations bearing a marked similarity to this, and he's waiting for Spock's next move before he decides on his.

This is as it should be. The other way can only possibly lead to disaster. Spock knows this, but, illogically--alarmingly--this does not make it any less frustrating.

Well. He knows what must be done; if it requires a little effort on his part, he supposes that he's earned as much. And so he fixes his stare on Kirk's shuttered face, strips it of the impatience that's worrying its way past his controls, and, carefully, evenly, he says, "However..."

Kirk's eyes snap open. His lips purse, and something shifts, like the faint scent of ozone on the breeze as lightning gathers overhead. "However?" he says, and his voice is measured, orderly--an admiral's voice--but there's an edge to it that speaks of dangerous ground ahead.

"Jim," says Spock, and the use of his friend's given name earns him a quirk of the eyebrow but a glare that concedes nothing. "Please understand. I have given this matter a great deal of thought..."

"You're leaving." A harsh laugh, and, were Spock's shields not so tightly locked down in preparation for this exchange, its bitterness might have made him recoil. "Of course you are."

"No," says Spock, but Kirk is already shaking his head.

"I can't believe I'm actually surprised," he says. "You're leaving."

"Admiral," says Spock, but it's the wrong approach; he can see it in the anger that flares behind Kirk's eyes. He tries again: "Jim. I assure you, it is not my intention to leave."

"No?" An eyebrow arches and Kirk pivots on his heel, pacing three steps towards the door before

he spins back to face the room again. "No, of course not," he says, with dangerous calm. "If you were intending to leave, the first I'd know of it would be when a letter showed up on my desk three days later."

Spock knows he does not flinch. The only reaction to the venom in those words comes from Kirk himself: the fire drains from his eyes, the tightness to his jaw releases, and he looks shattered by the violence in his own voice.

"Spock," he says quickly, hoarsely, "I'm sorry. That was unwarranted."

But Spock has had time enough these past few days to consider the method of his departure from Starfleet. "It was not," he says, because whatever else he has told himself on those nights when sleep eluded him, however he has insisted in the privacy of his head that the appropriate words were spoken in that apartment above the Bay, that he did not simply slip into darkness without explanation or a backwards glance, he knows that Kirk did not hear what he was told. Spock has known this for three years.

For a moment, it looks as though Kirk will argue. His brow furrows, and he sucks in a sharp breath, head bowed as if to bury his guilt in belligerence. But he releases it slowly before it can become the opening shots of another verbal enfilade; perhaps there is something to be said, after all, for exhaustion. It grays his face when he looks up, meets Spock's eyes, and nods once, brusquely.

"Then tell me," he says, and, though the commander's voice is back, the edge is gone from it now. There is only resignation, and this is, illogically, more difficult to countenance. "What is your 'however,' Mr. Spock?"

The blood flow to Spock's fingertips has ceased entirely. He can barely feel the skin around his nails.

He says, "I would prefer that there remain no misunderstandings between us."

"So would I," says Kirk. "Please. Say what you have to say."

Further delay is unfeasible, and likely to become counterproductive: Jim is not a man to tolerate vacillation. Spock squares his shoulders, lengthens his spine, and fixes his eyes on his commander's forehead. It is not ideal, but it will have to suffice.

"I must request a temporary leave of absence," he says. "Effective immediately."

A lengthy pause, just long enough to become uncomfortable. And then there's a huff of breathless laughter. "So you *are* leaving," says Kirk.

Spock finds that he cannot drop his gaze. "No."

"Spock." The smile that stripes the admiral's face is well-constructed, but it has nothing to do with amusement. "It's unlike you to prevaricate. You're leaving."

"I require no more than seven days," says Spock. "After which I will return."

"Seven days? You'll forgive my skepticism, Mr. Spock..."

"Yes," says Spock, evenly, because he will certainly forgive Jim's skepticism on a matter for which he has an abundance of reasons to be skeptical, and, in fact, he would have been startled to find it absent. But it appears that Kirk was expecting an argument, because that unornamented candor seems to be enough to derail the train of righteous indignation careening through his quarters, at least momentarily.

"Yes?" says Kirk, and for the first time since Spock threw his conversational curveball, uncertainty frosts the edge of his tone.

"Yes," says Spock. "Your skepticism is both justified and expected. Nevertheless, I *will* return."

Silence. A thousand unspoken thoughts dance across Kirk's face. He turns, paces a few steps, turns again and paces back.

"Seven days?" he says at last.

"At most," says Spock. "Fewer, if I depart the ship at Sigma Cilicia IV."

"And I suppose," says Kirk, "that you'll expect to find your First Officer's post waiting for you on

your return?"

It is difficult to be certain, but Spock thinks he hears a warmth creeping into the admiral's voice now, a dark humor that cannot end well for Spock's pride, but promises better things for their discussion. Carefully, he says, "Acting First Officer."

"Of course, Mr. Spock," says Kirk, and that is, without question, the first flickerings of a smile at the corner of his lips. Spock releases a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "I think I could see my way clear to ratifying the position," adds Kirk. "So long as Admiral Nogura sees fit to ratify mine."

The ends of Spock's fingers have begun to turn an alarming shade of brown. He releases his grip, feels the prickle of affronted flesh as the blood rushes back in. "In that case," he says, "may I assume that my request is granted?"

The slightest of hesitations--a fraction of a second, nothing more, but enough to make his point--and then Kirk nods. "You may," he says, though his voice is gruff and he does not look at Spock. "Have the forms sent to my terminal and I'll sign them off. But make no mistake, Commander. Seven days only--and then you will be marked AWOL. Are we clear?"

We. Not you. The words are an admiral's; the sentiment is not.

"I believe so," says Spock.

Another sharp nod. "Seven days, Mr. Spock," says Kirk. "And then we'll talk again." And, without further comment, without the barrage of questions or demands or affront for which Spock has been preparing, he turns on his heel and strides from Spock's quarters. He does not look back.

In silence, and assailed by the beginnings of the sort of headache that's almost certainly setting off all kinds of alarms on the remote neural monitors in sickbay, Spock lowers himself to his meditation mat among the fragments of his shattered controls. The conversation, he thinks, could not possibly have proceeded better or arrived at a more favorable outcome; the difficulties that he expected have presented themselves, but they have resolved with considerably greater ease than he had predicted, and he has achieved his objective with the minimum of unpleasant emotional discharge.

Still. He thinks he might feel less unsettled if the admiral had taken the time to offer a word of

farewell as he was leaving. It is an oversight, perhaps; an artifact of an evident emotional compromise that is not unanticipated, but Spock cannot shake the creeping sense of unease that this one omission speaks more fully for the conversation's success or otherwise than any of the other small victories achieved therein. He thinks he might feel less unsettled if he thought that, in the end, his friend believed him when he said he would be coming back.

Enough. It is done. It is done, and Spock needs to sleep. He's still not certain that he is equal to what needs to happen next, and it is going to take all of his strength to bring it about.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE DON'T KILL ME! There is method to this, I swear there is. And Chapter 45 will be up tomorrow too, so you really shouldn't kill me before that.

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Spock departs the ship at Sigma Cilicia IV with as little ceremony as marked his arrival, and Kirk does not see him off. They have said as much as can be said for now, he thinks, and he doesn't want this to become some grand farewell. This is a temporary separation between friends—an *au revoir*, not a goodbye—and he wants to attach no significance to the parting. And if it's the last time they see each other... well. Every leave they've ever taken could have been their last; it shows, he believes, a certain lack of faith to make a production out of this one.

So he stays on the bridge and nods his acquiescence to Uhura when the transporter room signals their readiness to energize, and contents himself with a brisk, "Good luck, Mr. Spock," as the beam engages, too late for any reply. At his right shoulder, he hears a tight intake of breath, the shifting of weight from one foot to another as Bones telegraphs his wholesale disapproval, but Kirk offers neither explanation nor counter to the steely glare that he can feel on the side of his head. Spock will either return or he will not; Kirk's trust is either misplaced or it is not, and nothing now can alter the way that things will play out. And he doesn't feel much like talking about it.

He waits long enough to receive confirmation that beam-down has been successful, then orders Sulu to plot a course heading for Earth, warp 6, and sends a missive down to Engineering to have Scotty gather his shakedown notes into a report for presentation at the Centroplex when they dock. It is fewer than twenty-four hours since they left Starfleet in a flurry of vague promises and borderline insubordination, but it's time to go home. Wherever home might turn out to be.

Kirk is not naive enough to imagine that retiring to his quarters to compile his mission debrief is likely to be a productive use of the day after last night's conversation, with or without the five hours of sleeplessness that followed, but there's movement enough in the officer's lounge to sublimate the urge to over-think, and this, he hopes, may be enough to keep his recalcitrant mind on track. He settles himself in a chair by the window, sipping from a bottomless cup of coffee, and tries to find the words to compose an account of the days that have just passed: clinical words, words of disinterested detachment, words that fail to acknowledge the thick undercurrent of loss and redemption and vindication and need that flows beneath the surface of every thought. In a few hours—half a day, maybe more—they will re-enter Earth's gravity and Kirk will stand in front of his superior officers and find some way to speak abstractly about the things that he has seen, the things that he has done, and then it will be over, consigned to history, along with the names and, for a while, the faces of the men and women who died. So much destruction, so much loss, but he can live with that, because this is command and these are the decisions they all agreed to make. He knows that it only *feels* as though it's personal, because he's allowed himself to think of it at such; he knows that the world does not turn on the pleasure of James T Kirk any more than it turned for Lori Ciana or Will Decker or Sonak or Ilia; he knows that, to the men and women of the admiralty in whose presence he will stand and speak of their loss, this is just another mission brought safely home again, object accomplished with minimal fuss. And he knows that they are right. It's just that he can't help but feel as though, in the final analysis, the equation is fundamentally unbalanced and that James Kirk gained too much where others have lost.

It's just that all of these things, like everything else in his life, simply make more sense when Spock is here.

Bones finds him in the early afternoon, a couple of hours after it becomes clear that Kirk is not going to break for lunch, and slides, unspeaking, into place alongside him at the viewing port. They stand quietly for a while together, warp-streaked starlight striping their faces in the shadow of the void, Bones sipping placidly from the mug in his hands, Kirk's arms folded across his chest. Last night's sickbay conversation hangs heavily between them, scattered among the unspoken accusations, the consternation, the air of general exhaustion, and Kirk knows that, for all that he could try to explain what has happened and why it had to be this way, there is some fundamental part of his friend that cannot accept his decision because he cannot reconcile himself to the promise on which it hangs.

He could try to explain it, but he won't. Because he knows that his own confidence is entirely too fragile to survive the doctor's scrutiny.

So instead, as Bones opens his mouth to break the silence, Kirk breaks it for him: strong words that brook no contradiction, soft but assured and woven through with a certainty he doesn't feel. "He's coming back, Bones," says Kirk quietly, but he doesn't turn his head, doesn't meet his friend's eyes. He doesn't need to see what's reflected there.

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The day dissolves, light years sliding past the ship like ghosts in the darkness. Kirk stands on his bridge as they break warp on the edge of the Sol system, as an off-white speck on the viewscreen softens and spreads, yellow sunlight flaring against the black curtain of space, and thinks of another journey from another time, another Kirk who stood where he stands and watched the firmament fall away, and knew that the life he'd known was coming to an end. Scotty's report is on his PADD, a litany of minor inconveniences and negligible shortcomings that stretches to more than thirty pages, and Kirk's not sure if it's a figment of his chief engineer's obsession or the next phase of the alibi that his crew has conspired to construct around him; frankly, either is possible, and he doesn't think he really wants to know. One way or another, the *Enterprise* is going back into drydock for another few days, and days are what Kirk needs right now.

He has been vaguely expecting to be greeted by a clamoring circus of media corps, holocams and an adoring public screaming their thanks to Starfleet Best and Greatest, and has locked himself down in preparation, but Nogura, it seems, is far too good at this to make a performance out of a mission over which death hangs so recent and raw. Instead, they're met by Admiral Bernstein, somber-faced and decorous, who snaps off a polished salute which Kirk returns with gratitude and thanks them for their service. Admiral Nogura is waiting for them, she says, in his offices in San

Francisco, and Kirk just bets he is.

They beam down to the Phoenix Building in respectful silence, directly into Tactical Command's private transporter array, and Kirk falls in behind Bernstein and Admiral Chavez, whose waiting presence does not bode well for the continued absence of the press, as they make their way the short distance to Nogura's office. Five days have passed since Kirk last walked these corridors. Five days in which the world very nearly ended, in more ways than one; and he thinks, as he walks, that he can feel the shadow of the man he was close at his back, ready to claim him once again. Whatever Bones may think, whatever the truth may be about what James Kirk can and can't live without, there's more at stake in the conversation to come than the fate of a ship and the question of who will command her now that her captain is gone. It was easier to be confident in the privacy of his own head, with the *Enterprise* still firmly beneath his feet. It was easier to be confident in the indigo shadows of a sickbay at rest, fueled by liquor and the certainty of his friend. It was easier to be confident, in fact, at every stage of this journey right up to the part where he stands beside Admiral Bernstein at a wood-paneled door and buzzes for entry, and waits for the answer to come.

And so, in the end, there's something almost inadequate about the ease with which they give her back to him again. There's no need for careful arguments or quick thinking, he doesn't have to cajole or bargain or persuade: Kirk asks for the *Enterprise* and Nogura accepts, on the basis of a couple of provisos that cause nobody any lasting pain, and then it's done. It's over. The black cloud lifts and it turns out that the sun had never ceased shining in this little corner of the universe; it was only a passing storm, and the skies are quiet once again. James Kirk is now the first admiral in 'Fleet history to have active command of a starship, and all he can think about is the fact that, if it were always this simple, then what the hell have the past three years been for?

Bernstein's smile is wide and open, her hand on his shoulder warm and full of understanding. There are handshakes and congratulations, solemn words of thanks and muted, understated joy, and arrangements are made for handover, mission assignments, selection of crew. And through it all, Kirk finds himself absurdly grateful for the fact that he's running on empty, that fatigue has now shut down all but his primary functions, because the whole damn thing feels so disturbingly unreal that it's almost a relief to have to wait until later to process it all.

Debrief is set for 2030 hours: time enough for Kirk to eat a warm meal, find a shower and a dress uniform for the holos, and Chavez is already pulling out his communicator to make arrangements as the meeting breaks up. Kirk knows a dismissal when he hears one, even if etiquette advises against an overt eviction from the office, given the tone and content of the meeting just past, and he turns to leave with a head full of white noise and static, but Nogura calls him back before he's got two steps towards the door.

"Jim," he says quietly, perfunctorily, "wait a moment, will you?"

Kirk turns back towards the desk, and they know each other well enough these days that it is

acceptable to let one raised eyebrow ask a question as he meets the old man's eyes, but Nogura never says anything he's not planning to say, and so he simply nods, folds his hands behind his back, and waits for the room to clear, the door to close, sealing them in silence.

Alone, he gestures to the ring of armchairs in the corner of his room, set permanently for coffee with the great and good, and follows Kirk towards them, lowering himself onto a well-stuffed cushion with the ease of a much younger man. He allows Kirk to follow suit before he folds his hands at his chest, leans back, fixes him with the easy stare of the powerful.

"So," he says. "Jim. Tell me: how are you holding up?"

The question is so unexpected that Kirk's not entirely sure what he's being asked, and he's obliged to take moment to sift through the events of the past days in order to filter out a shortlist of possible candidates. It's not particularly short. "I'm fine, sir," he says carefully.

But Nogura only nods, as though he's been expecting the answer. "She was a good woman," he says quietly, "and an excellent officer. One of the best I've worked with."

Lori, of course. He *really* ought to have got that one. In his mind's eye, Kirk sees the shade of his ex-wife roll her eyes in good-natured exasperation; feels his throat tighten. "She was," he says, and voice sounds rough. Raw. But there's nothing he can do about that, even if he cared to try.

"I wanted you to know," says Nogura, with the gravity of a man pronouncing words to change a life, "that she was given full honors. Her name was added to the memorial wall alongside her grandmother's. Only that her parents wanted her laid to rest in the family plot in San Diego, she would have taken her place among our fallen heroes at the Golden Gate." A beat. "I wanted you to know that, Jim."

There has been little enough time to spare for the woman he once thought he loved, these past few days, though she has been a constant presence at his side, a wry smile and an arched eyebrow watching from the shadows, waiting for the moment when he can allow himself to miss her as she deserves. Kirk isn't sure what he was expecting, really, but, if he's thought about it at all, he doesn't think he ever imagined that he'd come home to find her already gone, returned to the earth and vanished forever.

He doesn't know what to say. So, in the absence of the questions he wants to ask, he says, simply, "Thank you, sir."

“You understand, Jim,” says Nogura gently, and Kirk is not sure if it’s a question or a statement, “why the family didn’t want to wait?”

He thinks he does. “Of course.”

“Under the circumstances...”

“Yes, sir.” The words are brisk—too brisk, perhaps—but it’s increasingly important to get this conversation finished, to leave this room and find somewhere to be alone for a while. His head is starting to ache. “I told Admiral and Commodore Ciana that I’d visit when I could.”

Nogura nods. “Give them a couple of days,” he says, slowly, carefully. “I’m not saying don’t go. I’m just saying... give them a couple of days.”

Kirk thinks of his wife’s blue eyes, framed beneath her father’s soft white hair; her golden smile set against the gentle lines of her mother’s face, and he wonders if, in the end, he might have felt any differently in their place. The world was ending and the man who broke their youngest daughter’s heart was headed out into the void on the ship that had caused her death. So, yes, he’ll give them a couple of days. He’ll give them weeks, if that’s what they need. It is, quite literally, the very least he can do.

“Understood, sir,” he says, and, though Nogura has made no effort to end the conversation, Kirk gets to his feet. It’s a breach of protocol, certainly, and if Bernstein were here he’d be in for a raised eyebrow or two, but he’s fairly sure he has the latitude today, and, more than that, he thinks the admiral will understand. “If you’ll excuse me, sir,” he adds, safe in the knowledge that there is now no unobtrusive way that his CO can demur. “I’ve got a busy evening coming up, and I’d like some time to get ready.”

“Of course,” says Nogura, all solemn consideration, though there’s little chance he’s mistaken Kirk’s impatience to leave for anything other than what it is. But he stands with his officer, hands folded neatly at the small of his back, and, though Kirk knows him better than to think that whatever is written on Heihachiro Nogura’s face is the same as what’s going on behind Heihachiro Nogura’s eyes, it looks like they can pretend for now that they’re a couple of old colleagues united in loss, nothing more, and, as far as the illusion of privacy goes, that’s as good as he’s likely to get. There’s a reason, after all, that Lori Ciana rose so quickly through the ranks under the watchful gaze of their Commander in Chief: Nogura, like Kirk’s ex-wife, misses almost nothing.

But Nogura stands with his officer, and, if he’s guessed that there’s an emptiness where the sense of homecoming should be, if he reads equivocation in the firm handshake that answers his, there’s

no sign of it in his face. “I’ll see you in a couple of hours, Jim,” he says, kindly Uncle Hei and his battle-weary protégé, and he walks him to the door.

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In the end, it’s long after midnight before Kirk steps through the door of his apartment, cold and stale with three weeks’ disuse, and then it’s only because, about fifteen minutes earlier, he finally and abruptly ran out of reasons to avoid it. He ought to remember that this is what it’s like in the dead zone between the issue of new orders and the part where they come into effect: a sort of No-Man’s Land punctuated by jocular smiles and congratulations and the quiet appropriation of his entire workload, bit by cheerful bit. There’s been barely a moment of Kirk’s evening that has not been an exercise in re-discovering exactly how much he has chosen to forget, and he wonders if it will always be this way for him, now. If homecomings and personal success will always feel so heavily qualified as they do tonight.

The apartment is dark, lit only by the moonlight drifting like dusty silk through the uncurtained windows. Exhaustion is like lead in his bones, like gravel behind his eyes, and he knows that there are things he needs to do—like food and sleep, though mostly sleep—before they just go ahead and happen to him anyway, but he can’t shake the uneasiness that skitters through his veins, and these rooms, unchanged by the passage of days that have seen the universe inverted and the world spin off its axis, feel less like a link to a more coherent past and more like a museum or a crypt, haunted by memories that they’ve no right to hold. He needs to sleep, but *needs to* is not the same as *likely to happen*, and if anyone has cause to recognize the truth of this, it’s James T Kirk.

He commed Bones before the press conference, figuring that, regardless of what has and has not registered as fact in the privacy of Kirk’s head, it doesn’t get much more official than a live announcement on national holo, and his friend deserves a heads up at the very least. He wasn’t expecting unrestrained delight or ebullient congratulations, but there was a warmth in the doctor’s tone that told Kirk all he needed to know, and a quiet, thoughtful pause after his *told you so* that told him even more. And so, when Bones speculated aloud about the suitability of a bottle of blue brandy to the occasion, and whether the billet of the former Chief of Starfleet Operations might be a more appropriate venue for its consumption than the temporary lodgings afforded to a lowly CMO cooling his heels until his new assignment comes through, Kirk heard the question buried beneath the acerbic good humor, the understanding, and he knew that he wasn’t the only person in the whole of Starfleet for whom the whole damned thing rings hollow. It made it possible to laugh quietly, thank him and refuse, in the knowledge that Bones will also understand why tonight is not the night for toasts. And it made it possible to imagine a time when he’ll be able to raise a glass and drink to what’s happened today, and that’s... better than nothing, Kirk guesses.

It doesn’t help right now.

To hell with it. He thinks he knew in Nogura's offices what he was planning to do, but it's not until now, surrounded by unpacked boxes and darkness and a complete absence of any signs of habitation or care, that Kirk understands that there is nowhere in the world less suited to his present state of mind than where he is right now. He's debated his way through two hours of debrief in the presence of allies and enemies and colleagues whose opinion of Kirk changes according to how useful a friend he can be on any given day; he's smiled for the cameras and spoken with quiet feeling about the courage of his crew and his return to deep space, and voiced elaborate panegyrics on the infinite wisdom of Starfleet Command in tones of effusive praise that nobody could question or fault. He's sat behind his old desk and poured coffee into the weary crevices of his conscious mind while he's scrolled through files left half-finished, correspondence unanswered, tactics unplotted, until Kaplan turned up at somebody's quiet suggestion, sleep-ruffled and unimpressed, and reminded him that her ability to manage Fleet Ops in his absence remains unchanged by the revelation that he's not, now, coming back again. He is done, in more ways than one. To hell with it.

The box is not difficult to find, in the end: it's one of a dozen or so crammed into a corner of what's recognizable as his home office only by the presence of a desk, a chair, and a terminal screen in a room otherwise stripped of ornamentation. This is where he stored the detritus of his old life, packed into crates when he moved into Lori's apartment, as though it could be buried beyond the reach of thought with cardboard and polystyrene peanuts, and in all of the fourteen months that have passed since the end of his marriage, he has never seen any reason to disturb them. A scrawled note on the side of each hints at their what's inside, and this is how he knows which box to open. It's the only one where the contents are unlabelled.

There's a hook on the wall above his couch, relic of an earlier occupant with a better-developed sense of interior decorating, and the glazing flares white in the moonlight as Kirk carries the picture through to the living quarters. It feels solid in his hand, a comfortable weight, and two years out of sight have not erased the image beneath the glass from his memory. Paper and ink, perhaps, or charcoal; mounted against a dark hardwood that's been lacquered to a high shine by hundreds of years of care, with a brass plaque inlaid into the frame inscribing a familiar name in curling calligraphy:

HMS Enterprize, 1705

Kirk comms in a brief instruction to his office, leaves word for Bones at the front desk of his lodgings house, and taps out a message to Nogura via his assistant, explaining how he can be reached. His overnight bag is still sitting on the floor by the entryway where it was deposited by a yeoman some time in the hours after they docked at the Centroplex, and Kirk grabs it and slings it over his shoulder as he walks out the door. To hell with it. He's done what he can, and Starfleet is done with him, for now at least.

And he's still on his goddamn vacation.

Chapter End Notes

On reflection, I should probably also post Chapter 46 tomorrow. But I haven't actually finished writing Chapter 47 yet, so that'll be the end of this uncharacteristic run of good behavior, I'm afraid.

Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A February sun is rising behind a copse of eucalyptus as Kirk ascends the shallow hill to the place where Lori lies, cradled beneath a canopy of white-blossomed pear trees. The Ciana family stone rests in a quiet corner of Mount Hope cemetery, screened from the noise and motion of the city by carrotwoods and out-of-season oleanders: a dark granite obelisk that reaches to the stars that have fired their blood for generations, and which now casts a long shadow over the mound of freshly tilled soil that marks the entry of one more member to the ranks of memory. Her name is missing from the brass plaque, but that, Kirk supposes, will come in time. She feels very close here, as though, if he turns over his shoulder, he might see her disappearing into shadow.

He came to San Diego on the back of an instinct that carried him out of his billet and into the waiting arms of the first airtram to dock at the station: bound for Tijuana, and he considered, for a long moment, just staying the course, pillowing his head against his rolled-up jacket and riding on into Mexico, another name on a long list of places he's never seen. An unspent ticket on the PADD in his overnight bag testifies to his indecision, but, in the end, he knew even before they began their descent over Point Loma, bathed in the dark blue shadows of the city by night, that he'd reached his destination. He knew where he was going, he guesses, before he'd even left his apartment.

Exhaustion planted him face down into thick, dreamless sleep at the first hotel he came to, but the habit of too many years woke him before the sun was up and Kirk spent no more than half a minute contemplating the filigree network of cracks and stains on the ceiling before he realized that the only thing keeping him running at the moment is action and motion; the last thing he wants is space to think. A perfunctory shower under poorly calibrated sonics stripped the last traces of *Enterprise* from his skin and hair, and he set out into the sleeping city in search of something he doesn't quite know how to name. Closure? Maybe. But he can't help feeling that what he's after is more like absolution.

She'd have hated the stone, he thinks, letting his eyes travel along the length of its smooth, polished surface and into the lightening sky above. Lori liked memories but scorned ostentation; she'd have been content with one of the simpler concrete tablets laid flat against the ground elsewhere on the hill: a name, her dates, perhaps the Starfleet crest. It occurs to him now, bouquet in hand, that she'd be rolling her eyes at him if she could see him now, face etched with a kind of disappointed exasperation at his complete failure to think past convention and nicety; what she'd have hoped from him, Kirk thinks, is that he'd maybe choose to honor her memory in a way that was meaningful to her, though he's not sure where he's supposed to pick up a bottle of forty-year-old Scotch at this time of day, and at least part of him suspects that she'd be as inclined to punch him on the arm as to thank him for pouring it onto the soil. He can't help but think that, if it were him in the ground, she'd have been better at this. But, then again, that's the way it's always been for them. Some things never change.

The air is soft and warm and smells of recent rain. Kirk reaches out a hand to the cool surface of the monument and feels nothing but stone beneath his fingers. *Goodbye, Lori*, he says in the silence of his head, but he can't make himself say the words out loud.

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About eight months after the end of their marriage, they found themselves off-world together at the Morenian negotiations on Chel, and Kirk took his ex-wife out to dinner at the end of a long and particularly trying day. Lori had just started seeing Ostergard a few weeks earlier, and their post-marital entente was fragile enough yet that they were still pretending that Kirk didn't know this, so he's not sure how they got onto the subject of things that could have been, other than the fact that Chelarian wine, as it turns out, is more than 30% proof by Terran standards. Lori would have started the conversation, he's certain, but he let himself follow her lead, encouraged, perhaps, by the sense of intimacy renewed in a manner that demanded very little from him in return, and they talked more easily that night than they had since before they were lovers.

She asked why he hadn't married Ruth, which was something he thought she already knew, but that, he guesses, was always one of their problems: assuming that they'd said more than they really had. So he told her about a bright September morning in San Francisco; about sitting down to breakfast at the table of their little two-room apartment off Clement Street and knowing straight away that something was wrong; about the tight lines of his fiancée's face as she told him that she loved him, that she would always love him, and that loving him just simply wasn't enough. Lori listened quietly as he remembered feeling nothing much of anything at all, that distant day, just a blanket of hazy detachment where the sadness ought to have been, and, afterwards, as Ruth was packing, he'd pulled on his uniform and made his way to the Academy and aced his astrometrics paper with a score so high that he'd asked his professor to re-mark it because he was certain there'd been a mistake.

She'd laughed at that, a soft sound that broke the shell of sadness that had frosted around them, and her fingers had flexed against the table, as though she were fighting an urge to reach out for his hand. *Yeah*, she'd said. *That sounds like you.*

And Kirk had smiled, because the memory had long since ceased to hold any particular bitterness, and he's old enough now to remember himself as a cadet with fond chagrin. But Lori's laughter had faded as she'd raised her wine to her lips and sipped, and she was quiet for a long moment after that, hair twisting gently in the warm breeze that wandered in from the ocean as her eyes drifted out of focus over the pale ochre skies of a Chelarian dusk.

I don't know, she'd said at last, and he remembers that her lipstick, a deep cherry red that Kirk had never seen her wear before, had left a crimson stain on the lip of her glass. *You get body-slammed*

like that, there's an instinct that tells you to take the hit and keep running. Because the only win you have left at that point is invulnerability.

They weren't talking about Ruth anymore; he knew that even then. Thinking back now, he's not even certain that she was talking about their marriage, because her ex-husband's continuing solitude disturbed her, in a way that Kirk never understood while she was alive, and he knows her too well to think that she didn't understand why he made no effort to correct that, once she'd given up on trying to find a place for herself in a heart that wasn't his to give. But the thing is, she never expected that there was an end to this story of his; if she was trying to find meaning in what they'd lost, it was by making him make something of what was left so that he hadn't just locked her out for no better reason than to immolate himself on the fires of isolation. She'd wanted, in spite of everything, in spite of what she'd felt and what he'd felt and the way it had all fallen apart, to make sure that he had a way to be happy. Because she was smart enough to realize, in the end, what Kirk himself could not admit until three days ago: that there has never been anyone for him but Spock; that the years before he knew him were just filling in time; that his life was set in stone the day he beamed aboard the *Enterprise* and found himself staring down a steely Vulcan glare that admitted of no possibility of solidarity until the day that it did; and that any attempt to deny or deviate from this simple truth was always going to crash and burn.

So if she's going to let him go, if he's going to let her go, then it has to be for this. This is the only real memorial he can give her now: to make sure that he didn't throw away what they had for no good reason. Nothing else is worthy of a woman like Lori Ciana.

At the airtram station in Boise, he comms Kaplan to let her know that he'll be working on his handover dossier *in absentia*, and she tells him that Nogura's office has been in touch, but, though she declines to go into detail, it doesn't *sound* as though Kirk's job is on the line, and he wonders if, perhaps, word of his replacement has filtered through and it's not Kaplan. Nogura has Kirk's recommendation on record, but Kaplan is young and new to tactical command; it was never likely to be her. It's likely to be Boudin, thinks Kirk, and isn't *that* just going to make for a few interesting situations once he's back out in the field, but, on the whole, it could be worse. Much worse. It's possible the stripes are finally going to come in useful.

An optimistic call to Alisoff evidences a triumph of hope over expectation, but she's no better disposed than her late CO to offer the updates that Lori never got around to giving him after she made him leave for Africa, and then, duty and motivation exhausted, Kirk puts in a final comm to Bones to tell him where he's going and why.

"Idaho, huh?" says his friend's disembodied voice as the swaddled hordes filter past the soundproof booths beyond, tightly wrapped in parkas and scarves and gloves. "What happened—San Francisco wasn't cold and wet enough for you?"

It's an excellent point, particularly given that Kirk is no better prepared for the journey than he was

the last time he made it, and the fingers gripping his communicator are once again turning a worrying shade of grayish lilac. “Something like that,” he says, and hears the beginnings of a weary smile warming his voice as he speaks. “It’s as good a place as any to kill time.”

“Guess so,” says Bones. A speculative pause. “Anyone comes looking for you, guess I know which way to send them.”

Unseen and unregarded, Kirk closes his eyes, rests his head against the chill formica-plated wall, exhales. “I’d appreciate that,” he says.

“Sure,” says his friend. A beat. “Can’t promise they’re gonna be too happy about it, mind.”

A breath of quiet laughter curls steam into the air, frosts the concourse wall with beads of moisture. “Probably not,” says Kirk. His head feels light, reeling, full of clouds. “I’ll be on comms anyway. This is only partially a vacation.”

“‘Partially,’ my mother’s britches,” says Bones conversationally. “‘Partially’s as near as you get, Jim. Lord knows, there wasn’t a man or woman in Starfleet was surprised when you found a way to get out of that last one early. I’ll see you in a couple of days—there’ll be a bottle of Salurian rum waiting in sickbay, soon as you get the old silver lady out of park.”

The last time Kirk drank Salurian rum, he was twenty-one years old and alleviating the pain of his second failed attempt at the Kobayashi Maru. He woke up three days later in the library bathrooms, with no shirt, no memory of the intervening seventy-two hours, and a tattoo on his left buttock of a face that he didn’t recognize, which took four sessions with a dermal regenerator to remove. Bones knows this story. He probably doesn’t have Salurian rum, but Kirk makes a mental note to bring his own liquor, just in case.

“Isn’t that illegal?” he asks, for the show of things, and, as predicted, his friend’s rumble of laughter rolls back over the comm wave, like ripples across a pond.

“Only in three sectors,” says Bones cheerfully. “Four at most.”

The concourse is emptying as the tide of passengers ebbs, and the sun is sinking behind the Rockies in a blaze of iced gold and purple, lengthening shadows draining what little heat remains in the air. Kirk has wrapped himself in an extra shirt and his uniform jacket, but the temperature is diving towards zero as night approaches and he needs to get out of the cold.

“Fine,” he says, and he makes no effort to hide the grin in his voice. “But let’s wait until we’ve cleared Jupiter station before you break out the contraband, all right? I’ll see you in a few days—Kirk out.”

The communicator snaps shut as Kirk signs off, a muted click in the artificial hush of the booth, and he pulls his coat more tightly around him as he makes his way out through the static sound-dampening field and into the cavernous roar of the central atrium. The past is everywhere here. It’s three years since Kirk last made this trip; three years since he found himself ejected from command and the only place that has ever truly felt like home, and scrambled, reeling, to find a way to make his peace with a new reality. Three years since he lost sight of the one face he wanted to see in a room full of strangers; three years since he commed his new CO from the Gem State to explain that he’d turned and run like hell from his brave new world; three years since she struggled out of sleep to speak softly to him and let him know that she understood. As he makes his way across the lobby towards street doors banked either side with snow, he hears her voice all around him, catches flashes of her golden smile beneath every pair of blue eyes that pass him in the crowds. She’s everywhere, but she’s retreating from him: the gaze behind the eyes is sharp, the smile that lights her face is knowing, and she nods, turns, disappears into shadow. *Didn't waste much time, huh?* she whispers from the edge of recall, and there's a note of laughter behind the words. *Did he spook you that bad?*

He’d hold onto her if he could. He knows that, now that it’s too late. But she just smiles, sunshine in the shadows, and shakes her head. *It's not me you want*, she says, and she’s right, of course, but she’s also wrong. Because the trouble with wanting is that it can mean many things, and it wasn’t ever a woman who broke Kirk’s heart.

He knows that, now that it’s too late.

~*~

The last traces of daylight are a ribbon of burnished orange on the horizon as the rental car descends towards the snow-scattered yard of his uncle’s old homestead, and the sky above is dark and clear and shot with starlight and constant motion. The last time Kirk was here, he’d tethered his gaze to the ground beneath his feet to avoid all memories of what he’d left behind, but tonight, as the passenger door opens and he steps out into the frozen shadows, he turns his head upwards and sucks in a deep breath of mountain air, sharp and clean as broken glass, and searches the black vaults above for his sleeping ship. It’s easier to love this world uncomplicatedly, in all its savage beauty, when he’s only passing through.

The house is cold and bathed in gloom, but the environmental controls spring to life as he opens the door, and the air inside smells fresh, mobile with recent use. The grate is neatly swept and the

dust that layers onto the open surfaces between his parents' infrequent visits has been cleared, and, though Kirk knows it has been more than four months since anyone last stayed here, the signs of care-taking are evident, and bode well for the prospects of hot water in the shower. He drops his bag on the couch on his way through to the kitchen in search of coffee, rubbing warmth into his hands as he goes, and notes with a sudden twist of hunger that the synthesizer has been upgraded since his last visit, and that fresh fruit is now on the menu. He'll pass on that, he thinks, and dials up a grilled cheese sandwich with a side of fries and a carafe of Java as hot as the machine will make it, in the knowledge that he has fewer than seven days' dietary freedom left before Bones is in charge of his meals once more, and it's time to make that count. The thought makes him slightly giddy with irrational joy: it means he's going home again.

Firewood is stacked in a geometric pile on the hearth, but it's been sitting in the cold too long, and damp has seeped into the fibers. Kirk contents himself with dragging a screen into place in front of the grate, to shield the room from the worst of the draft, and drops onto the couch closest to the heating vent, where the temperature is creeping towards comfort. In a moment, he thinks, cradling his steaming mug against his chest, he will get up, make his way to the master bathroom, where the water always runs a little warmer, scrub the day off his skin and make a play for some real, genuine sleep; maybe start the process of reclaiming a little bit of his humanity. He's going to sink into bed, wrapped in a frost-scented comforter, and close his eyes and let sleep wash over him, and he's not going to remember that it's thirty-eight hours into his seven-day countdown, or that he has no idea what he's doing here, or that he stood this morning in front of his ex-wife's grave and left flowers in lieu of a goodbye, or that there's an empty space on the wall above the fireplace beside the holo of Sam and Aurelan on their wedding day, a black line of residual dust ghosting the outline of another picture, now removed.

He's not going to dream.

~*~

He wakes early again, surfacing into consciousness before the sun has finished rising, but, for the first time in days, Kirk feels rested. The house controls have molded themselves to his presence overnight, and the blackout glass of the windows lightens as he swings his feet out of bed, spilling pre-dawn gray through the pale curtains in all the shades of an overnight dusting of snow. The floorboards are warm, gently heated beneath his feet, and this, he thinks, is as good a sign as any that it's time to get up.

Fifty-some hours down, barely one hundred more to go. Not that he's counting.

Not that he's worried.

His mother has been campaigning to get the chimney closed for almost as long as the house has

been in his parents' name, but not *too* strongly, Kirk thinks, or the fireplace would have been defunct long before now. It's impractical and drafty and a whole lot of thankless effort to maintain, but there is something primal, something satisfying, about the work it takes to light it, and so it's almost a disappointment when the chopped kindling catches on his second attempt. Almost, but not quite: Kirk dials the lights down to zero and lets the flames light the room as he carries his coffee to the wide picture window to watch the rising sun streak the snow-capped mountains in coral and amber. He wonders if he'll miss the dawn when he's back on his ship, but he doubts it. Deep space has its compensations; he never has before.

Beyond the graveled yard, a path stretches through the trees that fringe the property, curling down the hillside towards the distant state highway. It's a difficult drive but a challenging hike; perhaps he'll tackle it later today, or tomorrow, or the day after, once the sun takes the edge off the ice in the air. It's bathed in shadow now: the clear crystal darkness of a winter morning, and it's silent, still and deserted. Kirk is not expecting a figure to make his way out of the gloom—tall and angular, even buried beneath a thick coat and a woolen hat that fails to hold back the frozen chill, imperious eyebrow arched against the discomfort written across his face—but he watches the empty road for a long moment just the same, and a fragment of poetry, heard once and long forgotten, skitters across the corners of his conscious thought:

Even if I now saw you

only once,

I would long for you

through worlds,

worlds.

Japanese, he thinks, and old: one of Lori's favorites, perhaps; something he's learned from her, once upon a time. He tries to remember the context, the occasion, and comes up blank. Was she talking about him? Or herself? Or something she saw in her husband's face when he thought she wasn't looking? On the edge of his vision, a golden smile flares in the retreating shadows of the room, a yellow-haired head shakes indulgently and turns away, and she's gone again without a word, leaving him to draw his own conclusions. But he guesses he's earned that by now, and Kirk smiles softly in the paling light of the oriel, drains his coffee, and turns to make his way back upstairs.

~*~

He finds things for to occupy himself that first day; things to keep him busy. A handover dossier for a job that never really felt like his, comm chatter scattering the airwaves: organizing, finishing, squaring away. Updates from an idling *Enterprise*, Scotty smiling cheerfully out of the screen of the homestead's old terminal as he runs through lists of last-minute improvements he wants to make, confident in the knowledge that Kirk's not likely to refuse. Negotiations with Personnel

about replacements for the crew who transferred off his ship in the early hours of the Vejur crisis; with Supplies about refitting the captain's quarters so that Kirk doesn't feel as though he's invading a dead man's privacy every time he ends his shift; with PR about the inevitable cabaret that must accompany the official return of James Kirk to starship command. The morning is lost to Starfleet, and it's a surprise to look up from his work when a growling stomach deposits him back into the moment and find that the sun is already on the far side of its apex in the ice-blue winter sky.

Damp is creeping in beneath the sill of the gable window in the second guest room, and the last flurry of fall leaves still block the gutters beneath the eaves. A faucet in the downstairs bathroom has a tendency to stick in cold weather, which is eleven months of the damn year up here, and its constant dripping is like needles in the back of Kirk's skull in the silence. Paint is peeling from the outside windowsills, and the weathering is coming away on the back door. There is work to do, if a man wants to work. The farm is set low into a southwest-facing slope, and the high ridge to the north has held back the worst of the snow, but there are clouds on the horizon that promise a fresh flurry overnight, and so Kirk decides to start by clearing the yard: it's the kind of honest, physically demanding labor that his restlessness requires. He finds a shovel in the woodshed, along with a half-empty caulking gun for the leaking window and a tin of weatherproofing lacquer that will have to wait until the air dries up a little, and sets to work clearing a path that's already tolerably passable, but that's not really the point. Last night's drift has dusted the surface of the older snow below, and, though it's frozen into a crust in the shaded areas where the sun is weakest, it offers little resistance to Kirk's underarm swing, shovel biting deeply into a blanket of white. Ice crystals sparkle as he pitches a spadeful of powder into the corner of the yard, and this is good; this is exactly what he needs.

It's not deep—no more than two inches in places—but the path is long and open to the sky, and there's a lot to clear. Kirk has bundled himself into his father's old overcoat and utility gloves, but he shucks off the jacket after fifteen minutes' work and feels the cold air bite into his sweat-dampened shirt sleeves. Meltwater darkens the hem of his pants as the frozen ground appears, snow creeping in around the tops of his boots to trickle down his heels and pool beneath his soles. The blade of the shovel grazes shale as he slices, gathers, swings back over his shoulder, a visceral crunch of rock and ice, the soft, scattering rustle of snow on snow. Slice, gather and swing, and a bird, disturbed by his footfall on the gravel, rises, complaining, from the boughs of a nearby tree, a lonely chatter of wing and song against the hush. Slice, gather and swing, and frustration rides a wave of energy along his arms: frustration, disquiet, and impatience. Slice, gather and swing, and there is no answering footfall on the road beneath him and no rumble of approaching engine from the sky, and he knew there wouldn't be, he *knew* this, but he's been listening for it just the same and each quiet, empty minute rings in his ears like a confirmation of every dark thought he doesn't want to acknowledge. Slice, gather and swing; slice, gather and swing, and nothing but silence behind it.

The truth is, he has no idea what he's doing here. The sane thing, the rational thing, would be to walk back into the house and throw his clothes into his bag, close the door behind him, and head back to San Francisco before the storm sets in. He knows he's hiding, here on the mountainside, and he's not sure why, beyond the general sense of redundancy waiting for him in an office he's about to leave and the knowledge that there aren't enough pieces of James Kirk to satisfy everyone who wants a part of him this week. And they're good reasons, he guesses, but they're not good enough to let him pretend that's all that's going on. If ever there were a time when Kirk did not

want to be difficult to find, it's now, and yet this knowledge makes him angry in a manner that he cannot explain to his own satisfaction. Maybe it's just that he feels as though he's always taking that first step forward only to find that he's reaching into empty space; maybe he wants to see what will happen if he pulls away for once. And maybe it's just that a James Kirk who can skulk about his apartment, waiting to see if anyone shows up, is not a man he recognizes, and he's sick of looking in the mirror and seeing someone he doesn't know.

He said he was coming back. Seven days, he said; fewer if he departed at Sigma Cilicia IV. There are many reasons to doubt this and only one real reason not to, and that gets a little harder to believe with every passing hour. Seven days, he said. It's been two and a half. Kirk sinks the blade of his shovel into a bank of soft powder and tries to make his brain stop counting.

He works steadily all afternoon, but winter is long in the Rockies and night comes early in February. As the shadows lengthen beneath a sky the color of flame, Kirk tosses the shovel up against the side of the house, kicks snow off his boots on the step, and makes his way indoors to find that the fire in the grate has long since banked. Tomorrow, he thinks, he'll top up the kindling from the timber pile nestled beneath a frost-scattered tarpaulin in the woodshed; for tonight, he builds a pyramid of tinder from the dwindling pile on the hearth and warms the feeling back into his hands as it catches slowly from the heat of the embers. His communicator is sitting untouched on the table where he left it more than four hours earlier, and he gets to his feet with the idea of coming in to the office for an update, but he walks past it before he knows he's going to do so and makes his way to the liquor cabinet instead, where his father keeps the kind of whisky that would have lit up Lori's face in connoisseur's delight, had Kirk ever brought her here. He's not going to check his messages, he decides, as he pours two fingers of Scotch and carries it back to the fireside, stretching out the stiffness in his shoulders as he walks. He's not going to scroll through line after line of congratulations and gratitude and personal questions he has no intention of answering, in search of a word, a name he knows he won't see. He knows better than to do this to himself. He's an idiot for letting it happen again.

He should have stayed in San Francisco. In San Francisco, he'd be easier to find. But there are too many ghosts haunting those familiar roads; he came here on instinct, and he needs to trust in that, for at least a little longer. Kirk sips whisky by the firelight until his eyes grow heavy, heat and dancing shadows soothing his unsettled mind, and he wakes on the couch in the small hours of the morning with an aching head and muscles like granite that protest all the way up the stairs to bed.

He dreams that night. But he doesn't remember them in the morning.

The blizzard has blown itself out to the northeast by sunrise, and the path across the yard remains clear. Searching through the sideboard for a flint or a fresh book of matches, Kirk comes across the chimney breast's missing holograph: a picture he doesn't remember posing for over beakers of orange juice in a function room in Horseshoe Bay. He peels back the linen tea cloth that someone has wrapped around it for safekeeping and stares for a moment into the past, at the face of the woman he married, at the face of the man who married her. Lori's smile always translated poorly to holo: captured for posterity on her new husband's arm, dress golds a flash of summer against the

gray winter sky at the window, she looks beautiful, radiant with easy joy, but the sunlight is gone from her eyes. Something is missing from her in reproduction, something that he'll never see again, and Kirk slides the picture back into the drawer as his chest tightens and his throat constricts.

He stacks the fire, clears the ashes from beneath the grate, and sets off upstairs to re-seal the guest room window.

Kaplan comms mid-morning, as Kirk is proofing the third draft of his handover report and wondering idly if he needs to mention the fiasco with the Argelian swimming pool and the trade delegation from Brannigan's Colony, to let him know that Xeno are making tentative advances in Fleet Ops' direction and that there's talk about maybe possibly calling a provisional meeting in a couple of days. Hypothetically. Alisoff is playing her cards close to her chest, and Kirk understands that—she's not Lori, she doesn't have a pre-existing relationship with his department, and, most importantly, she doesn't know who's going to be in charge of making Kirk's decisions this time next week—but he still has to fight the urge to cut the call and redial her office, try and talk her down from her defensive reticence. That he doesn't do this is out of respect for Kaplan and her place on the Starfleet stage: she's going to have to stand her ground, these next few weeks, and he doesn't want to make her look sidesteppable now. If this is something he needs to know, if it's the information he's been looking for, he trusts his deputy to tell him. She knows enough to know why it's important.

He finishes his report, sends it through to Kaplan for comment, resists the impulse to tack a fussy little codicil to the bottom of the message, wondering if Alisoff's office gave *any* hint as to what the meeting might be about. Is it significant, he wonders, that the overture has come only after Kirk's tenure as the Chief of Starfleet Operations has entered its final days? Is it significant that it has come from Alisoff when it never came from Lori? Is it significant that her office won't say what she might—potentially—want to talk to Fleet Ops about? He doesn't know her well enough to answer these questions, and he's not used to being so out of sync with Xeno, so completely out of the loop. It feels like the latest in a long list of reminders of how violently the world has shifted. How much they've all lost.

The sun gains strength as the morning goes on, and Kirk wraps himself in his father's coat and deerstalker, and a thick woolen scarf that might be Peter's, and carries his lunch out onto the porch. The swing is clear of snow but slick with melted frost, and so he sets his coffee on the seat and stands at the railing instead, resting his elbows on the crossbar as he chews absently on his sandwich. The white-capped peaks around him glow like earthbound stars against the clear, cool blue of the sky, and he can hear what he thinks is a solitaire singing in the aspens. Kirk feels a wry smile playing at the edge of his mouth as he reaches behind him for his mug. It figures that his only company out here would be a bird named after seclusion.

The fire has burned down to embers when he brings his plate back inside, and he never did find that flint; he can't afford to let it go out. So he leaves his dishes in the sink and makes his way out to the woodshed, where logs are piled beneath a tarp, soft and damp from the snow, and spends a little time pulling out the driest wood from the back. And there's something cathartic about the

effort it takes to swing an ax and shatter timber: mindless repetition and focused destruction, action and reaction, the antithesis of handover reports and press conferences and diplomatic paralysis. The ax rises and falls, the wood shatters beneath the blow, and, when he's worked for five, ten, twenty minutes, there's a pile of kindling at his feet: tangible evidence of his exertions, and isn't that a damned change for once. Kirk gathers up an armful of snow-scented pine and wonders again just how the hell he's managed to survive the last three years of his life.

Fire replenished out of immediate danger of extinction, Kirk wanders back outdoors in search of a ladder with which to tackle the guttering, maybe the second-floor window frames, a couple of loose shingles on the north-east eaves. There are stables at the back of the property, screened from the house by a thick copse of cottonwood, where Kirk's mother hopes to keep Appaloosas when his father finally gets around to retiring; for now, they've been pressed into service as a kind of holding pen for anything not useful enough for the woodshed, and he guesses that if anywhere on the grounds is likely to inspire his restless mind with ways to avoid thinking for the rest of the day, it's going to be out here. He's not disappointed. An eighteen-foot ladder rests against the near wall, hung with cobwebs and patched with waterlogged dust, but it's sturdy enough to take Kirk's weight when he tests it, and the rung locks hold when he snaps them into place. Three eight-gallon drums of whitewash gather leafmold in a damp end-stall that could do with a little weatherproofing of its own, depending on how long he stays and how bored he gets. A carpentry bench, which Kirk is privately certain has never seen use at the hands of a single member of his family, promises a treasure chest of power tools that he can almost certainly use to do *something* if the snow keeps him indoors one day. And there, by the near wall, a tackroom door yields to a little gentle pressure to reveal the jewel in the diversionary crown: a wooden rack, slung with a tarp and two woolen blankets, beneath which rests Kirk's uncle's old trail saddle.

Yes. This will definitely do.

It's years since Kirk has been on horseback—deep space is not precisely the ideal environment for equestrian pursuits, though you'd think there might have been a few more opportunities when they made planetfall, given half the places they visited—but the passion has never left him, and the smell of tempered rawhide, shot through with the dusty musk of horsehair and sweat, will always, he thinks, have the capacity to drop him abruptly back into childhood days beneath an infinite Iowan sky. His brother's shadow is at his shoulder as he carries rack and saddle out into the yard in front of the stables and sets to buffing the dust from the tooled-leather ridges of the fender and housing, and the scent of saddle soap conjures memories of sunny, late-summer days on the edge of a cornfield: two sandy-haired boys on a pair of Pasa Finos, racing along a dusty trail, with nothing but possibility stretching out ahead. Sam was always the horseman, always the rancher; in another life, another family, he'd have been content to tether himself to the prairie lands and raise cattle and children beneath his native sun. He looks so young in his wedding picture, so full of life and hope, and Kirk can't help but remember that, of the four faces that hung together on that wall, three of them are gone now forever.

He doesn't know what to do with that. Other than to make it count.

And this, at least, he thinks he can do, if he can just get the chance. *It wasn't ever a woman that broke your heart*, said his mother, the day he got married, and, Kirk guesses, he ought to know better by now than to ignore his mom's advice. It wasn't ever a woman that leveled James Kirk, that got inside his head and his heart and hollowed him out. A beautiful face, a sharp mind, hair the color of an Iowa meadow—these are the things that catch his eye, but they're never the things that keep him. He may love them, but he won't fall *in* love with them, and it will never be enough, for him or for them. Small wonder they all chose to leave in the end, and he thinks he might have stopped to notice before now how he's never sat boneless by a window, staring blankly into a colorless sky, for Ruth, or for Carol, or for Janet, or for his wife. *It meant more than the Enterprise*, said Lori, once upon a time: strong words, brave words, and he'd turned and walked away so that he didn't have to hear them. *It meant more than command or deep space or any of it. You loved him and he left you, and you just kind of... stopped.*

Yes. He thinks she understood him very well in the end. Better than he was prepared to understand himself.

He wishes he could still tell her that she was right, though, of course, she already knew. There wasn't much that got past the all-seeing gaze of Lori Ciana, and he has no idea what it was about him, about them, that made her turn her back on all reason and good sense and let him start something that she knew was bound to fail. He wishes he could tell her that he finally understands what she was trying to tell him: that night on Chel, the first night they spent together, the last; he wishes he could tell her that she was right about almost all of it--except for one thing. It turns out that this story of his has an ending after all.

Because Spock is coming back. He is. There's no reason to believe this, and every reason not to, but the truth is, there's just no way that it ends like this; they've both tried too many times to walk away. Like warp and weft, like binary stars, like quantum entanglement, there is no one without the other: they've spent eight years in a decaying orbit; collision was always inevitable. So he's coming back. He said he was, and he will.

And so, because his ears have never stopped listening for it, Kirk hears the hum of an approaching engine before it's much more than a disturbance in the air, a vibration on the edge of sound, and he knows, immediately, what it means. Finding a lonely mountainside ranch in the foothills of the Idaho Rockies was never going to present much of a logistical challenge for a man like Spock; the real question was whether or not he could take that final step. Kirk has spent so many years reaching forward; he guesses he just needed to know that he wasn't grasping at air.

He slings the blanket back over his uncle's half-cleaned saddle, carries it back into the barn. It's a shame, really, he thinks, as he pulls the big doors closed and walks back towards the house, brushing soap and dust from his hands; it looks like it's been some time since the leather was last treated, and he'd have liked to have finished the job. Maybe he will yet, though he doubts it. If he's right, if the knot of apprehension now tightening in his gut isn't completely off target, then everything is about to change, and that job belongs to the limbo of anticipation and uncertainty that's haunted the past few days; a restlessness that's already passing into memory. And, besides,

it's leather. Vulcans don't approve of products made from hide.

The trees of the foothill are rustling now in the updraft of an oncoming car; the engine hum is creeping up the octaves, and, in a minute, a vehicle is going to appear above the ridge. Kirk sucks in a deep breath and lets his eyes fall closed for just a moment, takes a second to center himself, to feel the last traces of his old life dissolve into history. This is it. This is what he's been waiting for, and now, faced with the reality of it, he knows he's not prepared, but, then again, he's not sure he ever really will be. There's no way to prepare for this. It feels a little bit like freefall, he thinks. It's felt that way ever since they met.

Kirk opens his eyes, squares his shoulders, smiles. And he makes his way indoors to wash his hands.

Chapter End Notes

And on that note, my run of good behavior must end. But I'm writing away at Chapter 47, I promise!

Kirk's half-remembered fragment of Japanese poetry, by the way, is by Izumi Shikibu.

Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The journey from San Francisco has taken less than two hours, though it has felt alternately much longer and much shorter. Spock is beyond illogic now, however, and decided before the car had cleared the snow-swept peaks of the Sierra Nevada that he was going to ignore every whisper of disquiet or ambivalence that might attempt to unsettle his resolve, and so he has passed the time in studious contemplation of the changing terrain below as the miles race by. He has not so much as attempted a trance. If it wouldn't come on the journey to Earth, it's hardly likely to effect a sudden triumphant return now that he's en route to Idaho, and, in any case, this is precisely the sort of Sisyphean endeavor that's liable to produce the opposite of its intended effect, in that its failure must serve only to call attention to his fractured controls. Spock's peace of mind is precarious enough right now; he does not require any assistance in destabilizing it further.

His robes are travel-creased and uncomfortable against his skin, and they carry the faint scent of civilian interstellar transit woven through the fabric. They seem... ill-suited to the current venture, but it was this or his uniform, and, though Spock can't put his finger on exactly why the latter seems like a bad idea, some hidden instinct is quite insistent about this, and, in the absence of any rational alternative, he's prepared to acquiesce. McCoy's wardrobe, fortunately, is better stocked than the modest valise that Spock has brought with him from Gol, and he insisted that Spock take temporary possession of a thick waterproof jacket, formerly employed against the heavy rains of Beta Auraculi, along with a set of woolen gloves and some sort of oiled canvas headgear that smells of unpolished copper and mothballs. Spock has shrugged on the coat—homespun desert wool is a poor defense against the chill of a north-Californian winter day—but the other items sit, untouched, on the seat beside him. He'll decide what to do about them later.

Later. The arid scrublands of Nevada and southeastern Oregon have given way to the urban greenery of Ada County, and, ahead of him on the horizon, he can see the flat plain buckle as it begins the long climb into the Rockies. There is not much *later* left.

He would like to be more certain of his welcome. McCoy has been adamant on the subject, in terms that hinted of some non-specific threat of retributive violence, should Spock elect to remain in San Francisco, as per his stated intention, and await the admiral's return, but he cannot truthfully believe that Kirk's decision to remove himself from Starfleet Headquarters this week evidences a desire for anybody's company, let alone Spock's. He could comm, of course, announce his intentions and see what happens next, and the fact that he has not done this—that he has contented himself with nothing more than a brief message to Kirk's yeoman, asking that she notify her commander of Spock's intent—unsettles him further. Still. *Alea iacta est*, as the ancient Terran general said; the car is over Boise now, and Spock's communicator is on. If Kirk wants to comm him to tell him to turn around, he still has time; otherwise, Spock will continue as he is. It is, perhaps, not the most watertight plan he has ever devised, but it's the one he's following just the same.

He'd simply rest a little easier if he were confident that this decision was correct. His history with Kirk is littered with miscalculation and tactical error; it seems presumptuous to think that he's suddenly developed clarity of reasoning in the past week, simply because he'd like it to be so. Spock's logic has always been uncertain where James Kirk is concerned.

The car lurches as it slices through a mountain thermal, and, in the moment before the inertial dampeners kick in, Spock is obliged to throw out a hand to steady himself against the window. The glass is cool beneath his touch, and the water vapor that has condensed against the pane is beginning to freeze as the altitude climbs. A tinny little chirrup from the navcom announces their imminent arrival at his programmed coordinates, and Spock is obliged to suppress a spike of something that feels alarmingly like unmitigated horror, and to lament the speed and efficiency of Terran domestic transportation methods that deliver a traveler to his destination with scarcely enough time to reconcile himself to the prospect of the conversation to come, let alone implement adequate preparations. And yet, even in the midst of his distraction, he cannot help but wonder if any length of preparation would be sufficient for this. Everything is about to change, he thinks; all there is left to him now is to hold on tightly as the world shifts beneath him, and hope he can find his feet again when it's over.

Because he understands now, and it is, after all, as simple as it has always seemed. He loves James Kirk. He is in love with James Kirk. And he is loved in return; it has been so for many years, and running from it has only made it stronger. As the car crests the final hill, as a smoking chimney climbs above a thicket of snow-capped evergreens to reveal the house beneath it, Spock wonders if, perhaps, the intense antipathy he experienced that first day of Kirk's command might not have been the early manifestation of an attraction so instinctive and profound that it shook him to the core of his Discipline; if the hostility that soured the air between them for so many weeks was nothing more than the fear that has haunted him for all these years, trying to find its way out in a manner that he could understand, sublimate, and condone. He supposes that it no longer matters. He may never be able to pinpoint the hour that he fell in love, but, as the car descends to the frost-sown yard, as the front door of the house opens and his friend steps out onto the porch, buried in a thick coat two sizes too big for him and absently toweling his hands, Spock can pinpoint the moment, the second, that he decided to stop fighting it.

Kaiidth.

He takes a moment to collect himself before he orders the car to open its doors. A second, no longer—there is protocol to observe, after all—but even that brief interlude is enough to convince him that he's prevaricating: an hour or more would not be sufficient to gather his reverberating thoughts, to ease out the tension in his shoulders and his neck, to settle the rush of apprehension and desire that slams into his controls like a landslide as he considers the task ahead. Where it may lead and what it may mean. If any of this is possible; if Spock can make it so. If he even ought to try.

Enough. Spock engages the egress mechanism. The doors slide open.

He's expecting the chill—it would be difficult to overlook it, given the thick carpet of snow that hangs upon every open surface—but the strength of its assault is startling. Spock was not aware that the Terran temperature dropped so obscenely, preposterously low, and he cannot for the life of him imagine why any sentient being would choose to make its home amongst such extremes. McCoy's hat and gloves, discarded in the back seat of the car and now out of unobtrusive reach, are beginning to make considerable sense, but there's already a faint smile playing at the edge of the admiral's lips as he slings the towel over his shoulder and leans his arms against the veranda's rail, a light behind his eyes that bodes poorly for Spock's dignity, and he prefers to mitigate against any further injury to his self-respect.

“Beautiful day,” says Jim innocently, as Spock steps onto the frozen ground and attempts to fold his hands at his stomach without succumbing to a violent shiver.

An eyebrow arches. Even *that* makes him feel colder. “It is...” says Spock, and allows a meaningful glance at the banked snow above the eaves to make his point for him, “...regional.”

A low chuckle from his friend gusts a veil of steam into the air. “There's a fire inside,” he says. “Please come in, Mr. Spock. You look absolutely bloodless.”

For a brief moment, Spock considers arguing, and it's only partially in defense of Vulcan honor. *Inside* seems disproportionately personal just now, as though it represents a final abdication of control, and old habits die hard.

On the other hand, though, he has never in his life felt cold like this, and there's a fire in the house. Control may be overrated. “Thank you,” he says, and experiences a moment of satisfaction at the brief flash of panic that ghosts across his commander's face before he's able to school it back into his habitual casual charm. There is something enormously comforting in the knowledge that, as ill-prepared as Spock might feel, he's not the only one flying blind just now. He's not the only one without any notion of what happens next, and he's not the only one who finds that prospect more than a little terrifying.

But, *alea iacta est*. He follows Kirk onto the veranda, and from there into the house.

“Please forgive my intrusion,” says Spock as his friend leads the way into the main living quarters: comfortably furnished, with two throw-scattered couches and an assortment of armchairs arranged around a wide hearth, where a fire crackles heat and warmth into a room that smells of pine and rosewater and burning wood. “I asked your office to inform you of my itinerary....”

“It’s no intrusion,” says Kirk, and there’s something in his face that Spock can’t quite place—consternation? Or frustration? “I’ve been out back all afternoon; if the office called, I haven’t picked it up. Please—have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

The words are evenly spoken, unhurried, but there’s a sense of urgency to them that mirrors the trepidation tightening Spock’s chest. He lowers himself into the chair closest to the fire—sweet and blessed heat again in a world turned to ice—and says, “Tea would be welcome.”

“Tea, of course,” says Jim. His brow furrows. “I don’t think the synthesizer is set for *therismasu*...”

This is not unexpected. Or, at least, it wouldn’t be, if Spock’s thoughts were less fragmented just now.

“Earl Gray will be a satisfactory substitute,” he says, “or chamomile, if it is available.”

Kirk nods distractedly and turns for the kitchen, and, belatedly, it occurs to Spock to wonder if his commander’s coffee habit is a familial trait and if it would, in fact, have been less trouble to request a glass of water. It appears to be impossible to persuade his brain to process these thoughts at a useful speed, however. No matter. The very thought of introducing any form of refreshment or sustenance to his stomach at this moment sends nausea curling through his abdomen, and this, surely, is the larger problem in the general scheme of things. He wonders if Kirk will notice if he simply cradles the cup between his hands for warmth and declines to sample its contents.

Alone, restive, he stands to shed his coat, folding it neatly to store on the back of his chair, and, freshly chilled through the spare fabric of his robes, he takes a step closer to the warmth of the fire, rubbing his hands while he remains unobserved. The chimneybreast is broad and rough-plastered, whitewash overlaid with the patina of many years’ use, and he lets his eyes roll over its contents as he waits for Jim to return. A lintel crosses it above the firebox, a thick slab of untreated oak hardened by the heat, and, on the mantelpiece, someone has arranged a collection of mementoes so eclectic as to tell a tale through their diversity alone. An old clock keeps time half a minute slow in the center of the *melée*, flanked on either side by two ornate brass candlesticks topped with waxy stubs long since burned past usefulness. An assortment of china vases jostle for space with a darkwood box, inlaid with mother-of-pearl; a glass bowl full of marbles; and an ancient oil lamp, black with soot. And above them, suspended from the wall, hangs a holo of a man and a woman that Spock recognizes immediately, though it is six years since he has seen either face, and they must be fifteen years younger again in their picture. He is George Kirk, Jr., whose brother always called him Sam; she is Aurelan, his wife, who survived him by a day.

Theirs is the only portrait to hang on this wall. Elsewhere in the room, faces known and unknown keep company with starmaps and landscapes and images of assorted Terran fauna, but here, on the chimneybreast, a couple long dead hold lonely court. And yet, to their left, an unused hook and an asymmetric arrangement testifies to the presence, at one time, of another photograph. Its absence tells a story of its own, Spock thinks, but this, like everything else in the room, belongs to a different Kirk, a Kirk that Spock has seen only rarely, and the shift in matters between them has not yet resolved itself into the kind of easy familiarity that they used to share. He will not ask; not today. Perhaps he will wait to be told.

“Chamomile,” says Kirk briskly as he returns, a steaming mug in either hand, and the moment is lost in confusion as Spock’s erstwhile CO crosses the room towards him to stand by the fire. He stops a cautious distance away, at the apex of his arm’s reach, and Spock is obliged to take a half step forward to retrieve his tea.

“Thank you,” he says, and cradles the cup to his chest. He can feel it warming his sternum through the fabric of his robe, almost past the point of comfort, but drinking it remains impossible, and he’d prefer to avoid drawing attention to this fact if at all possible. Kirk, he notices, has mirrored the gesture. Neither of them sips. Neither of them speaks. If Spock were not Vulcan, he thinks, he might find the moment uncomfortable.

“So,” says his friend after a moment. “You found your way here, then.”

Evidently. But Spock suspects he’s beginning to reacquire some of his hard-won fluency in Human emotional nuance, and his answer, he thinks, requires a little more subtlety than simple recognition of fact. Carefully, he says, “The journey presented little difficulty.”

A brief nod. Kirk’s face is unreadable. “I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

There’s something quite remarkable about the way that, despite everything, despite all they’ve shared and all they’ve lost, Jim remains unaware of the hold that he has always exercised over Spock. It is not logical, of course, but Spock cannot claim any particular superiority himself in that respect, and so he says nothing. He thinks, perhaps, he’s beginning to understand at last.

“I believe,” he says now, slowly, testing the words on his tongue before they leave his lips, “that an offer was made some years hence, that, in the event of a successful conclusion to our former mission, I might be introduced to this region in your company.”

Kirk’s brow furrows and for a long, protracted second, Spock fears that he has misjudged: that the moment was not, in fact, appropriate to reminiscence, and that he has inadvertently pushed the

limits of his latitude. Three years' absence has frosted over the easy familiarity that they used to share, and he is, in any case, unequivocally out of practice in the art of camaraderie, even if he were certain of how to say the words he needs to say. And then, sudden warmth lights his companion's face as understanding dawns, and Spock can almost see the memory of that long-ago conversation flash behind Jim's eyes: a late night after a difficult mission and its unsatisfactory end; a fractious commander, haunted by his ghosts; his second in command, lost for reassurances, who must have loved him even then. He sees it whisper across his friend's face as recollection carries him back across the years, and Spock resists the urge to release the breath that has caught in his chest. The room may be warmer than the yard, but he's not entirely convinced that any sudden exhalation will not mist in front of his face.

"You remembered," says Kirk. There's a smile playing at the corner of his lips; Spock considers that it's probably redundant to reference his eidetic memory. "Of course you did. Well. Far be it from me to go back on my word." The smile breaks free, sunshine in a world of darkness, and Spock wonders how he ever managed to convince himself that this was something he could live without. "Welcome to the Rockies, Mr. Spock."

Spock nods. Something has released in his chest and his breathing is easier, more even, than it was a moment ago. "I was uncertain," he says, "as to whether or not the invitation still held."

An arched eyebrow indicates that Kirk has not missed his meaning. "The invitation will always hold, Mr. Spock," he says, but his tone has changed. The commander's voice is creeping in. "Though I hadn't expected to see you again so soon. Seven days, I thought you'd said?"

Spock has no intention of acknowledging the indecent haste with which he made his way back to Earth from Iota Cilicia XII, where Ambassador Sarek and his wife are currently in attendance at the Polemius conference, but there are undoubtedly matters to be discussed. He wishes he could unobtrusively set down his mug of tea; it is beginning to be inconvenient, and he'd like to be able to fold his hands for this. So, instead, and in the absence of any alternative exterior signifier of extreme dignity under duress, he lengthens his spine and elects to open with, "In the event, affairs were settled more rapidly than I had expected."

"Clearly," says Kirk. "It's been almost... three days, by my count. That's not enough time to get to Vulcan and back."

"Correct," says Spock, who is beginning to wonder why he failed to consider the fact that James Kirk can calculate warp trajectories and relative distance with a speed and precision that approaches Spock's own. "As I stated on board the *Enterprise*, my task on Vulcan is complete."

There is a lengthy silence, filled with the absence of capitulation. Kirk purses his lips.

“Of course,” he says, “if you don’t want to discuss it, that’s your right....”

Ah. The trailing sentence. The ultimate weapon in the Human arsenal of passive interrogation. Kirk’s preferred approach is direct assault; his deployment now of the subtler inquisitive arts says more about his emotional state than he might prefer to telegraph. Spock suppresses the sigh that is attempting to escape his disordered controls, and considers how best to begin the least welcome conversation of his life.

“I did not return to Vulcan,” he says slowly. It helps to fix his eyes on a point two inches above the top of Kirk’s head. “My parents are not currently in residence on my homeworld.”

There’s a pause. And then a nod. Spock has the distinct impression that the information is not unexpected, and takes a moment to lament the passage of sufficient time as to allow the admiral the opportunity for a really *good* think.

Kirk peers into his untouched mug, makes an expression of faint distaste, and sets it on the mantelpiece. Spock would have been pleased to learn earlier in their discussion that this was an option, but, he reflects, as his friend turns away from the fire and crosses to a sideboard in the corner of the room, where a half-full decanter rests alongside three cut-crystal tumblers, the data remains relevant. He stashes his tea beside a floral vase and folds his hands at his stomach, as the admiral unstoppers the bottle with a plosive *pop* and pours himself a generous measure.

Whisky splashes against glass, and Kirk turns over one shoulder, beaker raised in mute enquiry. “Thank you, no,” says Spock, and his friend nods, as though this, too, is expected. He turns back to the room, glass in hand, and, though his face has hardened into command focus, the eyes behind the mask are tired as he lowers himself onto the couch in front of the fire. An upward glance meets Spock’s eye for the first time in many minutes, and Kirk nods towards the chair to his left.

“Please sit down,” he says. “You may not have been to Vulcan, but you’ve been somewhere. You must be tired from your journey.”

It’s a variation on the theme of questions that aren’t quite questions. Spock is beginning to understand a little more clearly how his former captain has always been so adept at wrangling information from his conversational partners over inconsequentials and small talk, and it occurs to him to wonder, for the first time, how often Spock himself has been the unwitting subject of James Kirk’s particular brand of data-gathering. But he sits just the same: he has seen almost twenty years’ service in deep space and nearly as many again at his parents’ side on their frequent interstellar travels, but none of them have been quite as exacting as the passage he’s just completed. And besides: by settling into the armchair at his back, the chamomile tea is placed definitively out of

reach.

“Thank you,” he says, as he lowers himself onto a fire-warmed cushion. “I am not excessively fatigued.”

Kirk’s lips quirk upwards into half a smile. “Really?” he says pleasantly. “That hasn’t been my experience of the aftermath of a conversation with your father.”

A filial defense is probably expected here, but denial is illogical. “Perhaps,” says Spock, and experiences a moment of satisfaction at the consternation that flashes briefly across his friend’s face. “However, I have not had the opportunity to speak with the Ambassador.”

“Oh?” An eyebrow arches as Kirk raises his glass to his lips, sips amber liquid. “I thought you said you’d visited with your parents?”

How can he explain it? It’s important to get this right, but, equally, Spock is still finding his way over unfamiliar terrain, guided, for the first time in his life, by little more than instinct and ideas, and he’s not certain he has the words just yet. When he left the *Enterprise*, it was with the express intention of seeking out his mother, in the hope that the question of his absence from Gol could be summarily discharged with the minimum of controversy, and establishing to his satisfaction that his initial hypothesis was fundamentally flawed and informed by an insufficiently rigorous theoretical framework. He could have combed ahead to advise of his intent, but he appears to be making a habit of the surprise appearance of late, and, in any case, he suspected that any discussion of his failure to complete *Kolinahr*, emotional as it was bound to be, was better suited to direct interview. The Ambassador’s attendance on Iota Cilicia XII is a matter of public record and the work of a few moments’ searching to determine; another thirty-seven seconds’ investigation established Sigma Cilicia IV as the closest spaceport to the ship’s current trajectory, as plotted that morning and adjusted some 3.3 hours earlier. Given a steady course heading and the procurement of suitable onward travel, the entire endeavor was likely to be concluded in no more than 173 hours, allowing for flight delays and travel lag, and assuming a total of two Cilician days planetside in order to ensure that his mother’s itinerary was not disrupted by her son’s arrival. It was a plan that offered very little in the way of contraindications, and a high statistical probability of success.

What he had not anticipated—what he had no way of predicting, as it turns out—was his own reaction to seeing her.

Spock has always thought that fear for his mother drove his anger at his father; it has been a fundamental tenet of their interaction for as long as he cares to remember, and it has colored every word and every action that has passed between them. He arrived on Iota Cilicia XII with the understanding that a logical error may have crept into his reasoning along the way, and that his fear may have been built on a child’s misreading of a situation for which he had no context, but he

had never considered that the entire edifice upon which his parental relationship is constructed could itself be fundamentally unstable. Because it turns out that he might, in fact, be afraid for his mother *because* he's angry at his father, and this changes things considerably. It's possible this is much more complicated than he thought.

Amanda walked beside her husband, hands joined in the *ozh'esta* as the crowd filtered out of the great stadium that takes up the entire central sector of the northern city of Rhee: two elegant figures on their own private island of calm, amongst a tidal wave of senators and diplomats and admirals and reporters that bustled and swirled and spilled around them, and could not break the touch that connected them. Forty years have passed since she made her decision; seasons have come and gone; the son she bore and raised has grown to manhood and begun his own search for his place in the universe, and still she walks proudly by her husband; still she joins her hand to his so that everyone can see the choice that she has made. Captivity, Spock once told his commander, is often a question of perspective, but it turns out that Spock's own perspective might have been shattered by filial resentment and frustration, the blind defiance of the son of an exacting father. Many times, his mother could have left. Many times, she could have walked away, and, true, there's a sense of duty deeply ingrained into the fibers that make up Amanda Grayson, but there's also a stubbornness there, so robust that it could warp steel, if focused correctly, and she has never been a woman to be underestimated or misused. Spock found himself on the edge of the melee, following a few yards behind as they made their way back to the Ambassador's rooms, and, from nowhere, a memory crept out the depths of recall: a bright summer's day, sunlight spilling like thick cream through the open window, the scent of vinegar and spice on the warm air as his mother hums an aria from an old Vulcan opera while she stirs a bubbling pot on the stove....

Whatever she knew before she made her choice, whatever she has discovered since, she has no regrets. He saw this in the look she turned on his father when a stray arm jostled her from the crowd and he caught her, mid-stumble, without question and without thought. He saw it in the unguarded moment that passed between them: her smile, his tolerant acceptance of her smile, their easy warmth borne of long years of contentment. This is love, and this is logic, and there was no need to hear it spoken aloud in order to be certain. Spock saw his parents and he knew.

He thinks Jim will understand this, when Spock can find the words to explain it: the way the pieces fell suddenly into place and all that was left was to find the first and quickest transport across the sector, make his way back to Earth, find Jim and tell him what he'd learned. He suspects that, eventually, this will become the stuff of *I told you sos* and private jokes, and that McCoy, though he will not be privy to the details, will indulge his penchant for knowing smiles at Spock's expense for many years to come. And Spock will accept this without hesitation, without so much as a pause for reflection, because there is no question now: his choice is also made. It was made eight years ago, in fact, before he was ever aware of the choosing.

But he says none of this. He doesn't have the words just yet. So, instead, he quirks an eyebrow, meets a hazel-eyed scrutiny head on, and says, impassively, "Indeed."

Gentle laughter meets his answer. "I see we're still practicing the ancient Vulcan art of

inscrutability," says Kirk, and takes another sip from his whisky. The hand that holds the glass, Spock cannot help but notice, is trembling faintly, and there is a part of him, a newborn, unfamiliar part, that would like to rise from his seat, take a half-step towards the couch and lower himself down beside his friend; wrap his fingers around Jim's and press his lips to the knuckles, one by one, until the tremors cease. The thought of it—the intimacy of the gesture, and the ease; the way Jim's eyes will close and his head will roll back on his shoulders; the way he will surrender himself to the moment as though it were as natural as the air in his lungs, the blood in his veins—makes Spock's breath catch in his throat. The man who could do this has not quite finished forming yet, but he will. It is only a matter of time.

"I would prefer," he says, and there's a hoarseness to his voice that was not there a moment ago, and he does not have to search too deeply to find the cause, "that there be no misunderstandings between us."

Kirk looks up sharply, eyebrows raised. "Yes," he says. "You've said that before."

"It remains the case."

"And I remain as far as ever from understanding, Mr. Spock."

The words are lightly spoken, but there's a tension behind them that Spock cannot fault; he has, as yet, said nothing of consequence, and it was always a long shot that the simple fact of his appearance here would be enough to bury the hurts and confusions and frustrations that they have spent almost a decade constructing. It is suddenly difficult to remain seated, and he finds himself moving without conscious thought, standing before he's aware of the urge to rise, and crossing to the fireplace once more. Flames crackle and spit at his knees, and Spock turns towards them, facing the solitary portrait and its missing twin, facing away from Kirk. It is easier to speak if he does not have to look him in the eye.

Easier, perhaps, but not exactly *easy*. He should have accepted the offer of whisky, he thinks, though it's not as though it would have had any effect; this is, in a sense, precisely the problem. Spock takes a deep breath, releases it, and makes himself speak.

"It is a question," he says slowly, "of biology."

A long pause. And then: "Vulcan... biology?"

"Yes." He hesitates. "And Human."

"Ah." A soft puff of breath. "Well. This conversation feels alarmingly familiar."

"I assure you, Jim," says Spock, and he does not need to look at his friend to know that the use of his given name has softened his eyes, his face, "*this* conversation is entirely new."

Silence behind him; the sound of a swallow, a glass coming to rest against the wooden floor. A creak, as of couch springs protesting the sudden absence of a body, and a soft footfall that marks the passage of two feet across the faded throw rug in front of the hearth. Spock does not turn his head; he does not need to. He could follow Jim's motion in a lightless room.

"All right," says his friend at his shoulder. He is close enough to touch, but he makes no move to do so, and Spock is profoundly grateful for this: for his proximity, and for his distance. "Tell me."

Well. *Kaiidth*. He knew what he was coming here to do. Spock folds his hands at his stomach, feeling the heat of the fire lick across his chilled skin, and begins.

"My mother is Human," he says, "but my blood is my father's. His genetic legacy is dominant, and it has governed my physiological constitution."

Kirk does not speak, makes no noise of confirmation or assent, though nothing Spock has said so much as supplements his existing knowledge. He simply waits. There is not a sentient being that might pass Spock on the street who would not be able to determine from observation alone the salient facts of the information he has just imparted, but this, he thinks, is not really the point. The point is, he is a scientist, and there is, therefore, a certain measure of comfort in defaulting to the language of science. It permits a level of distance, of academic detachment from the words he speaks, and detachment is what he needs right now.

"My medical files list my species as Vulcan," he continues into the silence, eyes fixed unwaveringly on a fluted china vase glazed in dark olive-green, "and, broadly speaking, this is correct. My genetic profile follows that of my father's people, and this codes for more than just my psi-channels, my muscular composition, the positioning of my heart..."

"Your ears," adds Jim placidly, but there's an undercurrent of warm amusement to his tone that references his long-standing determination to elide their physical and cultural differences under a general rubric of compassionate intelligence. He has always found it easier to see what makes them

the same than what makes them different; it is one of the many admirable traits that make him so good at what he does, and which spoke, once upon a time, to the segregated heart of a man who had spent a lifetime trying to discover where he belonged. But the sentiment, worthy as it may be, is not appropriate right now. Right now, he needs to understand that they are separated by more than the superficial. He needs to understand, as Amanda once did, so that he can make *his* choice.

"Yes," says Spock, and he is careful to ensure that his tone, though casual, discourages any further interruption. "Also my ears. Any external signifier of my genetic inheritance has followed Vulcan genotypical characteristics. Although traces of my mother's DNA are to be found in my chromosomal make-up, they are few, and they are, almost without exception, recessive. I have, for example, the rudiments of an appendix, but, as you know, no innate resistance to the effects of choriocytosis." A beat. Spock sucks in a breath. "Moreover, my biochemical makeup is markedly different to that of my mother. Including my dermal sensitivity to the chemical known on Earth as capsaicin."

The bewildered pause is not unexpected. As far as his companion's context for this conversation goes, the reference has come from nowhere. But he is not James Kirk for nothing; there is barely the faintest trace of confusion in his tone as he breaks the silence to say, slowly, "Capsaicin..."

"Yes," says Spock. "On Earth, it is generally found in..."

"Chili peppers," says Kirk. A sharp intake of breath, and then he's moving, crossing to the far side of the fireplace to lean his back against the mantle, one arm folded across his chest, the other raised to his face, where his fingers pinch the bridge of his nose. "I believe," he says, "that the substance of this discussion has escaped me. Why are we talking about chili peppers?"

He has moved back into Spock's line of sight, but there is no need to meet his eye. Spock fixes his gaze once more on the green fluted vase and says, "The Human physiological response to excessive heat is to manufacture a cooling excretion composed of water, lactic acid, trace minerals, and urea, which is expelled through the eccrine glands onto the surface of the skin."

On the edge of vision, he sees Kirk's brow furrow. "You mean, we sweat," says his friend, and there's a frustration to his voice now that speaks of his abject failure to grasp the unifying theme behind the analogy.

"Correct," says Spock. "The Vulcan system, however, has no such thermoregulatory response. In fact, the Human body has the capacity to secrete sodium reserves through perspiration in quantities that would induce hyponatremic shock in a Vulcan. I reference this," he adds, as Kirk opens his mouth, undoubtedly to voice some form of protest at the incomprehensible direction of his companion's narrative, "to draw attention to the fact that the chemical processes that have evolved to support the biological functions of our two species diverge in many unexpected ways.

For the most part, this presents no obstacle to routine interactions: there are no significant adverse effects, medically speaking, associated with the limited physical proximity required to achieve, say, efficient command of a starship. There has been..."--and here he hesitates--"...no prior reason for concern."

A long pause. "I see," says Kirk. His hands come up to his face, balled into fists, and he scrubs at his eyes, his temples. "But... other actions, perhaps...." He trails off, hands falling away and folding across his chest once more. "Other actions requiring... closer proximity. That might be a different story. That's what you're saying."

Spock inclines his head. His neck feels as though it were made of lead. "Yes," he says.

"And that...." A beat. "That's what you meant. On Vulcan. That's what you meant when you said it wasn't safe."

Of course Jim would remember this. Spock can recall every word they spoke, every look and every touch they exchanged that day, but this is the consequence of an eidetic memory: everything is recorded, and there is no opportunity to purge that which he would not choose to revisit. He wonders just how often Jim has walked those sands again in his mind, these past four years, and decides he doesn't want to know.

"The chemical is known as *kavek-sash-guv-kastorilauk*," he tells the green vase. He cannot lift his eyes. "It is not identical to capsaicin, but the structures and mechanisms of action of the two compounds are extremely similar. It is a component of a mucal lubricant secreted onto the appropriate area of skin by the *guvik-pi'nafek* during..."--and, though it is many years since Spock has been a prepubescent schoolboy, shrinking under his tutor's stony glare, he is still obliged to force himself to say the word--"...arousal."

Those three loaded syllables disappear into a sudden, startled hush. Presently, Kirk says, "... Arousal."

"Yes."

"You mean..."

"Yes," says Spock firmly, though he's not sure what grounds he has for modesty now, given what happened between them in the billet above the Bay. Still. It's the principle of the thing. He wasn't

raised to talk about this.

"I see," says Kirk. He pushes himself off the mantelpiece in one fluid movement, paces to the far wall. It is, quite literally, the most distance he could put between them without leaving the room, and Spock feels his chest tighten. "So it's secreted when...?"

Spock closes his eyes. "Yes."

"By the skin of the...?"

"Yes."

"And your concern is that... what?"

Spock's eyes snap open. Kiek is standing with one hand resting on the back of an armchair, and his gaze, focused sharply and directly on Spock, is level, evaluative. The admiral's shoulders twitch in a brief, recalcitrant shrug; challenge is written into the set of his jaw. He understands what he's been told, Spock realizes; he simply refuses to accept that it's a problem. Spock suppresses the urge to roll his eyes; he *knew* this would be his friend's reaction.

"My concern," he says slowly, carefully, meticulously stripping all traces of pedantry from his tone as he goes, "is that the Vulcan dermis is evolutionarily adapted to tolerate prolonged contact with this substance. It is, in fact, a critical component of the..."--and again, the hesitation. He'd thought he was better prepared to discuss this--"...the mating ritual. *Kavek-sash-guv-kastorilauk* stimulates the cardiovascular and metabolic processes, promoting increased blood flow to... the affected area, and acting in conjunction with the associated hormonal response." A pause for emphasis. He cannot emphasise this enough. "This is not true of the Human system."

For a moment, there is no response from the figure by the chair. Then Kirk releases a soft puff of air and shakes his head. "And this," he says, "this... accident of biology. This is why...?" A humorless laugh, and he shakes his head again. "This is why," he repeats, and it's no longer a question.

Yes. This is why, though it's not only this, of course. It's the heart of the matter, but it is not its essence. There's a frightened child in there somewhere; a fragile mother with a pale face who moves stiffly and who will not tell his eleven-year-old self why; there's a father possessed of impossible standards who demands more from his half-Human son than the son can ever hope to

deliver; there's a terrifying storm of emotion, an attachment that cannot be rationalized, a bond so strong that the rigors of *Kolinahr* could not so much as crack a hairline fracture through its hold. There's the knowledge that this ought to be manageable and it is not; there's the shame of imperfectly mastered Disciplines; and, below it all, there's the creeping fear that this man he loves, for whom he would lay down his life without a second's thought, shines so brightly, feels so deeply, loves so completely, that someone like Spock--contained, meticulous, ordered--will never be enough for him. And yet here they are once more: this familiar place to which they are drawn time and time again, and nothing is different, nothing is resolved, and nothing ever changes, no matter how hard he fights.

So this is why, but it's also not. The truth is, as ever, more complicated than any series of unornamented facts that can be rendered clearly in black and white, but that's another story for another time. For now, this is why. This is their truth. This is what matters.

"Yes," says Spock, and across the room, Kirk drops his head towards the floor, draws in a deep breath. There is a moment of absolute stillness. And then another. Spock waits.

"Mr. Spock," says his friend at last, "for a man of such prodigious intelligence, you can be remarkably obtuse sometimes."

So can Kirk, of course, but it hardly seems like the time to point this out. "Indeed," says Spock.

"That's quite the sweeping conclusion you've managed to draw. And from minimal evidence, too."

"The effect of capsaicin on the Human epidermis is not disputed..." Spock begins, but Kirk cuts him off.

"Agreed," he says, "but that's beside the point." The hand on the armchair flexes, relaxes, flexes again. "Please tell me, Mr. Spock, that you haven't taken it upon yourself to extrapolate an entire theoretical model of Human behavior and risk, based on a single epithelial reaction?"

Well. That's not *quite* how Spock would have phrased it, but it's difficult to dispute the substance of the allegation. He contents himself with a sharp nod of acknowledgment that could go either way.

"It is possible," he says, "that my data sample may have been incomplete."

A burst of laughter--sudden, unexpected, but genuine--escapes his friend, rattling Kirk's chest as it breaks free, and something in the room, some hidden tension that has strung the air like an overtuned *ka'athyra*, releases. Spock cannot truthfully claim to be delighted at this turn of events, but he'll take it over the alternative. This at least indicates progress.

"Given the shortage of data in your sample," says Kirk, "I think you may be right."

Spock inclines his head. "Perhaps," he says.

"Your methodology lacks something in the way of rigor, Science Officer."

"I have reached the same conclusion," says Spock, and he cannot quite eliminate the slight bristle that has crept into his tone, because, yes, it's possible that he's earned this, but there's a *limit*. He's still Vulcan.

Across the room, Kirk fixes his gaze and waits for Spock to meet it. He's still smiling, though he's stripped the amusement from his face, and his eyes are bright, lit by a warmth that Spock was not expecting.

"Didn't it ever occur to you," asks his friend, "to ask your mother?"

Spock returns the scrutiny, eyebrow arched. "No, Jim," he says evenly. "I have never asked my mother about her experiences during sexual congress with my father."

Kirk sucks in a deep breath, and the smile widens, deepens. "I guess not," he says. "Though I can't help thinking that there must have been *some* way you could have gauged her reaction to your hypothesis. You're an intelligent man, Mr. Spock. Couldn't you have found a way to ask if there was anything she would have changed, given the chance? If it was worth a little... incompatibility in the end?"

Spock turns his eyes towards his hands, neatly folded at his stomach. He thinks of his mother's face as she stepped off a transport and into the terminal at ShiKahr; of his father's as his eyes found hers across a bustling lobby. He thinks of their joined hands in the crowds of Rhee, an unbreakable link in a tidal wave of chaos, and of the look they shared when they thought nobody else could see.

"Perhaps," he says. "I traveled to Iota Cilicia XII with that broad intention. However," he adds, and

hesitates, because he's not certain how to phrase this in a way that makes sense outside of his own head. "However, when the opportunity presented itself, it became clear that to make such an inquiry would be to invade my mother's privacy no less than any attempt to discuss the... biochemical implications of the match." He pauses, stares at his fingers. "The decision—her decision—is her own," he says at last, and trusts that his friend will understand. He has always been fluent at decoding the words that Spock does not say. "It is not mine to question."

The admiral's eyes are relentless. Spock does not need to look up to know that they are locked on the place where Spock's should be; that they do not move. Jim watches him for a long moment, and then he releases a soft puff of air and drops his head. He nods once, gently, and then again.

"I see," he says quietly. "Yes, Mr. Spock. I think I understand your dilemma."

"Thank you," says Spock.

"But," adds his friend, "perhaps you could have asked *me*."

He's right. Of course he is. If he were not, Spock would not have come: the conclusion he has drawn has been formulated from inadequate data, and he is a scientist; he is bound to expand his field of enquiry to incorporate whatever information might become available. But he is also the man who sought the complete abrogation of his mother's emotional legacy rather than trust to his own ability to love and remain himself; everything about this venture represents a paradigm break with the person he thought he was. He wants this—he wants it so badly that his hands, folded tightly in front of him, tremble with the effort of remaining still when his body is telling him to simply reach out and ask for what he needs—but the wanting itself feels dangerous, volatile, unstable. It's as though he were attempting to calibrate a warp coil in absolute darkness: it doesn't matter how well he knows the theory, everything is unfamiliar, everything is different, and he has no idea what will happen when the chambers mix. Spock can count on one hand the number of times he's released the tight hold he keeps on the world around him and just sat back and trusted to Fate, and there's a reason that his default reaction to danger is to fall back into numbers and statistics: numbers and statistics are knowable, predictable, quantifiable. Safe.

But *safe* is not what they do. There is no *safe* for James Kirk and Spock of Vulcan. There never was.

It's time to let go.

"You are correct," he says now, and it's amazing, really, how easy it is to speak the words now that he's made his choice. This thing has grown wild and monstrous in the captivity of his mind, but,

released, it turns out that it was never dangerous, never terrible. It's amazing how easy it is to look up, to find and meet his friend's answering gaze, to cast the dice and let them fall where they may. "If you will permit me, Jim, I will ask you now."

His eyes are fixed on Jim's. He sees an eyebrow arch, but it's not a question, it's not consternation: it's an acknowledgment, a recognition of what's been offered. The world falls away and the moment focuses itself into a point, a singularity, from which all possible futures flow. And then time unfreezes, resolves itself into motion and action, and Jim drops his right hand from the back of the armchair, folds it with his left at his back, and walks slowly, unhurriedly, across the floor to where Spock stands. His head is bowed, but he lifts it as he steps inside his friend's circle of personal space, and his gaze is open, artless, completely exposed. He is close enough that Spock can feel his breath agitate the fine hairs around his face, that he can feel the radiant heat from Jim's body in the shadows that the fire does not reach. He is close enough to smell the buttery sweetness of Human skin--iron and salt and rust-- and the sharp, spiced pine of his aftershave; close enough to hear the whispered memories of another time, another place, in the air between them. This is the ghost that has haunted him for a thousand nights, made flesh in front of him, and Spock cannot begin to understand how he has ever managed to fight against it.

This is his choice. This is what they've chosen. It's like freefall, like gravity, like quantum entanglement. It's like coming home.

"There's only one answer to that question," says Jim, and he lifts his lips to meet Spock's.

Chapter End Notes

I've done it! I've finally, FINALLY--200,000 words later--got to T'Lara's prompt! WOOO! (In my chapter notes, I've been referring to it as the Lava Lube Issue, because I have the maturity of an eleven-year-old.) Did anyone guess it, by the way? Because if you did, quite frankly... wow. Hot DAMN, you're good. I'd like to shake your hand.

Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Sorry sorry sorry! (Again.) This chapter gave me all kinds of grief when I was trying to write it, so it took way longer than expected. Huge thanks to miloowen for helping me work out the issues.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The kiss is soft and chaste, the faintest press of lips on lips. It lasts for no more than six seconds, during which neither he nor Spock moves or draws breath, and, when it's finished, Kirk does not move away, but instead lets his forehead drop forward to rest against Spock's, and they stand like this for many minutes, unspeaking. They have never kissed this way before: undemanding, barely touching, sweet and slow; their kisses have always been combusive, like fuel on fire, hungry and without thought. This is how he knows that it's different now. They are different. This is entirely new.

His heart is skittering against his ribs; blood roars in his ears. The bottom drops out of the world, and only the touch of Spock's head against Kirk's anchors him to the room, to the moment. Yes, he thinks, he was right before. This is exactly like freefall.

Despite what he's told Spock, he knows that the logistics of this are going to take a little working out. Not so much, perhaps, as Spock seems to think, but allowances are going to have to be made and consideration taken; the feats of wild abandon are going to require a little bit of practice, a little bit of discussion. But all of that can wait. For now, just getting this far is enough, and he's going to hold onto it for a little while, for as long as Spock will let him. And this, too, is different, because Spock shows no signs right now of letting go.

Kirk lets himself be guided by instinct. Their hands hang loose at their sides, and some inner voice, something he trusts but doesn't quite understand, tells him to reach forward, trail an index finger across the cool skin of Spock's knuckles, slide the back of his hands down the back of Spock's until their fingers mesh. The breath catches in his friend's throat, and it's a far cry from the sounds Kirk heard him make that long-ago day in his billet, but there's something more vulnerable, more exposed, so much more intimate in that sharp, small intake of air. Spock gives away much more of himself in silence than he ever does in words.

He could raise his lips to kiss him again, but he won't. This is enough for now. Kirk's mind is swimming with everything he's just learned, and he knows his friend well enough to understand what it has cost him to lay himself open like this, to say what he's just said and then ask for what

he wants as though it changes nothing. What he needs now is reassurance: he needs to know that Kirk has heard him, that he accepts the need for caution, and that nothing Spock could say would make a difference to what Kirk feels. Kirk is not necessarily an expert at this bit, but he flatters himself that he was, once upon a time, something of an expert at Spock, and he thinks he knows how to silence a little of the uncertainty that hangs between them. He thinks he knows how to say with actions what Spock won't hear in words.

Quietly, moving nothing but his wrists, he twists his left hand in place against Spock's right, shifting them so that their palms are facing. Breath hitches again, and there's a faint tremor now in Spock's arms as Kirk curls his fourth and fifth fingers against their long, cool counterparts, until only the middle and index remain standing. Memories rush him, but he lets them come; they lost their power to bruise when Spock stepped into this house and looked Kirk in the eye and ended all possibility of doubt, and they're almost welcome now, like old friends who quarrelled long ago. There's a conversation or two still to have, logistics to negotiate, and a past to lay to rest, but this, for now, Kirk can do: he can let his friend know that there's not a barrier that he can throw up that Kirk won't willingly scale. Human or Vulcan, salt or spice, a kiss at the lips or fingers joined in the *ozh'esta*; these are no more than minor variations on an infinite tapestry. What connects them is far greater than what separates them; it always was.

There's a gentle rush of breath, almost a sigh, and Kirk feels the tension leave Spock's shoulders. The smallest shift, head tilting upwards, and Kirk's head moves with Spock's, following the contours of his motion, so that their noses brush, their breath gathers, and Kirk's eyes close of their own accord as his mouth meets Spock's again. It's exactly as he remembers: skin cool and pliant; lips pressing tightly together as they connect, and he wants to reach for more, he wants to hook his arms around that angular waist and pull Spock to him, find the taste of copper and spice that he remembers and never understood before, but he holds himself still, lets Spock lead, lets him choose how far to take this, how much to release. He pushed too hard once before and everything fell apart. Kirk has learned to wait.

The kiss deepens slowly, and still they're joined only by their hands and by their lips. The dead air in front of Kirk's body feels as though it has caught fire, and he can feel himself hardening, the tightness, the tension that wants to push forward, to touch. Spock's mouth parts slightly and Kirk follows his lead, pressing a little closer, dragging his lips against his friend's as they move, feeling warm breath ghost across his face, mingle with Kirk's. And there it is: the faintest hint of heat, the sharp counterpoint to the scent that he remembers, traces of arousal that flavor the air between them. It's like a secret code that Kirk alone can read; a language of desire that's only for the two of them. It certainly casts some of their former interactions in an entirely different light.

He pulls back gently, disengaging before his good intentions lose their rapidly escalating fight with the rush of blood to his groin, but he keeps his fingers wrapped around Spock's. They're both breathing heavily and, head pointed down, Kirk can see that he's not the only one engaged in a losing battle with biology. There's a chance this could be a very uncomfortable afternoon for both of them; he guesses they'll have to take a few long walks in the cold air if they're going to manage to keep their hands to themselves.

“You are smiling,” says Spock quietly, and Kirk has to think about that one for a moment, because he had no idea that a huge, beatific grin had stretched itself across his face. Though he supposes he could have guessed as much, even without the tension in his cheeks.

“Yes,” he says. Their heads are pressed together again, but he lifts his now, finds Spock’s eyes. “You’ll have to forgive a little emotional compromise right now, I’m afraid.” A beat, and then some inner giddiness that he can’t manage to restrain makes him add, “I was just thinking of our old *Suus Mahna* sessions on the *Enterprise*.”

There’s a pause, not quite long enough to be pronounced, but enough to telegraph the Vulcan equivalent of blank consternation. “Indeed?” says Spock, with the barest hint of a suggestion in his tone that wrestling maneuvers are, perhaps, the furthest thing from his mind right now.

“Indeed,” says Kirk cheerfully, because there’s a bubble of laughter trying to work its way free from his chest, and he knows that Spock knows this, and that’s only making things worse. “If you remember, I always had to sling a towel around my waist as we left for the changing rooms.”

He can see the workings of an active mind beneath an imperiously arched eyebrow, but Spock’s not biting. He says, “It is my understanding that this practice is not uncommon among Humans following a strenuous period of exercise.”

He’s a liar, of course. They both knew what Kirk was hiding beneath the towel; it was one of the reasons it was so damned hard to hide it. He can’t help it; Kirk turns the smile upwards, lets it shine directly into Spock’s face.

“Spice, Mr. Spock,” he says. “I’m talking about the scent of spice on your skin when we sparred.”

And that—that right there. That’s an answering smile lighting Spock’s eyes. That’s about as open as Spock gets, and it’s too long since Kirk has seen it. “Perhaps,” he acknowledges, “you were not the only one so affected by our training sessions.”

The laugh breaks free. It’s extraordinarily difficult to maintain any semblance of control over this rampant, incorrigible happiness. “All that time,” says Kirk, “and you let me think it was just me.” A thought occurs to him. “The cell on Ekos....”

A sigh, as of dignity under duress. “Yes, Jim,” says Spock.

“The negotiations on Lance’s Planet....”

“Yes, Jim.”

“When the locals insisted I wore the....”

“Yes, Jim.”

“Bones’ birthday celebrations on Vir....”

“Yes, Jim.”

“Weren’t you bunking with him on that trip?”

“Yes, Jim.” A note of long-suffering patience has crept into the tone, but the eyes have not dimmed. “However, the majority of the night was spent in your presence, if you recall.”

“I do,” says Kirk, and he does: he remembers the way the fabric of Spock’s civilian slacks clung to the curve of his thigh; the way the thick Virian moonlight wove through his hair as they walked along the beach together, long after Bones and Scotty had gone to bed; the way their shoulders brushed together from time to time as they moved and talked, and the way they both pretended not to notice. He’d gone back to an empty bed that night and lain wakeful as the sky began to gray, until, close to dawn, he’d just given up, locked himself in the bathroom to muffle the wall-shattering snores of a contented Scotsman, and bought himself a wholly inadequate release with his hand and the scent of spice at the back of his throat. Yes, he remembers that one very well. He just didn’t realize that Spock was similarly stricken.

There are more, many more; too many to count, and Kirk suspects he’s going to spend the rest of his life seeking them out and cataloging them, adding them to a private playlist in the back of his head. It’s quite amazing, really, the difference that a little context can make. But for now, he guesses, there are things to do, arrangements to make, decisions to reach. The world doesn’t stop just because it’s been turned on its head and shaken until its ears ring. And his friend is tired, talked-out, and probably cold.

He places a quick, gentle kiss to Spock’s lips, because these things are possible now. “Mr. Spock,” he says, “I remember them all.” An eyebrow arches, and Kirk gives a quiet laugh. “Yes, no doubt

that's an illogical Human exaggeration," he says. "I'm sure there have been more instances than I could possibly hope to determine. You have the advantage of me there, I'm afraid, Commander, given that your knowledge of Human anatomy far outstrips my knowledge of yours." And he smiles, and turns his smile on his friend, whose eyes smile back, and he leaves just enough of pause to allow for maximum effect before he adds, "But just remember—I know what to look for now, Mister."

"I am unlikely," says Spock placidly, "to forget."

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The sleeping arrangements turn out to be surprisingly complicated, which is, Kirk thinks, something he really ought to have anticipated, had he but given it a little thought. He leads Spock to the guest bedroom, where the linens are fresh and the room is aired, but where there's a vacancy and an unmistakable lack of signs of occupancy, and invites him to deposit his bags, freshen up if he chooses, while Kirk heads downstairs and attempts to persuade the replicator to conjure up something acceptable to Vulcan nutritional requirements. His logic, he thinks, is sound: his friend is tired, he's travel-weary, and he's bound to be hungry, and, most importantly of all, Kirk has no intention of assuming that they'll be sharing a bed. Not now, not given the exigencies of Spock's confession, and especially not after what happened in San Francisco; he's going to give his friend a little space, a little privacy, a little room to breathe while he settles into his new skin. He's going to be a goddamn *monk* about this, if he has to be, and he's going to count himself lucky that he even has the choice.

But then Spock walks into the room and sets his bag on the floor, and the look on his face as he surveys his surroundings suggests that he thinks he's just failed some kind of test, and Kirk realizes, abruptly, that this *would* be how he reads the gesture; of *course* it would. Never let anyone claim that the Vulcan race cannot entertain *logical* and *hyper-critical self-flagellating masochism* within the same experiential framework: Spock genuinely believes that he has done something wrong in seeking the connection that they both want so badly that it's like an electrical charge in the air, and he's read Kirk's motion towards gentlemanly restraint as confirmation that Spock's advances would be unwelcome.

Gods above and below. And there is nothing, literally *nothing* that Kirk can say to mitigate against this now, as far he can see, because he's pretty sure that drawing further attention to the matter is only going to solidify it more firmly in Spock's resolve. So, at a loss for any more reasonable options, he decides to improvise, and so, before he can change his mind, he makes himself cross the floor in three rapid strides, hooks a hand around the base of Spock's neck, and crushes his lips once more against Spock's. It has the advantage of being precisely what Kirk has been wanting to do for the entirety of the seven minutes since their last kiss ended, and there's something quite gratifying about the way that the small noise of consternation that escapes in a startled puff of air as Kirk's mouth closes on his friend's is swallowed almost immediately in the sudden rush of hands and clashing teeth and—yes—a venturing tongue that finds its way hesitantly towards Kirk's.

This is the last sound that either of them makes for several minutes.

It's intoxicating. It feels alarmingly like breaking the surface of the water after a long submersion, lungs bursting, heartbeat thundering in his chest, and the last thing Kirk needs is to coin another colorful metaphor for what they're doing that might go some way towards justifying the steady shuffle of feet across the floor and towards the guest bed. In a moment, the backs of his knees are going to connect with the oakwood frame, buckle against the mattress, and he's going to find himself pinned against the comforter by the weight of one Vulcan body which, disturbingly wasted as it feels beneath Kirk's fingers, unquestionably outweighs him by at least twenty pounds of solid muscle. He's not sure he can be accountable for what happens at that point, and that worries him. It's not as though Spock will protest if Kirk makes a serious effort to roll out from underneath him, it's just that he has the strongest feeling that something will break if he lets this go much further, something that Kirk is not sure he can fix, and he's genuinely not certain which would be worse for them: to carry on or to stop this now. And that's not just because he's rock hard against Spock's thigh, erection straining the fabric of his pants and shorting out any effort towards higher thought every time Spock moves against it, and it's not just because there's a solid length of Vulcan cock pressed hard and tight against Kirk's hip and the scent of spice fills his lungs with every breath. It's not *just* because of these things, but they don't exactly help, either.

And so it's something of a blessed relief when his communicator chirps just as his calves begin to graze the soft down of the bedspread, though it's a couple of disordered seconds before the sound filters down through layers of arousal to penetrate that part of his brain still capable of logical reasoning; a second more before he's able to recognize it for what it is, and by this time it has stopped chirping and settled into a steady, impatient buzz against his left buttock. It doesn't *feel* like relief, of course—it feels like murderous frustration and a barely governable impulse to rip the damn thing from his belt and throw it at a wall—but relief is probably on the way.

He... might have to take care of a thing first, though. In private. And as soon as humanly possible.

Spock, damn him, pulls back with elegant composure, breaking their embrace as easily as if he were catching himself mid-stumble, and the only sign of any immediate distress is in the swelling of his lips, the faint flush to his cheeks, and the impressive tent of fabric at his groin. Not a hair on his head is so much as ruffled, not a labored breath agitates his chest as he folds his hands calmly at his waist and then, after a moment, thinks better of it and refolds them at his back. Kirk, for his part, is simply glad, as he flips the communicator open with unnecessary force, that it's an audio-only line.

"This is Kirk," he snaps into the speaker, and, goddamn it if even his *voice* doesn't sound thick and hoarse with arousal. There's a startled pause at the other end of the line.

“Yes, sir,” says Kaplan after a moment, and, despite everything, Kirk is able to find it in himself to be impressed at her ability to ignore, or at least sublimate, any hint of the extraordinary when communicating with her superior officers. It’s a useful skill for Starfleet. She’s likely to go far. “My apologies for disturbing you again this afternoon, Admiral; I know you’re busy.”

He hasn’t checked his communicator since he caught sight of it on the kitchen counter while he was making tea and clipped it, absent-mindedly, back onto his belt. If she’s been disturbing him regularly since he disappeared into the stables after lunch, Kirk has been blissfully unaware of the fact, and, he reasons, he probably ought to cut her a little slack. It can’t be a good week to be Deputy Head of Fleet Ops. Moreover, she has no idea what she’s just interrupted.

Probably.

No, definitely.

Well.... Almost certainly.

“Not at all, Commodore,” he says now, and he thinks he sounds a little less... afflicted. He hopes so. “What can I do for you?”

“It’s just a courtesy call, sir,” she says. “I won’t take up your time. It’s simply that a Commander Spock arrived at your office this morning and asked me to let you know that he was planning to visit you in Idaho. He already had the co-ordinates, sir, so I assumed you’d sanctioned the trip, but he was anxious that I pass on his intentions....”

“Yes, Commodore,” says Kirk quickly, because he can feel the first firings of something in his belly that feels very much as though it might turn into hysteria, and it’s important that he ends the call before his voice betrays him. “You were quite right. Thank you for your diligence.”

“Of course, sir,” she says. “I also sent a message to your terminal, but I wasn’t sure if you’d read it....”

“That’s fine, Commodore,” says Kirk. “Thank you.”

“Yes, sir. If there’s nothing else...?”

“Thank you, no,” says Kirk, and it’s a little abrupt, certainly, but he’s doing the best he can. “Kirk out,” he adds, and snaps the communicator shut in the last moment before he succumbs to an extremely undignified fit of laughter.

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The synthesizer’s menu is an artifact of the Kirk family’s dietary preferences, with only the most rudimentary allowances made for the state of his father’s arteries at his last medical, and it cannot be persuaded to produce a balanced nutritional meal devoid of red meat products or their simulated equivalents. This is something, Kirk guesses, that they’re going to have to look at, if Spock’s going to be here for a while. Maybe they can take a trip into town, buy some eggs and home-grown vegetables, some herbs, some rice, some pasta, and he can try to remember a few of the old recipes that Grandma Davis tried to teach him, back when she used to spend the summers with them on the farm. The idea has a certain visceral appeal; it’s a long time since anybody has cooked an actual meal for Kirk, and longer still since he can remember cooking one for somebody else, and there’s an intimacy to the gesture, a symbol of care, that he finds he likes. For now, though, he can persuade the machine to produce a stack of silver dollar pancakes, drizzled with butter and syrup, and seek out a nest of blankets for them to burrow amongst on the porch swing while the sun slides behind the western peaks in a blaze of amber and gold, and call it a compromise of sorts.

Nothing about the endeavor is logical—not the food, not the location, and certainly not the temperature—and yet there is no complaint from his companion beyond the inevitable raised eyebrow when he recognizes the direction of travel. Kirk has found a couple of sweaters for his friend in his father’s closet, a spare hat and a scarf to add to McCoy’s borrowed waterproofs, and they sit close together on the swing, not quite near enough to touch, but enough to pool their body heat in a little pocket of warmer air beneath the quilts and, though their breath mists in front of their face as the shadows lengthen and the air begins to freeze, only an olive flush to Spock’s cheeks and nose speaks of any discomfort, and he makes no request to return indoors. Kirk watches him when he can, eyes sliding sideways when his companion is lost in thought or speech, and thinks that, of all the ways he could ever have imagined things going, this moment, this moment right here—framed by an icy mountain sunset, face pinched by cold but warmed by easy contentment, shoulders slackened by proximity and eyes lit from within, the way he remembers from simpler days—is both the strangest and, perversely, the most fitting.

They talk—hesitantly at first, because they’ve gotten out of practice at it, but it turns out that this is not something they’ve forgotten, just something they’ve temporarily misplaced. The sun sinks in the west and the air fills with the sound and scents of evening, and they talk: things meaningful and things inconsequential, and it’s old and familiar and so welcome, so *warm*, that it’s almost painful, in a strange sort of way that Kirk can’t define to his satisfaction. Spock tells him about the sanctuary in the desert, of days spent tilling soil and weaving cloth, of the stillness of *srashiv* and the emptiness, the sense of loss that hung around him like a shadow and kept him wakeful long into the moonless nights. He speaks of T’Kel and Master T’Sai, of the bond that would not break,

and, though he doesn't name it, Kirk can hear in the silences between words the frustration, the fear, and the anger, and understands that he's not the only one who has passed these years encased in frozen resentment. He's not the only one who spent hollow hours staring into the skies and wishing there was some way to un-know the ghost at his shoulder; to forget, just long enough to snatch a moment of peace. They've both got a lot to be thankful for, he knows, but, it seems, they've both got just as much to forgive.

Kirk tells him about the quiet, gray formality of Fleet Ops; the way the stars looked back at him from behind a frosted glass window on the Presidio as he tried not to search for his ship in the mobile vaults above. He tells him about Decker, about the first day he accompanied the new captain of the *Enterprise* back to his broken ship, and how they walked in EVA suits through airless halls while Kirk kept his diplomat's smile fixed in place and managed to feel nothing at all; about how Decker insisted on buying him a drink afterwards at the Officers' Lounge on the Centrolplex; about how Kirk had found himself, three Scotches later, beaming back to San Francisco and comming the only person he could think of in communicator range who was likely to hear the word *Enterprise* and know why it had been a bad day to be James Kirk. He tells Spock about waking Lori from one of her irregular sleeps; about how she knew before he'd said three words that he'd been drinking, and why; about the long pause that followed his request to come over, the hesitation that whispered across the airwaves. About the softness in her voice as she agreed.

Spock does not move and he does not speak, but Kirk feels him go very, very still as he tells the tale of a blustery day in late November, of orange juice and canapés in Bozeman, of a band that played Pachelbel and Bach over the howl of the wind above the Bay. Of an evening three weeks before Christmas, of the wash of rain on dark windows, of low voices and a bitterness so deep that there was no room left even for anger anymore. Of the hollowness of a loss without sadness. Of a marriage bookended by storms.

There's nothing else to say after that. Kirk lets his words trail into silence, and they sit together, quiet and unmoving, eyes fixed on the snow-topped trees that fringe the yard as a layer of cloud frost the edges of the moonlight and draws the shadows out of the darkness below the canopy.

"Ah," says his friend after a moment, and the word is soft, breathy: almost a sigh.

Kirk resists the urge to turn his head, to look at Spock, but, moving by memory and peripheral vision, he shifts his hand across the blanket to find Spock's, grips it, laces gloved fingers through his friend's. He's expecting resistance, inaction at least, and so it's something of a shock to feel Spock's fingers fold around his without comment and without hesitation. Spock's eyes are focused on the middle distance, and he does not drop his gaze, does not seek out Kirk's, but it's something at least. It's an opening.

"We talked once about regret," Kirk says quietly. "Do you remember? In the imaging suite of the

Marin County observatory, just before you... before I had no reason to go there anymore. There are so many things I've done that I'd do differently if I had the chance, my friend—but this? This is another order of fault altogether.” He drops his eyes to his lap, to their hands, joined above an appliqué peony rose. “We've made our mistakes, you and I,” he says, “but they were always *our* mistakes. I never meant to involve Lori in what happened between us. But, then again, I've done a lot of things, these past few years, that I never meant to do.”

Spock's spine is stiff and Vulcan-straight, as though he's engaged in a perpendicularity contest with the earth itself. He's so preternaturally still and pale, skin bleached beneath the moonlight, that he could be carved from stone or ice, but for the fact that his breath dances wisps of vapor on the cold air in a regular, even rhythm. At last, he says, “She must have been a remarkable woman.”

“Yes,” says Kirk. His voice is gruff, hollow; Spock's use of the past tense has not escaped him. “She was.”

A beat. And then the fingers twined through Kirk's contract, tightening their grip, and Kirk feels his chest constrict, even as a little of the tension leaches from his shoulders. This is as much of an answer, an absolution, as he's likely to get, and he brings his free hand up, out of the warmth of the blankets, to cup it over the back of Spock's, fingers closing on the rough wool from either side, as though Kirk is marking the skin beneath it as his own. He hears the breath catch in his friend's throat, but he says nothing, just grips his hand and holds on tightly, as though he's anchoring himself against an unseen storm.

Quietly, Spock says, “*Tushah nash-veh k'du.*”

Kirk nods. “Thank you,” he says, though in the end, he thinks, the loss was not his to mourn. He saw to that one rain-swept December night a year ago, and, no matter what has happened between then and now, there will never be any part of him that will stop being sorry for that.

They sit like this for many minutes, unspeaking, watching the stillness of the mountain trees as they pale beneath the low moon. Spock lifts his head, but he does not turn his eyes to Kirk, instead letting his gaze drift out over the trees and into the darkening vaults above. Eridanus is rising, Kirk knows, somewhere on the eastern horizon, but it's too early yet to see it clearly; it's lost, for now, among the haze of light and smoke and industry that clings to the lower skies. Spock's face is blank, perfectly composed, but his jaw is tight, his brow furrowed, and it is some moments before he speaks.

“I remember the day we talked of regret,” he says quietly. “We spoke also of *cthia*, and of that which cannot be changed.”

“Yes,” says Kirk, who can remember the conversation word for word, touch for touch, and who has replayed it many times in the years that separate that moment from this. “I told you I wished I had your forbearance.” Gentle laughter mists the air in front of his face. “I still do.”

“My forbearance,” says Spock, “is lacking.” A deep breath raises and drops his shoulders. “This has been true, now, for some time.”

Kirk’s eyes slide sideways. “You have regrets?” he asks.

“Many,” says Spock, and his eyes meet Kirk’s. “You must know that.”

The hand beneath Kirk’s is trembling, though he’s not sure if it’s the cold or the effort of holding himself still. Or something else entirely. Kirk says, “We are neither of us very good at this, are we?”

An eyebrow arches, in the manner of a man disarmed by staggering understatement. “No,” says Spock.

“We’re going to have to get better at it in a hurry.”

A beat, and then Spock nods. He says, “I see little alternative.”

Something unfamiliar, something unexpected, twists in Kirk’s side, piercing the tender place just below his ribs. It feels a little bit like unbridled joy, but he doesn’t want to leap to any conclusions.

“That’s good,” he says. “Because I, for one, am through with regrets.”

An elegant eyebrow arches. “I concur.”

“I guess that means you’ll be staying for a few days, then?” says Kirk as evenly as he can, though he’s aware, as Spock must be, that a matching tremor has set up in his hands, his thighs. It’s nothing compared to what’s going on inside his skull. “Because I think we could use some practice at this.”

“Among the faculty at Starfleet Academy,” says Spock, “the philosophy was propounded that proficiency at any given task is only to be achieved after 10,000 hours of study.”

An inelegant snort of startled laughter escapes Kirk in a cloud of frozen air. “I suspect that may be a tall order for this week, Mr. Spock,” he says. “We’re expected back in San Francisco by Sunday.”

“Perhaps,” says Spock. “However, it is possible that a useful beginning might be made.”

Kirk feels a wide grin spread slowly across his face. He makes no effort to stop it; he couldn’t if he tried.

“I bow, as ever, to your superior logic, Mr. Spock,” he says. “*Ri vath kau eh ri vath rok nam-tor na’etek hi etek kau-tor*, after all.”

Spock inclines his head, and, Kirk is gratified to note, not the ghost of linguistic surprise so much as agitates either brow. “Indeed,” he says. “The teachings of Surak are, as ever, apposite.”

There is no other wisdom and no other hope for us but that we grow wise. It’s not only apposite; it could have been damn well written for them, Kirk thinks. And he wants to laugh—to laugh or to punch something until it falls apart, but he thinks he’ll go with laughter right now—because everything is so much simpler than it ever seemed to be, and all it took was three wasted years and the lives of three good officers to see it. There is no other hope for them, he guesses; wisdom is pretty much the only shot they have left. It had better be. Seems like they’ve tried just about everything else.

“I’m glad you agree,” he says, and his head feels light, buoyant, filled with gossamer and air. “Because I believe....” But he stops, words lost on a breath of laughter, and his lips twist upwards into a wry smile, because there remains, after all, and regardless of everything, something incredibly surreal about saying these words, when it comes to it, let alone saying these words to a Vulcan. “Mr. Spock,” he says, and he lets the smile spread easily over his face, feels it catch behind his eyes. “I believe you may be the love of my life.”

Spock considers this with a raised eyebrow and a sideways nod. “As you are mine,” he says.

And, really, there is nothing else to do at this point, no other possible response than to reach out

with the hand that's not currently holding Spock's; to trace the angular curve of his friend's jaw with his thumb as his fingers curl around the back of Spock's neck and draw him in once again for a kiss that feels, even as their lips connect, as though it sucks the oxygen from the air and the gravity from the ground beneath their feet. And, when it's finished, before the world can resolve itself into black and white, Vulcan and Human, salt and spice; while his thoughts still rattle and spin like a shuttlecraft on orbital re-entry, Kirk gets to his feet, struggling upwards out of layers of wool and quilted cotton, and, without a word, reaches a hand down to Spock. His friend's eyes are dark, hooded by his downward gaze, and Kirk knows by the long scrutiny he offers those wool-covered fingers that he has understood Kirk's meaning very well. But, in the end, he hesitates for no more than ten seconds—long enough to have considered carefully, not long enough for doubts—before he reaches up and takes the hand that's offered, allows himself to be pulled to his feet. There's not enough weight, not enough tension in that grip to speak of any level of struggle, and Kirk feels his breath hitch in his throat as that fact registers amongst his wildly reverberating thoughts. Here and now, for the first time, there is no hesitation and no misgiving. This is trust: in Kirk, and in Spock himself.

Yes. Freefall. Always freefall.

Kirk links his fingers through Spock's, and leads them indoors and towards the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

Tushah nash-veh k'du: "I grieve with thee" (source: VLD)

Chapter 49

Moonlight spills, milk-white, across the coverlet, chilling the darkness of the bedroom. There was no question, Kirk thinks, about where they were headed, but still they hesitate on the threshold, and he's not sure if that comes from Spock or from Kirk himself. His friend is very still beside him, close enough that Kirk can feel every breath in Spock's chest, even through their ridiculous cocoon of clothes, and he risks a glance sideways at that patrician profile. The half-light falls like liquid silver on Spock's face, casting him in dramatic chiaroscuro, like a modern-day Rembrandt, and Kirk feels something spike in his chest, something dangerous, something uncontrollable. He swallows heavily, too loud in the silence, and Spock's eyes slide silently sideways, meeting Kirk's.

There is a long moment of perfect stillness. And then, without a word, Spock raises his free hand to his mouth, fixes elegant teeth around the middle fingertip of his glove, and peels the fabric away. Kirk watches, transfixed, as long, pale inches of skin slide free, and it's only when the glove falls to the floor with a muted *whuff* that he realizes he's forgotten to breathe.

They are both wearing far, far too many clothes. The sojourn on the front porch, with all its attendant environmental mitigations and adjustments for desert-dwelling bodies, is beginning to look less charmingly seductive and more catastrophically ill-advised with every passing moment spent inside three sweaters and a scarf. It should not be in any way possible to shed four layers of wool and blended polyester in a manner that is dignified, let alone romantic, and yet Spock has just performed what is unquestionably the most erotic act of divestiture ever witnessed by James T Kirk, and he's a man not lacking experience in this particular field of observation.

He has no idea of how to play this. He's been intending to let Spock set the pace and lead the way. And there are times when Kirk is extraordinarily grateful for his instincts, because they are generally on the money, and sometimes, just occasionally, they direct him to a place where the only possible course of action is to lift the hand that's currently joined with Spock's, guide it up through the narrow space between their bodies, and bring it to his mouth, where he fixes his teeth around the woollen tip of the middle finger of Spock's other glove, and tugs.

Spock's eyes close. He releases Kirk's hand to allow the wool to slide free, and he leans back against the door frame, head rolling on his shoulders, breath a sharp hiss between his teeth. Kirk has been rock hard since their kiss, but the sight of his friend so open, so lost in sensation, is enough to make his cock ache with desire. His hands are still sheathed in their own gloves, and he tears them off, carelessly, wanting touch, wanting skin, as he reaches for Spock's neck, his head, and crushes their mouths together. And there's no equivocation, no restraint, in the kiss that meets his: Spock's arms encircle Kirk without hesitation, fingers reaching for flesh through layers of fabric, gripping hard enough to bruise. Kirk fists his hands in Spock's hair and pulls him in as close as he can, as close as two bodies can connect, and still it's not close enough; never close enough. Teeth and tongues clash and collide with a kind of violence that's almost painful, that hovers on the edge of control, and it has never been like this; he thought it was good before, he thought there was passion and fire and danger each time, but it has never been like this.

“Bed,” he mutters, and “Yes,” breathes Spock, and so much for the negotiation and discussion and careful planning, but there is a time and a place for rational thought and it’s not when he’s pressed so tightly against a thick, full Vulcan erection that they’re practically reordering the laws of physics. “Clothes,” grunts Kirk, and tugs at the edge of Spock’s coat, which obliges his companion to release his iron-fast grip on Kirk’s back for the second it takes to shed one layer of waterproof fabric with a ripping noise that sounds very much like there’ll be some explaining to do the next time they see Bones. Or maybe not: by the sound of it, that tear had the quality of the kind of damage that offers its own commentary; there’s a good chance Bones won’t even ask.

But Spock is already moving, ripped clothing forgotten in the rush to seize two layers of sweater and drag them up and over Kirk’s head. The collars snag on his chin, and he scrambles his arms clear to help, to pull his head free so that he can find Spock’s mouth again, hands curling around the back of Spock’s neck, fingers carding through Spock’s hair, and sliding downwards of their own accord, over thick strata of wool, over the seam where they meet the coarse-woven cotton of Spock’s robes, over the tight, round curve of Spock’s ass. Spock’s breath hitches in his throat as Kirk splays his hands across the corded muscles, feeling the spare flesh contract beneath him, dipping his hands into the cleft and pulling Spock’s hips tightly against his own. Their cocks collide and Kirk sees white behind his closed eyes; hears in the low groan that escapes Spock that neither one of them is going to last much longer.

Spock frees his hands to struggle out of the last few sweaters, and now they’re down to manageable quantities of clothing at least. Now, after five solid minutes of groping and pulling and disrobing, they’ve achieved the typical starting point for an enthusiastic undressing of bodies, and that ought to be much more frustrating than it is, but there’s something perversely satisfying about it, Kirk thinks; neither one of them has much control over what’s happening here, neither one of them is in any kind of state to slow things down, but still—he’d like it to last as long as possible, to remember what he can do with it afterwards. They’re almost at the bed now, close enough that Kirk can tumble them with just the slightest sideways motion, and they fall together, landing on the comforter without breaking contact. Kirk hitches one leg over Spock’s hip and the improved angle sends a dizzying rush of pleasure straight to his balls; and that moan, that low, primal sound that trembles in the air between them, that could have come from either of them. It has *never* been like this.

Spock’s hands are moving now, up and under Kirk’s shirt, and his fingers are chilled, delicious points of ice against Kirk’s overheated skin. Spock’s lips are moving against Kirk’s mouth, his jaw, his throat, and Kirk rolls him so that he’s on top, bearing down on him, pressing him into the mattress. It’s a long time since he’s felt the solid pressure of another male body above him, since he’s surrendered control like this to someone, and there’s a disjointed moment where he has to remember how to let go, to just let himself feel the weight at his hips, his chest, the agonizing roil of pleasure at his groin that he can’t control, he can’t command. Spock’s hands slide higher on his chest, cool fingers grazing a nipple, and Kirk can’t help the guttural cry that breaks out of his throat. Spock’s body contracts, hips bearing down at the sound, cock grinding against Kirk’s, and he knows that they could come like this—together, clothed, and out of control—and he doesn’t want that. This is different; this has to be different.

So he cups Spock's ass with both hands, fingers digging into fabric-covered flesh for only a minute before he makes himself move upwards, under the folds of Spock's tunic, grab a fistful of cloth and tug it upwards. He has no idea if this is how Vulcan robes come off; it's not as though this is something he learned in his Xenoculture and Linguistics class back in the Academy, but it seems logical enough, and that's a decent place to start. Spock's elegant fingers move to the collar of his top, to some hidden clasp, and, yes, that's definitely one link higher on the chain of logic—well played, Vulcan haberdashers—but there's barely time to notice this before the thick cotton is falling away to reveal a loose black undershirt, and, dear God, how is the man not melting beneath all that cloth? Kirk zeroes in on Spock's mouth again, because the five-second break in their kiss is becoming intolerable, and together they work with clumsy fingers to free the vest from its precision fastening beneath the waistband of Spock's pants. It slides clear with minimal difficulty, up and over Spock's head to cast onto the dark floor behind them, and suddenly Spock is naked from the hips up and things have just gotten very, very real.

He has imagined this moment more times than he can count, hand wrapped around himself in the privacy of his quarters, eyes closed and the scent of spice at the back of his throat. Here and now, spread out above him, bony and angular and entirely too thin, hair disordered and arousal tenting the front of his pants, it's almost too much to process. It's not that they've never been naked together before; they shared a bathroom for five years, after all. It's not that they've never been this close to one another before either. Hell, it's not even as though they haven't brought each other to orgasm before. It's just that this is the first time they've ever agreed the terms of what they're doing together; it's the first time that they've both walked into this with open eyes and complete understanding. There have been points of no return before, and they've blasted through them with all the care and delicacy of a Dreadnought at Warp 8, but this is the first time that they've let it happen with a clear idea of what things might look like on the other side. And that changes things; it changes them almost past recognition. They've done this before, but not *this*. This they haven't tried. Kirk reaches his hands to the hem of his shirt and tugs it up and over his head, throwing it carelessly out into the shadows and pulls Spock's mouth back down to his own, fingers curling into the skin of Spock's neck. Because *this* they haven't tried, and he's getting damned impatient about fixing that.

Bare-chested, skin to skin, Kirk toes off his boots and hears them thud against the floor. His fingers glide along the length of Spock's back, over ribs too close to the skin, over vertebrae that jut out of spare flesh, until he finds the edge of Spock's pants. They're tight, close-fitting, but they will part enough to admit two Human hands and Spock grunts and thrusts downwards as Kirk makes contact, grips, pulls him closer. One hand slides between them, fusses somewhere along Spock's waist, and suddenly the pressure over Kirk's wrists releases, the fabric gapes away from Spock's backside, and he feels his companion go very, very still. Kirk didn't realize his eyes were closed until he's obliged to open them, and he looks up to see that Spock has rested his head against Kirk's forehead, gaze fixed on Kirk, face unreadable.

No. Not unreadable; not quite. There's a question in that hooded stare, and there's remorse, and there's confession, and all the hundred-and-one things that Spock will never name *emotion* while he allows them to eat away the heart of him, to freeze him from the inside out. And there's hesitation, too, but, where once Kirk might have read shame, distaste, aversion; it's remarkable the way a little context can add nuance to the lexicon of Vulcan non-verbal communication. It's not reluctance that has brought procedures to a groin-tightening halt. It never was, and that was always

the problem.

Kirk sucks in a breath, leans his head up to press a gentle, tender kiss to Spock's lips. His friend's eyes close, his breath catches, and Kirk moves his hands up to cup either side of his jaw, to hold him in place as the stiffness in his shoulders eases, as the tension softens from his arms. "Let me," he says, a breath against Spock's mouth, and Spock's eyes don't open and he says nothing, and the world holds still for a long, long moment.

And then Spock nods.

Kirk presses another kiss upwards, close-mouthed and chaste, feels Spock's lips contract into it above him. His hand runs along the length of Spock's jaw, over his shoulders and onto the small of his back, and then he rolls them with a gentle push: enough to lay Spock on his back above the coverlet, not enough to move Kirk on top. Spock's chest is heaving, breath fast and uneven, but he moves without complaint and without comment, eyes following Kirk as Kirk shifts onto his knees, gets a hand beneath each of Spock's upper thighs, lifts them up and onto the bed. Whatever they've been doing to him out on that desert rock, Kirk thinks, it hasn't involved food or rest or any form of basic bodily maintenance; the man he remembers from a desperate scramble on a San Francisco couch has receded into a shadow of bones and loose skin, but there's still strength in those muscles, there's still weight, and he couldn't move his friend if Spock didn't want to let him. But there's no hint of resistance as Kirk slides Spock's hips more fully onto the mattress, lifts one leg to rest on his right, the other to rest on his left. There's nothing but silence, hooded eyes, and ragged breath.

Spock's boots are damp with melted snow, dark patches staining the thick-woven cloth. They're not Starfleet issue, and they're certainly not Terran, and, for a moment, Kirk simply stares at them, at the criss-crossed lines of binding that wrap them from toe to calf, and wonders how the hell they're supposed to come off. But he's not the youngest admiral in 'Fleet history because of a penchant for the complicated; command is about starting with the simplest solution and working up from there, and so he gives the heel of one boot a speculative tug, on the principle that, if it doesn't work, he can think about investigating the intricate pattern of knotwork at the top in the hope that it's not as convoluted as it looks. And, since he's never met a Vulcan artifact that wasn't at least twice as arcane as it needed to be, he's pleasantly surprised to find that the shoes slide clear of Spock's foot with only the most cursory resistance, revealing the pale, narrow feet below, chilled and pinched with cold.

Kirk runs an experimental finger along one sole, and Spock's foot arches into the touch, a hiss escaping from his throat. He glances up and sees that his friend has not moved, that his eyes remain fixed on Kirk, that his chest rises and falls in a manner that betrays his utter stillness. "Trust me," says Kirk softly, and it's somewhere between a question and a command, enough to prompt a faint quirk of one eyebrow. "Trust me," says Kirk again, and what he wants to say is *trust yourself*.

"Yes," says Spock, and Kirk wonders if he's heard him just the same.

Spock's pants gape open at the waist, peeled back from the fastening to expose the sharp angles of his pelvic bone. Kirk shifts himself, re-centers, and reaches up to close his fingers around the upper hem, aware that his hands are shaking. Spock's breath stutters and skips as their skin connects, and then, wordlessly, he cants his hips upwards, lifting the seat of his pants from the comforter. The fabric shifts again, outlining the shape of Spock's erection through the cloth, and Kirk sucks in a breath, steadies himself, and lifts the hem up and over the swollen cock, releasing it into the night air. He has never seen it hard before; he's barely seen it soft—stolen glances in the gymnasium showers, guarded moments in communal mission quarters, cursory ablutions during a red-alert wakening in the middle of the night—and he lets his eyes glide over it as he slides Spock's pants down, along his legs, over his ankles, and throws them to the floor. It's lean and long, like the man himself, slick with a filmy, viscous liquid that casts the sharp, spiced scent of his arousal into the air; smoother-skinned than Kirk's, and absent visible testes, but otherwise little different. Kirk wants to touch; he wants it so badly that he can feel his heart thrumming in his ears with the rush of desire, but instead, he makes himself sit upright, step off the bed, raise his hands to the fastening of his own pants, and strip off those final layers of clothing. Spock's eyes follow him, and still he says nothing.

Naked, Kirk makes his way back to the bed, lies down next to Spock. For a moment, neither of them moves, and then, slowly, gently, Kirk nudges his head forward to meet Spock's, brushes their lips together, watches as Spock's eyes flutter closed. One long-fingered hand rises to trail the length of Kirk's jaw as their kiss deepens, and Kirk brings a hand up to Spock's flank, to rest it lightly on the curve below his ribcage and feel a strong heartbeat thundering below his palm. He's so close now, close enough that he can feel the heat from Spock's cock, can feel the air move as it twitches below his arm when he glides his hand down, over the angular hip, over the wiry hair of his upper thigh. Kirk presses his mouth in more tightly against Spock's, feels Spock's tongue meet his, feels the soft sound of pleasure at the back of his friend's throat, and lets that be his guide. His hand moves downwards, into the rough brush of pubic hair at Spock's groin, and his fingers circle Spock's penis.

A small noise, halfway between pleasure and consternation, buries itself in their kiss, and Spock arches forward, thrusting into Kirk's grip. The skin of Kirk's palm tingles where it slides against lubricated flesh, as though he has dipped his hand into water that's just the right side of uncomfortably warm, and the cock in his hand feels hot to the touch, solid as a length of iron. Spock breaks free of Kirk's mouth and tilts his head forward, breathing heavily as his hips work against the comforter, hand hovering above Kirk's thigh as though he's looking for permission. Kirk is painfully hard now, and, with his free hand, he reaches up and laces his fingers through Spock's, guiding them down to wrap them together around his aching cock. The touch of Spock's cool skin is so sharp it's almost electric, and Kirk can't help the groan that escapes his throat as those long fingers begin to work him, carefully at first, gently and uncertainly, and then harder as Kirk lets himself go, thrusts into it, matches Spock's rhythm.

“Spock,” he hears himself say, and his hand is slick, sticky with Spock's lubricant; he can feel it between his fingers, beneath his nails, like a constant, low-level current running through his skin. “I can't... you feel so good...”

If he was expecting a response, he gets none, but the hiss of Spock's breath in his ear; the short, nasal sounds of pleasure; the rapid thrust of his cock in Kirk's hand are answer enough. He can feel his orgasm building; he can feel it tightening his balls, and he wants to hold it off but there's just no way to slow himself down. He's wanted this for far too long; they both have.

Kirk comes first: a dizzying rush that whites out his vision, and he hears himself yelling something that might be Spock's name, might be obscenities, might be nothing but pure sound. It's long and it's hard, and he feels it splashing on his chest, over their joined hands, as though he's emptying himself onto his friend's pale skin. Spock is thrusting faster now; even through the daze of his own orgasm, Kirk can feel it, can feel the heat that builds beneath his hand, can feel the air of desperation that creeps silently into his movement, and then he stiffens on the bed and Kirk feels a hot streak at his groin, on his belly as his friend jerks and spasms beside him.

He thought they'd done this before. He thought he knew what Spock would look like when he lost himself in pleasure. But they might as well have been different men, that day; it might as well have happened to somebody else, because it was nothing like this. It was nothing like the way Spock's eyes squeeze shut as climax grips him, the way his lips form a thin white line across his face as his head rolls backwards on his shoulder, as his body forms a perfect arch on the bed. It was nothing like the hissed, abandoned sound of Kirk's name forced through his lover's clenched teeth as he stripes Kirk's body with thick lines of ejaculate. Everything is different, even this.

They fall back on the pillows, side by side, and, for a long moment, the room is silent but for the sound of two sets of lungs seeking oxygen in heavy, ragged breaths. Kirk's eyes are closed; he doesn't need to open them to know that he's a mess, that they both are. Semen pools on his belly, in his pubic hair, on the bed between them; he has a suspicion that it might also account for the vague feeling of wetness at his ear, and he's not sure which of the two of them it belongs to, but, either way, it's impressive. His heart hums in his chest like a caged bird, and the rush of blood inside his skull feels like the moment of weightlessness on the transporter pad when the beam locks on: not quite solid, not quite energy, somewhere in between. He's not certain he'll ever be able to move again.

A long moment passes, and neither of them moves or speaks. There's no need. Their hands remain joined.

In the end, it's the chill of cooling lubricant in February night air that brings Kirk back to himself, and he raises his hand experimentally to his face to inspect his palm. Beside him, a faint rustle of hair on cotton pillowcase describes the motion of a Vulcan head turning to watch with a blank-faced expression that could be scientific interest, could be alarm, could be self-loathing, and could be lazy post-orgasmic bliss. Kirk lets his hand catch the moonlight and turns it this way and that, peering at the skin. It's too dark to say for sure, but he thinks it might be a little redder than usual, possibly a little bit warmer, but there's no sign of any trauma, no blistering, no pain and no swelling. He slides his eyes sideways, meets Spock's, presents Exhibit A for his consideration.

“As first efforts go,” says Kirk, “I’d call that a success. Wouldn’t you?”

There’s a moment of silent deliberation. Then Spock reaches up with a hand that, Kirk cannot help but notice, is anything but steady, grips Kirk’s wrist, and pulls his arm down into Spock’s line of sight. A cursory inspection fails to meet his requirements, and an item of clothing—which might actually be Kirk’s, come to think of it—is procured from some corner of the comforter and swiped across the slick, sticky liquid to afford better access to the skin beneath.

“There is no evidence of damage to the dermis,” Spock acknowledges after a moment. “However,” he adds, before Kirk can lose any expression of satisfaction, “the skin of the Human hand is considerably less sensitive than that of... other areas.”

Kirk takes a moment to reflect upon the fact that they are both naked on his bed, covered in each other’s semen, and buzzing from the afterglow of two bone-shattering orgasms experienced at a volume that may very well have startled the birds from the surrounding trees, and yet Spock still cannot bring himself to refer to Kirk’s penis by name. But that seems like an observation for another time.

“Well,” he says cheerfully, “I guess further speculation is redundant until such time as we’re able to gather sufficient evidence.”

“Jim...” says Spock quietly, and his voice is low, reproachful. It’s a voice with which Kirk is uncomfortably familiar, and it has no place in this room—not tonight, not ever again—and so, with superhuman effort, he makes himself roll over onto one side so that he’s facing Spock, makes himself lock his eyes on the top of Spock’s head. Makes himself wait.

“Spock,” he says. “Look at me. *Spock.*”

A deep breath, and dark eyes slide reluctantly upwards. Spock meets Kirk’s gaze, and he does not look away, and, though there’s anxiety there, and doubt, and disquiet, something inside Kirk unknots, something releases, something settles. Unbidden, a memory reaches out of the depths of recall, and he feels the rough wool of an old Starfleet couch beneath his hands, the stiffening fabric of his uniform pants at his groin, the lurch in his gut as Spock looked up at him in shame and confusion, and he realizes that he *knew* then; he knew in that moment that Spock would leave. He saw it in his eyes. Spock looked at him that day, and he was already gone, and whatever it was, whatever dullness or absence he saw written into his friend’s face that long-ago day on the Presidio, it’s not there now.

And he knows again: it's different now. They are different. There's no danger of flight this time, there's no black road stretched out ahead, there's no emptiness in the eyes that meet his, just a question, an uncertainty, and something else, something warmer. Something that wants to be convinced.

“Spock,” says Kirk again, more gently. “Spock—don't think it. There's no point. We both know I couldn't walk away from this now if I wanted to, and neither could you.”

Another deep breath lifts Spock's chest, moonlight like rich silk on his skin. He doesn't answer at first, but his hand slides across the coverlet in search of Kirk's once more, long fingers lacing through their counterparts, and Kirk feels his hand lifted, pulled gently upwards and towards Spock's face. It's still damp with lubricant, still sticky and prickling faintly where the liquid clings to it, but Spock raises it to his mouth, palm turned away from him, and presses a soft kiss to each of the knuckles in turn.

“You are correct,” says Spock, and he closes his lips on Kirk's.

Chapter 50

He doesn't intend to fall asleep, but sleep happens regardless, and, when Spock opens his eyes again, it's to early morning winter sunlight streaming through the uncurtained windows and the sense of having achieved, for the first time in as long as he can remember, a truly adequate rest. A rapid cross-reference of February sunrise times versus degrees latitude, calculated against their approximate hour of repose, suggests an estimated period of plus or minus 10.3 hours' complete unconsciousness, and Spock is certain that, in all of his 42 years, he has never slept so long.

Well. This has certainly been a week for new experiences. And now he must establish the etiquette of waking, naked, in another man's bed, with a substantial portion of pubic hair glued to his inner thigh by dried semen and what feels disturbingly like a line of saliva trailing from one corner of his mouth, and he has approximately 1.2 seconds in which to do this. Because he is acutely aware that he is not alone.

Jim has propped two well-stuffed pillows against the headboard and is sitting up in bed, knees bent beneath the comforter, reading from a thick ink-and-paper book that he's rested against the horizontal line of his upper thighs. Steam curls from a mug on the bedside table, suggesting that, however long he has been awake, it has been sufficient time to make his way down to the kitchen and back again without waking Spock, though not long enough to allow his coffee to cool. He is absorbed in the text of his novel, eyes pinched in a manner that suggests some minor decline in his vision during the years of Spock's absence, and his face is warm and easy in the cool post-dawn sunlight: open, unguarded, and so unambiguously, breathtakingly beautiful that something twists in Spock's stomach at the sight of him; at the knowledge of what it means.

This is the man whom Spock has chosen. More—better: this is the man who has chosen Spock. He has no frame of reference for the sensation rising in his chest right now, for the way it feels as though he's standing inside a plasma globe and somebody's flicked the switch, but he suspects that it might bear some relation to what his mother has been trying to describe to him for as long as he can remember. As he resigns himself to the fact of being observed before his morning ablutions have been completed, to the fact that this state of affairs is, most likely, now permanent, he finds himself hoping that his suspicions are correct. He'd like to think that this is what was in Amanda's smile when she saw her husband across a crowded terminal floor; when she turned to him on a street in Rhee. He'd like to think this much for her sake—and for his.

He does not believe that he has made any movement or appreciable sound, but Jim's eyes slide sideways, drawn away from his book, perhaps, by the sense of being watched, and his face creases into his warm sunshine smile, the one that seems to illuminate him from within.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty,” he says cheerfully. “I'd ask you how you slept, but I think that would be redundant.”

Spock quirks an eyebrow; attempts an air of injured dignity, though he doesn't need a mirror to determine that this is a tall order this morning. "I am well rested," he says, "thank you. It was not my intention to disturb your reading."

The book snaps shut, and Kirk shuffles down the bed a little way, until his face is level with Spock's. "I'm happy to have my reading disturbed," he says. One hand reaches out, almost hesitantly, and brushes a stray lock of hair from Spock's forehead. "I didn't want to wake you. You looked like you could use the rest."

Spock's orgasm last night was ruinous; his jaw still aches from the clench of his teeth, and there was a period of approximately forty seconds in which his vision skittered and blurred in a manner that, under any other circumstances, would certainly advise in favor of seeking immediate medical attention. And yet the touch of Jim's hand against his temple—the faintest drift of fingers across his psi-point—rides a cascading wave of excitement directly to his groin in a manner that causes some distinctly uncomfortable activity among his glutinous pubic hair. It's hardly surprising, of course; it has been the case for many years that the close proximity of James Kirk is sufficient to induce a perfect storm of hormonal imbalance in Spock's endocrine system, which persists until time and privacy permits the application of the only reliable corrective, and this is only likely to increase in intensity now that matters have resolved themselves thus. Still, having been laid waste so completely last night that he has, essentially, lost consciousness for almost half a Terran day, it's... unexpected to find that his body is not only prepared to respond again without preamble or hesitation, but that it's actively enthusiastic in the matter.

There's no disguising this, either. Even if he weren't naked and pressed up tight against his friend, he's ceded some considerable tactical ground in his presentation of contextualizing physiological information yesterday afternoon, and he sees the precise moment that Jim scents it on the air. The sunshine smile widens, deepens, turns into something altogether less innocent, and he shifts a little on his pillow so that their bodies are turned towards each other.

"I see I was right," he says, and his voice has dropped a level, gone husky with arousal. "What say we gather a little more data for your sample, Mr Spock? I'm given to understand that the key to any scientific conclusion is replicability."

He cannot deny this much; it's the first rule of experimental rigor. Spock is a scientist, after all. And what sort of a scientist would he be, were he to neglect an opportunity to test his results?

"Your proposal is acceptable," he says, and reaches out a hand to curl around Jim's buttock.

Afterwards, they crowd into the tiny shower cubicle together for an overdue abstersion of bodily fluids from their skin and hair. The limited supply of hot water recommends that the procedure be consolidated into a communal endeavor, but Spock cannot deny that, logic be damned, were the cabin's ablutionary facilities connected to an abyssal hot spring powered by the geothermal energy of the Earth itself, he would almost certainly be advocating in favor of sharing the bathroom for their post-coital clean-up. There's something about the experience of nakedness with Jim Kirk that encourages a certain disinclination towards separation, and he's disposed to indulge his impulse.

The shower is elderly and the water pressure irregular, but the temperature is adequate and the need is, in any case, pressing. The bed is a wreck and he suspects that they are both, now, at some imminent risk of electrolyte depletion; frankly, in the absence of sonics, Spock would be content with a length of flannel and a bowl of water at this point, so any shortcomings or deficiencies in the bathroom's facilities are neither conspicuous nor relevant in respect of the overarching requirement to remove dried-in ejaculate from the hair of his upper chest before his nipples begin to chafe. And, besides, Jim welcomes him into the stall with a kiss that practically fuses Spock with the tiles behind him, and it's a good thing that it turns out that there's more hot water than they thought, because the most useful thing that can be said about the first ten minutes of their shower is that the walls are, at least, wipe-clean.

He is learning things about his refractory period this morning that he has never before suspected, and it's probably a good thing that he didn't know them while they shared a bathroom on the *Enterprise*. Though, on reflection, this is likely to make the coming mission... interesting.

When the sensation has returned to the inside of his skull and his legs are once more able to support his weight, Spock accepts Jim's hand as he struggles to his feet, and allows himself to be pulled upright and alongside his friend beneath a capricious stream of bullet-sharp water. For a moment, they simply stand together, not touching, cocooned in heat and steam. And then Jim presses a kiss to Spock's mouth and reaches behind him for a fat, misshapen sponge, slicks it from an old-fashioned polyethylene bottle and squeezes it until it erupts bubbles, and gently, tenderly applies it to Spock's chest. He circles it lightly below Spock's collarbone, dipping lower with every revolution, and Spock feels the hairs of his chest bend and swirl beneath the motion, the gentle resistance, the geometric integration of movement, water flow, effervescent drift. A lifetime has passed since the last time he was bathed by another person, and he's not sure he has words to describe the sensation it evokes: more visceral than verbal, from a time before he had language or speech. All he can say for sure is that this simple action, more than the fire of their kiss or the abandon of their lovemaking, more than the confessions that they've made or the assurances they've given; more than all of these, the care and the kindness of the simple act of washing him clean, speaks of a depth and strength of love that mirrors Spock's own. He doesn't know how to answer it, so he holds himself still and lets Jim wash him; it's how Spock would want the gesture acknowledged, in his place. And afterwards, when he's done, Spock takes the sponge from his friend and bathes him in turn.

They towel off together, side by side, two sets of feet printing dark shadows into the pale rug that fronts the cubicle. The bathroom air is heavy with moisture but cooling fast and they waste little

time: a cursory scrub of cotton across damp skin, and then Jim slings the towel around his neck and strides, naked and unself-conscious, across the short stretch of landing to the bedroom, and Spock is obliged to swallow a sudden intense speculation on the prevalence of such an activity and whether or not it is, for example, his habit when he finds himself within the state rooms of a constitution-class starship. Because the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, and he's just climaxed twice in the past hour. A man has his limits—or, at least, if he does not, he probably ought to refrain from testing the boundaries of his endurance before he's even eaten breakfast.

“What should we do today?” his friend calls over his shoulder as he disappears into the bedroom, haloed by rich, buttercup-yellow sunlight in a manner that strips the air in the bathroom of oxygen. “Don't misunderstand me, Mr Spock—I'd be quite content to spend the entirety of the day in bed with you, but I'm increasingly concerned about the kind of muscle fatigue I'd rather not explain to Bones at the pre-flight physical, so I thought it might be sensible to vary the routine a little. And besides,” he adds, turning to grin at Spock as he follows his captain into their room, “I did promise to show you the Rockies, after all.”

Spock would likewise consider the expedition a success if the sum total of his experience of the mountains of Idaho were acquired through the window panes of the cabin's master bedroom, but he's forced to accede to the logic of the situation.

“I defer to your superior knowledge of the surrounding topography,” he says, as he casts his eye around the room in search of his dissipated clothing. He's reasonably certain it's wearable again today without laundering, but he probably ought to remember to remove his pants in plenty of time this evening. Or this afternoon, come to think of it. Possibly pre-lunchtime, but they are neither of them as young as they were.

Jim is gathering up discarded diverse items of apparel, both Terran and Vulcan, and tossing them onto the unmade bed. Comforter thrown back, it is evident that nobody will be sleeping on that sheet again, and the pillowcases have fared scarcely better. This vacation could prove logistically challenging in terms of linen consumption.

“There's a town on Payette Lake,” says Jim, peering speculatively at a handful of fabric that turns out to be his own shorts. “It's two hours' hike in fine weather; three today, if the roads are clear. But it's a couple of days since the last snowfall; the going should be easy enough. How are those boots of yours fixed for cold weather?”

They coped adequately with the winters of Gol, where the temperature dropped, on occasion, below 95 degrees. Spock is not sure this is relevant. “I believe they could be waterproofed,” he says.

Jim laughs easily and tosses Spock's pants at him. “Perhaps we'd better take your car,” he says. “It

might be sensible to stock up on a few essentials, anyway. You'll have a hard time persuading the synthesizer downstairs to turn out anything acceptable to the Vulcan palate, and I think it's high time you had a square meal, Mr Spock."

He had not considered the question of food, but, reminded, Spock's stomach growls mutinously, which trails another laugh out of his friend as he pulls on a fresh pair of pants from the closet. He does not, Spock cannot help but notice, trouble himself to procure or don any manner of undergarment, and this is information that is likely to weigh heavily on and at the forefront of Spock's mind for however many hours they both remain clothed.

"Last night's meal was sufficiently..." he says, and hesitates, because he cannot truthfully conclude that sentence with *nourishing* and they both know this. But there is more to a meal than its nutritional content. "...Satisfying," he finishes, and, though he's not content with the adjective's connotative properties, Jim looks up with a smile that says he's understood him very well. He pulls an undershirt over his head, close-fitting fabric clinging to the lines of his chest, and closes the distance between them with a couple of strides until he's got two feet inside Spock's circle of personal space. Had he been any other living being, his proximity would be intolerable; with Jim, those inches that separate them are as frustrating as if they were light years apart. He rests a hand lightly on either side of Spock's hip, presses a kiss to his lips.

"Last night's meal," he says, "is likely to be this morning's breakfast as well, I'm afraid. And lunch and dinner too, if we don't make it to a store in the next few hours. Which becomes less and less likely, my friend, the longer you continue to stand in this bedroom wrapped only in a towel. Because frankly, Mr Spock, it's distracting, and there's only so much willpower a man can be expected to exercise."

And, just like that, there's spice on the air again. Spock would not have credited it, but his reproductive functions appear to have divorced themselves from his higher cognitive processes in a manner that permits little logical interference.

"That being the case," he says, as one eyebrow reaches for his hairline, "one might question the ramifications of such close proximity in our current state of undress."

A wide grin spreads easily across Jim's face, and his hands tighten on Spock's hips in a manner that provokes a distinct flurry of activity beneath the towel. But the admiral is a practical man, first and foremost, and he contents himself with another brief kiss before pulling away and crossing to the dresser for a sweater. "Your logic," he says, as he stretches it over his head, "is, as ever, impeccable, Science Officer. I'll make myself useful in the kitchen. Don't be too long."

His footsteps on the stairs are heavy, careless, echoing through the hollow wooden frame as he descends. Spock stands for a moment in the center of the floor and feels, illogically, bereft, as though the light has left the room. His clothes are lying on the comforter, carefully arranged away from the expansive evidence of last night's activities, and he crosses to the bed, lifts his pants with the idea of dressing as quickly as he can and following his friend downstairs, to the warmth of the log fire, the throw-scattered couches, the mid-morning sunshine in the oriel. The fabric is creased from its night on the floor, but it's wearable, and, as Spock lifts it, he smells Jim in the gaps between the fibers.

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He finds him in the sitting room, perched on the window seat and peering at a PADD on his lap, hands curled around a fresh mug of coffee. The promised stack of pancakes sits on an occasional table alongside a teapot and cup, and Spock pours himself a serving of Earl Grey and contents himself with watching, for a moment, as Jim reads. His hair is darker, these days, than Spock remembers from the years of their mission, although it's not yet showing signs of yielding to age, and he seems leaner, sparer, even if his body beneath Spock's hands last night felt much as he remembers from that long ago Cochrane's Day in the flag officers' residences. And there's something in his smile that didn't use to be there, but that, Spock thinks, is to be expected. James Kirk has seen his share of difficulty these past few years.

Unbidden, Spock's eyes drift to the mantelpiece, to its solitary portrait and the empty place where another ought to hang. He wonders what he would have done, had he returned from Gol to find Jim still married. Glorious, gifted, restored to his proper place in the universe... and yet bound to someone who was not Spock; lost to him forever. How would he have reconciled that to himself? Could they have found a way to work together, knowing what he now knows, and yet obliged, once again, to repackage it as something else, something that will never be enough? He suspects that they could not—that Spock could not—and he's grateful that he never had to find out for sure.

In his peripheral vision, he's aware of motion at the window, of soft footsteps that cross the floor towards him, and Jim falls into place at his shoulder, cradling his cup to his chest and following Spock's line of sight to the empty space on the wall. Spock drops his eyes, considers the ribbon of steam winding from the mug in his hands, but he's a moment too late, and he knows it.

"I guess you know what used to hang there," says Jim quietly.

Spock considers. This feels like a grave invasion of privacy. But he's been caught in a moment of intrusion, and there is no sense in prevaricating now.

"I believe so," he says, and Jim nods.

“For the record,” says his friend, “I didn’t take it down. Or put it up, for that matter. I didn’t even know it existed until a few days ago.” His eyes drop to his chest, to the mug in his hand, to the surface of the liquid as he tilts it towards him. “I wouldn’t like you to think,” he says, “that I would be so dismissive of her.”

Ship’s records show that Vice Admiral Lori Ciana was killed in a transporter malfunction on the refitted USS *Enterprise*, nine hours and thirty-seven minutes prior to launch. Spock remembers her as a slight, attractive woman, possessed of intelligent eyes, and with an authoritative manner that seemed to fill the space around her. He recalls her appraising stare beneath a light well in the center of the Phoenix Building, the way she watched him, the way she watched Jim, and understanding he saw flash across her face for just a moment before she schooled it back into command distance. He remembers her icy fury in the corridor behind an auditorium full of journalists, her stillness and her dignity in the face of Jim’s anger, and the softness of her voice when she ordered Spock to follow him. He remembers his desire to distance himself from her that he neither understood nor chose to interrogate, and he understands that it was fed by the knowledge of her regard for the man that he loved, and his fear that, one day, Jim would come to see just how much healthier it would be for him if her regard were returned.

Yes. She must have been a remarkable woman.

“I believe,” says Spock—slowly, carefully, uncertainly—“that, if you have no objection, Jim... I would like to see the portrait.”

Hazel eyes flick upwards from their contemplation of porcelain and coffee, brows arched in surprise. “I... no,” says Jim, and, though his tone suggests mild consternation, if the enquiry has offended, there’s no sign of it in his voice or his expression. “I have no objection. I’m just... it’s a little unexpected, that’s all.”

Spock is inclined to agree: the request has startled him too. But, as he follows Jim to the old oak sideboard where the decanter rests; as he waits for his friend to sort through an over-filled cupboard in search of a long, flat parcel of cloth and frame; as he watches the care with which Jim extracts it, unwraps its covering, pauses a moment to scan its surface with stony eyes and fixed expression, he feels increasingly certain that it was not wrong. Jim passes it to Spock without a word and Spock accepts it in kind, and Jim pulls in close behind him to rest his chin on Spock’s shoulder as Spock looks down into the face of a James Kirk that he has never known.

The man that stares back at him across the gap of years is not so different from the man now standing at his side. The angles of his cheekbones are perhaps a little sharper, his brow a little less lined, but the shadow behind his eyes remains, and the hollowness of his stare is the same hollowness that greeted Spock as he stepped onto the bridge of the *Enterprise* seven days ago. It’s

eased a little since then; if Spock were to turn his head now, shift a little so that Jim's face comes into his line of sight, he knows that he'd see that the fire he remembers, the peculiar spark that is the essence of Kirk, has crept back into his eyes, his smile, his motion. But it's missing from his portrait. From another time, another place, Lori Ciana folds her arm through her husband's, rests her free hand on his chest, and smiles into posterity, as Jim grins and raises a glass to the holocam, and, if it weren't for the fact that his face is the same, that his clothes are correct, that the red lines of the Golden Gate Bridge peer through the mist and storm that gathers at the window behind them, he might be another man entirely. Spock wonders if, had he returned from Gol to find Jim married still, he would have known his friend at all.

"She knew, you know," says Jim now. His head is pressed so close against Spock's that Spock feels his words in the bone of his jaw. Jim's arms slide quietly around Spock's waist. "About this," he adds. "About you and... us."

Spock remembers her eyes, placid but impenetrable; the way her expression shifted as Jim spoke, as though he'd answered a question that she hadn't asked; and he finds himself unsurprised. "Ah," he says softly.

"Yes." A beat. "It made for some... lively debate."

"No doubt." Spock would like to ask for details; he would like to ask what she knew, how she knew it. How much was conjecture, how much was fact. But more than that, he would like to know that, by her side, the emptiness, the absence that he sees behind Jim's eyes in his wedding photo, receded a little. He'd like to know that they were happy, at least for a while. He says, "She appeared to be a woman of uncommon perception."

A breath of warm laughter brushes the skin of Spock's jaw. "She was," says Jim. "Though I won't pretend that I was thankful for it at the time." He presses a kiss into Spock's shoulder where it meets his neck, lifts the holo from Spock's hands. "Still. We found a way past it in the end. I believe she was happy... in the end."

There's a catch to his voice, a hoarseness that he buries in an abrupt clearing of his throat as he turns back to the sideboard, portrait in hand. Spock pivots on his heel to watch as Jim folds it safely back into its linen sheath, slides it carefully back into place inside the crowded cupboard, and turns back to Spock with a tired smile.

"Your tea will get cold, Mr Spock," he says quietly, but, instead of crossing back to the sofa, where their breakfast awaits, Jim closes the three feet of distance between him and Spock, loops his arms around Spock's neck, and seals their mouths together. Spock leans into the kiss, lets his hands come up to card through Jim's hair, and pulls him in tight against his body, as close as he can.

The pancakes are forgotten, in the end, along with the tea and the rest of Jim's coffee. But at least this time, Spock manages to get out of his pants in plenty of time, though he believes that Jim has cause to regret the absence of underwear beneath his jeans. They make love on the couch, in front of the newly banked fire, with the sunlight streaking shards of gold through Jim's hair as his head rolls back on the cushion and he yells Spock's name, and, when it's over, hands and chests slicked once more with each other's fluids, Spock pulls his lover's head into the hollow at his collar bone, rests his chin at his crown, and lets his eyes fall closed and his skin do the work of mapping Jim's presence at his side. There are ghosts in the room, and there are ghosts behind Jim's eyes, but, for now, Spock will circle him with his arms and hold him close against his body, and they will sleep for a while—an hour, two hours, three if they choose. They will sleep until they are rested, and, when they are finished, they will wake, once more, to each other.

Chapter 51

The room is warm and the fire is bright, but it's February outside: the season is wrong for sleeping naked without a blanket, and, as it turns out, the presence of a Vulcan bedfellow, stretched skin to skin along the length of one's body, does not generate sufficient bodily heat to mitigate against the chill in the air. Kirk wakes after no more than half an hour's fitful sleep, and it's only partially because the skin on his hand is starting to throb.

This could be problematic.

The slow, steady rise and fall of Spock's chest tells Kirk that his friend has not woken with him, but there's no way to know if he's slipped into a light mid-morning doze, or dropped like a stone back into that deep, immersive blackness that laid him out last night. Snoring would be a useful marker, but why does Kirk have the feeling that this particular autonomic reaction is going to turn out to be an artifact of illogical Human physiological redundancies, and absolutely not a thing that Vulcans do? Whether or not that proves, in fact, to be the case? But that's another debate for another time; for now, he needs to take care of the issue at hand, as it were, and that's going to be one hundred percent easier to achieve if he can finish his ministrations before Spock wakes up.

Carefully, deftly, he slides out of Spock's loose-limbed grip, folding the long, pale arm back across his friend's chest. The throw rug is going to need a run in the cyclor, just like the bed linens, a couple of the towels, last night's clothes and this morning's jeans, so there's nothing to be lost in tugging one end down off the back of the couch and using it to cover Spock's sleeping body; maybe keep a little of the heat in, let him nap a while longer. Uninhibited treatment of possible low-level chemical burns aside, Kirk has never known him to sleep like this. He clearly needs the rest.

His pants have made it out into the hallway. Kirk has no idea how this happened, but it's something of a relief; when they were not immediately visible in the sitting room, he had visions of his parents happening upon them down the back of an armchair or stuffed beneath a rug at some undetermined date in the future, and they actually belong to his father. That's just not a conversation Kirk ever feels like having, even across subspace and thousands of light years of distance. He pulls them halfway on, realizes they're going to be uncomfortable, and settles instead for slinging them over his shoulder and continuing naked into the kitchen. This is, technically, his place too, after all, and they're miles from any other curious eyes. And, besides, he likes the fact that he has an excuse to pad about the cabin with no clothes on. He likes the decadence of it. He likes the reason behind it.

At the sink, he runs the water for a moment until it's ice cold, and then jams his hand beneath the flow. It's probably too late to make any appreciable difference; what he needs is to remember to

make sure, in future, that none of Spock's lubricant stays on his skin any longer than it has to. It's fun at the time, but his epidermis clearly isn't enamored of long-term exposure, and this is precisely the sort of thing that Spock does not need to know at this point in the discussion. They've kept contact limited to their hands alone for now, and it seems like a sensible precaution: the skin of Kirk's palm is not blistered and it shows no sign of any deep or significant damage, but it's red and uncomfortable and he can feel the heat tingling beneath the surface even under a stream of water that has only just stopped being snow. This seems like useful information to accumulate before attempting any more adventurous maneuvers; forewarned is forearmed, after all.

In the end, he dials up a bowl of milk on the synthesizer and immerses his hand for five solid minutes, until the prickling warmth subsides, and then spends another five hunting in the medicine cupboard for the dermal regenerator. Spock turns up in the kitchen doorway, bleary-eyed and wrapped shoulder to ankle in the throw from the couch, as Kirk is running a final diagnostic on the pads of his fingers, where the skin beneath his nails has proven particularly difficult to treat. He leans against the doorframe, eyes fixed on Kirk's hands, and one eyebrow arches in a gesture of elegant dissatisfaction that ought to be completely impossible beneath such an impressive head of bed hair.

"Is there pain?" he says, and his voice is quietly impassive in a manner that bodes very poorly for Kirk's ability to talk him down from whatever excoriating platform of self-castigation he's currently erecting for himself behind the darkness of his eyes. Kirk is sleep-deprived, goose-pimpled, and hungry, and, moreover, *he's* the one with the scalded hand; he just does not have the patience for masochism right now.

"No, Spock," he says curtly, "there is no pain. There is no injury and there is no cause for alarm, and there is certainly no basis for whatever it is that you're thinking right now. What there is, is additional information and a salient lesson in preparedness and after-care that I doubt either one of us will forget, so what say we go upstairs and get dressed, then get in your car and drive to the nearest diner before I start trying to eat the leather of my own boots? Commodore Kaplan will be coming with an operational update in a few hours, and I think poorly on an empty stomach."

The eyebrow arches a little higher. "Have you flushed the area with...?"

"Yes, I have flushed the area with water," snaps Kirk. "I have also neutralized the compound with topical application of casein. The dermal regenerator is a precaution, nothing more. Are we done?"

"It is possible," says Spock, because, no, of course they're not done, "that the effect of the chemical may be cumulative."

Despite himself, despite his frustration and his hypoglycemic irritation, Kirk has to bite down on a sudden urge to laugh. There is something inherently ridiculous about the fact that he's sitting

naked in his kitchen, nursing a lubricant-burned hand, while Spock first-officers at him from beneath a floral, semen-stained throw rug on the perils of multiple mutual orgasms, and, in any case, he's taken such a colossal hit of oxytocin in the past twenty-four hours that there's a decent chance he's actually, legitimately, high right now. He holds out his right hand for inspection, and purses his lips around a recalcitrant smirk.

"That's certainly true," he concedes. "But see for yourself. There's some irritation, some redness and swelling, and I'm in no hurry to leap to the next stage of experimentation just yet, but it's hardly the unmitigated disaster written all over your face. Please," he adds, as Spock opens his mouth to voice a token defense of Vulcan inscrutability, "don't. We've known each other for a very long time, my friend, and you're standing in my house wrapped only in a quilt. Let's just bypass the point in the conversation where we pretend that I don't have any idea what's going on inside your head, and try to aim for a useful conclusion instead, yes?"

A second eyebrow joins its twin. It would be more impressive if the fringe above it weren't currently standing out at ninety degrees from Spock's forehead.

"My mother," he says slowly, "was fond of cooking while we were stationed on Earth."

As pithy rejoinders go, this one is... unexpected. And notably lacking in pith. And, damn it, not fifteen seconds have passed since Kirk's confident repudiation of his friend's ability to confound him, and, particularly under the circumstances, it's just plain annoying that Spock gets to be right *again*.

"I see," says Kirk, because he refuses to admit that he does not.

"We had a small kitchen garden at the Ambassador's residence in San Francisco," his friend continues, and, though he's certainly aware that he's being deliberately obscure, there's no hint of triumph in his expression. This is, of course, one of the many reasons that Kirk has fallen so intemperately in love with him, though he's not inclined to admit as much right now. "We had a small coterie of staff, but my mother preferred to maintain the garden herself. When we returned to ShiKahr, it was her habit to spend the several days in advance of travel preserving and packaging for transport those items of produce that she was unable to cultivate on Vulcan. This included several varieties of capsicum."

"Capsicum," says Kirk. It is deliberately not a question. He feels, at least, as though the conversation is settling back into a thematic groove, but he'd be lying if he said that he knew where it was headed.

“Yes,” says Spock. “She was particularly fond of the jalapeño and the habaero, and there was not always sufficient notice prior to our return to Vulcan to be able to complete the drying process, as was her preference. Often, the most practicable resolution was to slice and suspend the peppers in a vinegar solution, which had the effect of preserving them for several seasons. It did, however, require prolonged manual contact, during preparation, with the oils contained within the fruit.”

“I... see,” says Kirk again. He’s starting to suspect that he does, though it’s difficult to be certain.

“Naturally, I assisted where possible,” says Spock. “However, on the occasions of my absence, or prior occupation, I believe she sought to moderate contact with her skin by lubricating her hands with olive oil before commencing work.”

Kirk blinks. “Olive oil?” he asks slowly.

Spock inclines his head. “I am given to understand that it offers a measure of protection without appreciably affecting the quality of the final product. However,” he adds, with an innocence that is entirely unconvincing, “any similarly oleaginous liquid might be expected to perform a similar function over periods of limited exposure.”

Into a sudden, vacuous silence, Kirk offers a feeble cough. “Oleaginous... liquid,” he manages after a moment. His voice is thin and inconveniently weak, but it’s hardly his fault: his conversational prowess has been dented by a sudden overarching need to concentrate really, really hard on remaining utterly still.

“Indeed,” says Spock mildly. “Perhaps an alternative might be found in some form of petroleum jelly?”

Kirk crosses his legs.

“That seems,” he says carefully, because he’d prefer to reassure himself that the discussion really has taken an unexpected turn for the carnal before he makes any potentially embarrassing assumptions, “an unlikely substitute for use in food preparation.”

Spock offers him a blank-faced expression that manifestly refuses to believe that Kirk can be so obtuse. “Indeed,” he says.

Well. All right, then. Of all the ways Kirk was expecting this debate to play out, Spock as Problem-Solving Lube Connoisseur was not among them, but he's a starship captain. He's a veteran of deep-space command and a decorated admiral of almost three years' standing. He's adaptable.

"No doubt," he says, as he folds his hands in his lap, because he's still naked, after all, and damn it all to hell, but he really ought to have thought to bring a cushion with him from the couch, "something of the kind can be found in the bathroom cabinet. I'll make sure to have a look before we go out, and, if not, I'm sure we can find a drug store in town." And a wide diversity of specialist retailers in San Francisco that promise more exotic variations on a theme, he thinks, but that's an idea for another day. For now, though, he's not above evening the score with a stealth attack of his own. "However, I would invite you to remember Bones' predilection for Mexican food where it was available on our joint shore leaves, Mr Spock. And my own enthusiastic participation in his choice of cuisine."

The left eyebrow, which has leveled off again as the conversation progressed, arches once more. "Indeed?" says Spock.

"Indeed," says Kirk cheerfully, and he's not too proud to enjoy the look of consternation that flashes behind his friend's eyes as he patently attempts to work out where Kirk is going with this. "Though my preference has always been for Asian cooking."

There is a moment of thoughtful silence. Then Spock says, slowly, "I fail to discern the relevance."

Kirk's grin breaks free. "I'm simply suggesting, Mr Spock," he says, and, yes, he should *definitely* have brought a cushion; his folded hands are no help at all, "that there are certain areas of this fragile Human body that are already adapted to tolerate the prolonged and concentrated presence of capsaicinoids. That's all. Now—shall we get dressed and head out?"

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McCall is a resort town that curls around the south bank of Payette Lake, and nestles, in February, beneath a permanent layer of glistening snow. In summer, the crystal blue waters of the lake and the tail end of the temperate Pacific winds that sweep in from the west coast, painting the hills with warm, golden sunshine, fill the streets with tourists both Terran and non; by winter, it serves as an adjunct town for Brundage Mountain and Little Bear Basin, and, near-miss apocalypse in the skies above notwithstanding, the Idaho ski season is in full force. It is the work of several minutes' searching to find a parking spot in the town's commercial center, weaving in and out of chattering bands of pedestrians on the snow-slick streets, and, when a spot opens up on the lakeside, it's possible that Spock swerves into it with uncharacteristic ferocity, ahead of a small pink mountain cruiser populated by a group of giggling students.

The town is on a lower elevation than the cabin, but the temperature differential is barely perceptible, and so they elect, by unspoken agreement, to defer appreciation of the magnificence of the mountain-framed lake until after breakfast, and make instead for a diner that Kirk remembers from his youth, where the coffee cups are bottomless and the trade is varied enough that the bill of fare represents a snapshot of Federation culinary traditions in all their deep-fried glory. It's well and truly off-season for Vulcan explorers in this part of the world right now, but, though *prusah kisan* might be off the menu, there will be something vegetarian there for Spock to eat, which is more than can currently be said for Kirk's house.

They're late for the morning rush, early for lunch, and the cafe is almost deserted, save a couple of elderly regulars at the counter, sipping from steam-curling mugs and staring at the holoscreen in the corner, and an Andorian family in summer clothes chattering contentedly in a booth by the door. At Kirk's request, the waitress seats them by the far window, which opens out onto the lake, and she welcomes Spock in Vulcan Standard before retreating to the kitchen for coffee. Kirk's communicator chirps as they're scanning the menus, and he exchanges a couple of words with Kaplan, who's sent through preliminary deployment schedules for the third quarter of the year and needs his approval for a few days more before she can sign off on them. And then, because she's gotten hold of him now, she patches Kirk through to his Yeoman, who patches him through to Chavez's office, where he speaks at length to an excitable woman called Descôteaux who is indefatigable in her determination to know exactly when Admiral Kirk can be expected back in San Francisco. Kirk deflects as best he can, but he's just not in the same league as she, and so, by the time the waitress returns to take their orders, their sojourn in the Rockies has developed a brand new expiration date.

It's not that he doesn't want to return to the *Enterprise*. Second only to the reappearance of the man across the table from him, a return to the *Enterprise* is the only thing Kirk *has* wanted, these past few years, and the thought of going home again, considered in isolation, tightens his chest with longing. It's only that, hidden out here in the mountains, it feels as though time and the world stands still around them, as though they've cocooned themselves in an impenetrable bubble that admits none of the compromises and exigencies of life together in the service. And, yes, that was always a bridge they would have to cross, and he has no doubt that they will cross it, if not with ease, then at least with dignity, honor and professionalism, but he'd just... he'd like to hold onto the simplicity of their time together here, for as long as he can. That's all.

The waitress retreats, along with Kirk's appetite, and he purses his lips and turns his head to look out across the lake. They're relatively undisturbed in this corner of the cafe: they're seated at a table rather than a booth, but their nearest neighbours are more than fifteen feet away and focused intently on the hoverball playoffs, and the Andorians are at the other end of the diner. They're secluded and unobserved, but it's still not what anyone would call private, and so, when Spock reaches out across the table to cover Kirk's hand with his own, the gesture is so completely unexpected that, for a second, Kirk almost flinches.

Almost. Fortunately, he's able to catch his surprise in time, because a response like that to a gesture like that would require quite the explanation, and, moreover, the hand under Spock's is

Kirk's right, which might very well lead to a reprise of their conversation from the kitchen. But a little curiosity is certainly permissible, and he allows it to show in the smile he turns on his friend as he curls his fingers upwards, nudging them between Spock's so that they lace together on the formica surface.

"As efforts towards moderating the commander's mood go," he says, "I believe this may be my favorite yet, Mr Spock."

Hidden from the cafe floor by Kirk's hand, Spock's thumb traces a soft line along Kirk's in a manner that does alarming things to the inside of Kirk's skull. "Indeed," he says. "The hours remaining to us in Idaho are relatively short, Jim. I suggest that as little as possible of this time be devoted to brooding."

"Brooding?" says Kirk, with half a choked laugh, because the face across the table from him is blank and perfectly composed, but that was unquestionably gentle provocation, and he's not sure that he's seen that in Spock's conversation with him since before Vulcan. "Perhaps you're right. No doubt there will plenty of time to indulge in melancholy once we're back on board the ship. Perhaps I'll draft Bones and Scotty in to help."

"As you wish," says Spock, and, though his fingers release Kirk's as the waitress arrives with their food, hand sliding across the table to fold with his right in his lap, his eyes are dancing, just as they used to.

Just as they used to, and Kirk has the strangest sensation of vertigo as he holds that gaze and returns it, as though he's peering into a past that has seemed so distant for so long that he'd almost forgotten it. But more than that, better than that, it feels as though he's staring into a future that's writing itself as he watches, because, yes, this is the man he remembers from those earlier days, but it's also not. Spock is as he used to be, back before everything went wrong, but he's easier, somehow; settled, somehow, as though his skin has finally begun to fit. And Kirk is not so arrogant as to assume that their relationship, newborn and fragile as it is, is entirely or even mostly responsible for the change; rather, he thinks, this relationship of theirs, however it plays out, is possible because the change has occurred. So yes, no matter what happens next; no matter that they're going back to the only place that either of them has ever truly belonged; no matter that they're sharing a bed now and possibly—just possibly—a life; no matter that things have finally fallen out the way they ought to—for Spock, Kirk thinks, the homecoming has already arrived.

"Eat up," he says, because otherwise he's going to get sentimental, and Spock might be different these days, but he's not *that* different. "We've got arrangements to make, First Officer, and a limited amount of time in which to make them."

"Yes, sir," says Spock, and there's a lightness to his tone that certainly wasn't there a moment ago.

Kirk suspects he's been played, what with the hand and everything, but he can't bring himself to care.

"Not least of all is the question of my Exec," says Kirk, who's got a few moves of his own in the one-upmanship game. "It's my intention to offer the position to the current Acting XO, provided he's prepared to accept the ratification of his temporary status. Can I assume that he will?"

"It would be my honor," says Spock, with enough of an eyebrow tilt to telegraph his surprise at the fact that the issue was ever in question.

"Good," says Kirk, and spears a forkful of omelet as a growling stomach announces the return of his appetite. "Because there are one or two conditions attached to the offer."

Spock pauses in the act of loading soup onto his spoon, and the eyebrow tilt progresses into a full-blown arch. "Conditions?" he says mildly.

"It wasn't my idea," says Kirk. He is enjoying himself more than is reasonable, and he's sure that he's going to pay for this at some unspecified and unexpected point in their mutual future, but he doesn't care; it will still be worth it. "It's only that Command has some... hesitations... associated with instituting an admiral at the head of a starship on a deep space mission."

"I see," says Spock, who almost certainly does. "Effectively, therefore, their concerns relate to your rank." And if there is a slight but meaningful emphasis on *your*, Kirk thinks, very few would notice it.

"They do," says Kirk cheerfully. He remembers the omelets being good here, but he's certain they never used to taste quite like this. "And, unfortunately, they're non-negotiable."

"Naturally," says Spock. He sets down his spoon and steeple his hands.

"There is simply some concern," says Kirk, "that the rank of commander is not sufficiently senior as to provide an effective check to a starship captain of flag officer status."

"Ah," says Spock.

“Were I to offer the role to anyone currently holding the rank of commander, they would insist upon a promotion.”

“...I see.”

Kirk grins. “They won’t let me offer you the job without it.”

Spock offers him a level stare that’s just this side of *long-suffering*. “I understood this much,” he says, “by the qualification of the conditions as ‘non-negotiable’.”

“They want a captain for First Officer,” says Kirk. “And there are no existing captains that I’d chose to have at my side.”

Spock does not sigh; not quite. “And these are the terms of the assignment?”

“The only terms of note, yes,” says Kirk.

“And acceptance of these terms,” says Spock, “guarantees assignment to the role of First Officer aboard the *Enterprise*?”

Kirk nods. “It does.”

“Without question of arbitrary reassignment to command of a different starship, as is customary for an officer of this rank and level?”

Arbitrary. Only Spock could make the dream of every other XO-assigned commander in Starfleet sound vaguely distasteful. “Without question,” says Kirk. “I do currently have a little bargaining power in my court, Mr Spock.”

Spock inclines his head. “Then I accept,” he says. “With due cognizance of the confidence afforded me. Thank you, Admiral,” he adds, and Kirk cannot help but grin at the scrupulous and pointed deployment of protocol, because he certainly deserves it.

“Congratulations, Captain Spock,” he says cheerfully, and attacks his hash browns.

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They pick up supplies at an under-utilized convenience store, and Kirk is struck by the fact that it's so long since he last attempted to purchase ingredients for food that doesn't come from a tape and the press of a button that he has no idea how much of anything he's supposed to buy. Nor is Spock of any particular support in the matter: his contribution is limited to picking up packets of dried pasta and peering suspiciously at the contents, though he does manage to purchase a pair of rubberized boots of a design and esthetic that Bones would certainly relish, but which will at least keep his feet dry when he steps outside the house. His current pair are presently saturated with three streets' worth of trampled snow, and his expression suggests abject misery tightly leashed behind stoic Vulcan denial, and that's no way to remember his time in the Rockies. And, besides, Kirk has an idea that it might be quite some time before they get another opportunity to engage in some al fresco sexual activity; he'll feel better about suggesting it now that he knows it's not going to put his partner in imminent danger of hypothermia from the feet up.

Purchases completed, they return to the cabin, where Kirk spends the afternoon at his terminal. Scrolling through an alarming backlog of messages, he discovers that his successor at Fleet Ops has been confirmed, and that, yes, it is Boudin, which is not, perhaps, the worst thing ever to happen to Kirk's department, but neither is it precisely equivalent to handing over control of the *Enterprise* to Willard Decker. He comms the new Chief of Starfleet Operations with a brief note of congratulations, and finds Boudin in ebullient form, which Kirk carefully fails to undermine by mentioning his intention of ratifying his appointments to the *Enterprise*'s senior crew through Nogura himself. It's not that he thinks Boudin would make trouble, it's more that, now, he *could*, and, though they've never been overtly hostile towards one another, there's also no love lost between them. Kirk doesn't particularly feel like holing up in San Francisco for weeks on end while the red tape gets sorted out, especially since he doesn't know where Spock is going to be bunking when they get back.

Hunger knocks him out of concentration as the sun is sinking below the ridge of trees that front the cabin, and Kirk looks up at the chronometer to the realization that his eating patterns are all out of whack today. It's barely 1530, but it's more than four hours since they last ate, and a quick glance across the room to where Spock is seated, poker-straight and PADD in hand, by the apathetic flames of the office's drafty old fireplace, notes a hint of fatigue in the set of his friend's jaw. They could both use a break, he decides; their working day has not quite stretched to the length of even the most unassuming of alpha shifts, but they are, not to put too fine a point on it, not actually supposed to be working right now. And Bones will know this, when they get back to HQ, because Bones has a way of always knowing these things, and then there will be acrimony, and, most likely, words. And Kirk is not in the mood for words.

So he stands slowly, stretches out the afternoon's cricks, and crosses to the door, pressing an affectionate clasp to Spock's shoulder as he passes. Spock nods but does not look up as Kirk heads out of the room and into the kitchen across the way, where he spends a moment in thoughtful

contemplation of the synthesizer, a collection of dusty saucepans dangling from hooks above the sink, and the un-decanted bag of groceries dumped unceremoniously on the work surface and since forgotten. Still, he's done this before—if not for many years—and he's sure he can remember the basics, so he starts by dialing up a pot of boiling water, filling it with pasta, and leaving it to bubble on the stove while he sets about chopping some ingredients for a sauce. Tomatoes are out of season just now, along with everything else that enjoys sunlight and an absence of snow, and the shop attendant's confusion as to why anyone might require fresh produce that couldn't be summoned from a synthesizer tape was manifest, so they are limited in this respect to whatever the condition of Kirk Senior's coronary arteries have persuaded his parents to program into the machine at its last upgrade, which turns out to be eggplant, green beans and okra. But they have herbs and they have some manner of chutney and they have white wine that's not synthehol, which can probably be persuaded to do *something* exciting, if it's mixed with the right combination of flour and milk. And they have eggs and they have rice and they have tofu, for some reason, and they have dehydrated miso soup and mushrooms that look like they were flash frozen some time around the Vulcan Reformation. And as well as all this, they also have—because they were there and because Kirk enjoys them both on their own merit, but not nearly as much as he enjoyed the look on Spock's face when he added them to the basket—olive oil, extra virgin, and four different varieties of dried chili pepper.

He's just finished dicing synthesized eggplant chunks when Spock makes his way into the kitchen, PADD discarded, and takes up position by the door in a manner that neither offers help nor supervision, but simply waits to be needed.

“Mr Scott reports that precision recalibrations to the *Enterprise*'s warp coil are proceeding according to schedule,” he says evenly, though his eyes are fixed on the motion of Kirk's hands as he discards the eggplant and starts trimming the green beans. “Barring any unforeseen events, the ship will be ready to launch by 1600 hours this coming Monday.”

Considering the fact that the last calibrations to the warp coil were completed by Spock himself, en route to intercept with Vejur, and brought the ship to as close to optimal efficiency as the universal laws of entropy will permit, Kirk has no difficulty in believing that *unforeseen events* will include anything that Scotty decides they need to include, should he decide that the greater good requires it. However, given that Scotty's conception of the greater good aligns so completely with Kirk's right now, he's happy to keep that option open.

“Very good, Mr Spock,” says Kirk, and nods towards the stove. “Turn that pasta down, would you? And you could top and tail that okra, if you're not busy.”

“I am currently unoccupied,” says Spock, and there's a warmth to his tone that Kirk is not expecting; something that, in another man, he might call contentment. It's soft and rich, and so unanticipated that Kirk glances up as Spock animates in the doorway, moves into the kitchen, and so it is that he catches sight of the smile behind his friend's eyes. A quiet joy, he thinks; something that's not for sharing, and so he doesn't mention it; simply turns his own smile into the beans beneath his knife as Spock falls into place beside him, makes space at the other end of the

chopping board, and sets to preparing vegetables.

They work together for a moment or two in quiet satisfaction, pot simmering quietly against the background hush, with only the rhythmic sound of blade on wood to mark the time. Proximity hums between them: near enough to touch, but untouching; body heat tempered by their distance from the stove; and Kirk can smell the first traces of spice beside him, though it's not yet pronounced. He finishes chopping the green beans and, reaching over Spock for a dish to store them, their skin brushes in a manner that is not entirely accidental, and he hears Spock's breath stutter for just a moment, though his hands never stop working. It's remarkable, Kirk thinks, that he should have spent his three years bound to this planet wishing for nothing more than to escape, and yet he'd never once considered the quiet pleasures to be had in simplicity, domesticity, place. Not until it's almost time to leave them all behind.

The chilis are enclosed inside a transparent carton at the bottom of the bag, and he knows even without looking that an eyebrow has arched as he reaches for them, pulls them out, opens the container. The scent of them tumbles into the air, and, Kirk thinks, he may have just ceded some tactical ground here, but he knows a thing or two about picking up on the mood the old-fashioned way, so he'll let it pass. He brushes the last remnants of bean from his end of the board and tips two long, fat peppers into place, and takes a moment to enjoy the sensation of one pair of Vulcan eyes sliding sideways to fix firmly on the side of his head.

Spock sweeps okra into a bowl, and sets down his knife.

The olive oil is sitting unopened on the bench beside the stove, on the other side of Spock. Kirk, knowing exactly what he's doing, reaches across his friend, leaning heavily into his chest to pass him, and grips the bottle by its neck to retrieve it. He doesn't look up at Spock—he doesn't need to—as he unstoppers it, and this is as much as it takes to telegraph his intended actions to his friend, who was also present in the kitchen this morning for certain pertinent conversations about chili pepper preparation. Easily, gracefully, Spock takes the bottle from Kirk's hand and Kirk lets him take it, because Spock's breathing has become a little uneven now, a little ragged, in a manner that hints at promising thoughts beneath that unruffled exterior, and Kirk is damned certain he wants to know what happens next. There's the faintest tremor in Spock's hand as he grips the bottle, upends it just enough to let a small quantity of oil trickle into his upturned palm, and Kirk feels something twist deep in his belly as he realizes, half a second in advance, what is about to happen.

Spock sets the bottle down, uses his free hand to lift one of Kirk's. He tilts Kirk's hand so that his palm is facing upwards, and lets oil drizzle from his hand onto his friend's. And then, with his oil-slick right, he begins to massage olive oil into Kirk's skin.

The sensation—liquid silk and heat—and the sound of fluid shifting, skin connecting, runs straight to Kirk's cock, and he's hard almost instantly. Spock can't see it; it's hidden by the kitchen bench, but Kirk has an idea that his friend knows exactly what he's doing to him, simply because the

tremor in the hands that cover his, the catch in his breath, and the sudden cascade of spice into the air suggest that Spock is similarly affected. Kirk can't help himself. The dinner is on the stove and their hands are covered in oil, but there's only so much stimulation a man can take before he's forced to act upon it, and Kirk turns his head sideways, presses forward, finds lips rushing to meet his. To hell with it; the damned clothes need to be laundered anyway, so he slides his hands free of Spock's and lets them circle around his back, his neck; lets them fist in his tunic, drag him closer. The edge of the bench slams into Kirk's lower spine in a manner that would certainly be uncomfortable, were it not for the fact that this likewise causes Spock to slam into his hips in a manner that perfectly aligns their erections, and it's quite impossible, in this moment, to be aware of anything other than that.

He can feel Spock's hands grappling at the hem of his pants, slick fingers fumbling the fastener, and he wonders if this would be the appropriate moment to mention that they forgot to look for a drug store earlier in McCall. Olive oil might work and it might not; it's not the most amazingly appealing idea that's ever entered into Kirk's foreplay, but he'll take it over chemical burns and the return of The Look, especially since their thrusting is growing rapidly more urgent and it's clear that, questionable culinary hygiene aside, this is happening right now and right here in the kitchen. And then Spock gets a hand inside Kirk's shorts and a fist around his cock, and the sound that finds its way out of Kirk's mouth is ninety-eight percent consonants and in no way controlled by higher cognitive function, which has taken a temporary leave of absence in the face of overwhelming arousal and a distinct lack of operational requirement. Kirk groans, presses forward, feels the fingers slide along the length of his shaft, and arches into the sensation.

And that would, in all likelihood, be the end of discussion right there, were it not for the fact that Kirk is, by nature, a fair and generous man and not the sort of lover to accept a hand job without reciprocation in kind, and so, despite the pressure building in his groin, despite the fact that his eyes are squeezed tightly shut and he's basically flattened against a counter, a chopping board, and two dessicated chili peppers, while a well-lubricated hand works him with expertise born of twenty-four hours' repeated practice, it seems only fair to try and give a little bit back, even if there's virtually no chance that they're going to be able to coordinate this thing anymore. He's got enough presence of mind to remember how to open the catch on Spock's pants, and he's halfway there, hand snaking inside the hemline, before Spock surreptitiously but unmistakably shifts his hips and moves away from Kirk's touch. This would be a bigger problem, and it's going to be in just a minute, but Spock, as ever, has read Kirk like a pro, and any creeping indignation is swallowed in the wake of the more pressing issue of Kirk's mind-obliterating orgasm, which continues at length for several confused and disordered moments.

Afterwards, brain swimming in endorphins, he can't bring himself to be annoyed anymore, much as he's certain that it's not only appropriate but also necessary to their continuing evolution together to make sure that touching privileges are not arbitrarily rescinded with neither notice nor explanation. It's just that it's difficult to get pissy when his balls are still tingling and his head feels like it's floating in hydrogen, and, moreover, he knows where this is coming from, and he suspects, on the balance of probabilities and prior experience, that arguing about it isn't actually going to help. But there's more than one way to handle a Vulcan, and, given that Spock has demonstrated his ongoing commitment to maneuvering his CO according to his own assessment of Kirk's needs and without any particular reference to Kirk's stated desires, he's not sure that he has any particular aversion to unscrupulous methodology, under the circumstances. Besides which, he has a theory

he'd like to test. And so, after collapsing against Spock's shoulder while his breathing levels out and his heartbeat slows, he decides that, if hands are going to be an issue, then he'll approach the matter like a diplomat and opt for a solution to the problem that employs literalism at its very best.

"Mr Spock," he mutters into a faceful of homespun cotton that is beginning to smell quite overpoweringly of sex, "I have a potential resolution to our impasse, but it's going to require a certain level of trust on your part. Do we have a deal?"

There's a moment's contemplation. Then Spock replies, with unnatural equanimity, "I will require further particulars in order to arrive at an informed response."

Which is, admittedly, and almost verbatim, the response that Kirk was expecting, but he hasn't gotten where he's at in life without learning how to stack the odds in his favor. "Of course," he says, and reaches a hand downwards to cup Spock's erection through the fabric of his pants. As a tactical maneuver, it may, strictly speaking, lack integrity, but there's a time and a place for that sort of thing, and the sharp hiss of air from the lips at Kirk's ear, the way that Spock's body arches of its own accord into the touch, tells Kirk that he's played the moment perfectly. He capitalizes on the confusion by running his fingers along the length of the shaft as he breaks away from the pillow of Spock's shoulder and sinks, slowly, purposefully—and meaningfully—to his knees.

"Ah," says Spock, whose eyes are closed. The word is barely audible; it's a murmur riding on a sigh, and his head rolls back on his shoulders as his spine loses tension. "That was not," he whispers, as Kirk finds the clasp at the side of his pants, slides them over and free of his swollen cock, "an answer to my question."

"True," says Kirk, who can afford to be honest now that he's gotten this far, and, before he can second-guess himself, he opens his mouth and takes Spock inside.

It's a long time since he's done this. Years, in fact: Gary was the last, in those horribly ill-advised late-night trysts that used to happen in the captain's quarters, before Kirk remembered that there were any number of damned good reasons why they weren't together anymore, and that, under the circumstances, sleeping with his helmsman was almost certainly a court martial waiting to happen. It's not a good memory; hardly any of his time with Gary on board the *Enterprise* is a good memory, and so it's probably time to start writing over it with a couple of new experiences. Starting right now, and obliterating everything that came before, because this is certainly not like any blow job Kirk has ever given in the past.

Despite what he's said this morning, it's not exactly on a par with loading his soy sauce with wasabi in that Japanese restaurant on Biederman's, in a manner that caused Bones to roll his eyes and start making noises about peptic ulcers, and Kirk's mouth reacts for a whole lot of reasons, not least of which is the fact that the deep-throating idea was possibly a little bit ambitious for man

eight years out of practice. His tongue protests immediately and his eyes begin to water as his sinuses catch fire, but he wasn't lying, earlier on: he knows this sensation of old, has sought it out more times than he can count, and his mouth has long ago ceded defeat to the pleasure centers of his brain that manage this sort of thing. It's the gag reflex that's the real issue, and that, if memory serves, is just a question of taking things a little bit more slowly.

So he slides back a little, finds a comfortable compromise, and sets to his work. Spock's knees are buckling slightly now, and, Kirk cannot help but notice, any immediate ethical concerns about their chemical compatibility have been subsumed by the more pressing need to thrust with uncharacteristic inelegance into the tight wet heat of Kirk's mouth. His lips are tingling and the inside of his cheeks feels like they've been rubbed with liquid flame, but he's still blissed-out and orgasm-high, and the burn is almost pleasurable now that the initial shock has passed. He reaches up, steadies himself with one hand on the inside of either of Spock's thighs, and swallows as far down the shaft as he can go.

There's no real way to tell how close his friend is getting. Spock's not typically the demonstrative type during sex, and their anatomy is just dissimilar enough that Kirk's usual physical cues are largely absent, but he thinks that the steady increase in the motion of Spock's hips is probably a good sign. If there were balls he could cup, that's what he'd do at this point, but there are none, so instead he lets himself explore the soft skin of Spock's perineum, oiled hands sliding up and across the tight line of skin and dipping into the cleft of Spock's ass. He has no idea how experienced Spock might be in this particular area, though he has an idea or two relating to Vulcan ideals of fidelity and Spock's own interpersonal social skills that lead him to think that this may be a bigger deal for him than even Kirk had previously imagined, so he's not intending to push too far, as it were; simply to heighten sensation, to help him along, and, most importantly, to have something productive to do with his hands. So it comes as something of a surprise when, as Kirk's fingers find the tight ring of muscle at Spock's anus, slide over it and circle the puckered skin, a hissed, decisive, "Yes," rends the air above him, and a determined hand shifts from Kirk's head to Spock's ass to hold Kirk's hand in place.

Interesting. Kirk hollows out his cheeks, sucks at the head of Spock's dick, and dips one finger inside his ass.

The groan that erupts above him is nothing short of revelatory. Kirk has never heard his friend make a noise like that under any circumstances, and, honestly, if he'd known that this was all it took, he'd have gone straight for the blow jobs last night and they'd probably never have left the house today. His jaw is starting to cramp and his lips feel full and swollen; the taste of cock in his mouth is neither repugnant nor uncomfortable, but neither is it particularly appetizing, but that sound, that abandon, is almost enough to get him hard again, and he still hasn't quite worked out the tremors in his quads from that last orgasm just yet. His finger is only buried as far as the first knuckle—he doesn't want to push too hard, in any sense of the term—but he pulls it free, dips it back inside, and the motion of Spock's hips is becoming almost desperate now, the noises escaping his lips almost nonsensical. And then Spock's thrusting stutters, spasms, and he pulls back, sliding his cock from Kirk's mouth just as the first streams of ejaculate spurt from the head and Kirk rocks back on his knees to watch, finger working at Spock's ass as his friend comes hard onto Kirk's

chest, in his hair, splashing the cool tile of the kitchen floor.

He catches Spock's hips as the orgasm subsides and is unsurprised to find them trembling. It takes very little maneuvering to persuade his friend to sink to the ground beside him, and they flatten themselves against the cabinets at their back and sit together for a moment, heads sliding sideways to rest against each other, hands seeking hands without conscious thought. It may be a testament to the power of the post-coital haze that Spock makes no effort to peer suspiciously at Kirk's mouth for signs of damage or discomfort, and Kirk finds himself wondering, distractedly, lubricant still tingling on his tongue, his lips, his cheeks, what Spock's come tastes like and how long it will take them before he finds out for sure.

In a moment, he thinks, he's going to rouse himself for a glass of milk; maybe a whisky from the sitting room to cut through the lingering capsaicin burn. He's certainly going to pull up his pants and turn down the stove before the pasta boils over and coagulates into a starchy ball at the bottom of the pot. But, for now at least, he's content to simply tilt his head sideways, raise one hand to Spock's chin and pull him in for a kiss that tastes of heat and spice and sex and desire.

And maybe, just maybe, a little bit of hard-won conviction, too.

Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

Please accept the usual abject apologies for the lateness of this chapter. There's no reason that it should have given me such trouble, but it really, really did.

Their last day in the Rockies, Spock wakes up late to the sound of birdsong in the trees and the comfortable weight of one sleeping Human head on his chest. They fell asleep like this last night, more than three hours after they tumbled into bed together, and, it seems, they have not moved in the intervening hours.

He finds this... gratifying. His left arm is numb where the blood flow has been restricted by the angle of Jim's shoulder, and his fingers are unresponsive to basic commands, but he finds himself unwilling to wake his sleeping lover by moving to a more comfortable position. Comfort is relative, after all. He could relieve the pressure on his protesting joints, but then they would be absent Jim.

The room is cool, air fractured by a thousand mobile drafts that creep in beneath the curtains and around the door, and he pulls the comforter up a little higher, turns into the warmth of Jim's chest. His friend's resting body temperature has dropped a little as the night has retreated, but he's warmer than Spock, and a lazy arm curls around his waist as Spock burrows them further beneath the blankets, pulling him closer and into a rapidly shrinking circle of heat.

"Cold," mutters Jim into the hairs of Spock's chest, and the word is sufficiently buried in pectoral muscles that it's impossible to tell if it's a statement or inflected in the interrogative, so Spock elects to interpret it as best suits his inclinations. He runs his hands gently along the chilled surface of Jim's arm, where it has been exposed to the cool morning air, feeling the mottling of goosebumps beneath his fingers, interrupting the smoothness of Jim's skin; feeling the trickle of psi-energy that follows his line of motion, neither strong nor focused enough to be a true connection: nothing more than a ghost of a presence at the back of his skull. Blunt, square fingers curl around the angle of Spock's pelvic bone and he closes his eyes, breathes his contentment into the cool, empty air above Jim's head.

The bed is a wreck once again. They changed the sheets before retiring last night, bundling armfuls of stiffened cotton into the cyclor and replacing them with warm, lavender-scented linens from the hall closet, and, within fifteen minutes of collapsing on the mattress in a tangle of arms and legs and mouths and skin, the entire enterprise was rendered moot. The brush of rough fibers beneath his left buttock tells Spock that he has fallen asleep on the wet patch, but, in truth, the bed is approximately fifty percent wet patch this morning, and the bits that are not covered in bodily fluids are covered in streaks of the coconut-perfumed oil that Jim uncovered yesterday, with a look

of unmitigated triumph, in a bottle in his mother's side of the bathroom vanity cabinet after their second shower of the evening.

They gave up on ablutions after the third.

Jim's hand has settled into a sleepy circular motion across Spock's hip, in the manner of a man hovering on the edge of consciousness, though the circumference is widening with every revolution, and it's beginning to dip close enough to his inner thigh that the blood flow towards the area of his groin is shifting in response. Spock makes no effort to suppress it; in truth, he's not certain he has passed sufficient time in meditation, these past few days, to ensure that his controls remain active, and he certainly hasn't tested them since his arrival in Idaho. Jim is sliding into wakefulness—Spock can feel it in the changing cadence of his breath, the mobile psi-currents beneath his fingers, the intermittent flickers of activity in his quiescent genitals—and so there is nothing to be lost, now, in shifting slightly so that the weight on his arm is transferred more fully onto his chest. Blood rushes freely along the reopened channels, surging into his fingers in a torrent of heat and protesting nerves, and he can feel the stickiness now that clings to his palm and beneath his nails, and he can't tell if it's his own fluids or the oil they used to lubricate a path for his fingers into the heat and constriction of Jim's body last night.

Jim says nothing, makes no sound of protest, but, with drowsy lips, starts pressing kisses to Spock's nipples. Spock sucks in a breath, and moves his tingling hand up to card through Jim's hair, to grip at his scalp as Jim's hand circles backwards across Spock's hip and over his buttock. It slides to a halt where Spock's skin meets the ruined sheet, worries the gap wider between buttock and bed, and Spock obliges by tilting his hip sideways so that Jim's hand can find the access it requires. The sensitivity of his anus is entirely unexpected, but the discovery appears to be satisfactory to both parties, judging by the attention Jim has paid this area since the previous evening. It's not that Spock has rejected the notion in the past, it's more that he's never really given it any serious consideration, prior to his decision to visit Idaho, and then his thoughts had inclined more towards the functionality of the action, and its sanitary implications. Jim, he knows, has had male lovers in the past—it does not take any great skills in the art of interpersonal discourse to determine that the tension that existed between the captain and Lieutenant Mitchell was primarily sexual in nature, nor to discern the undercurrent of attraction that colored Jim's interactions with Captain Christopher—and his enjoyment of manual stimulation of the prostate was not, therefore, unexpected, though the gland proved more difficult to locate than Spock had anticipated from his perusal of Starfleet's medical databanks after dinner last night. And yet, as those skilled fingers find their way once more to the ring of muscle that guards the entrance to his body, as Jim shifts and reaches over him for their rapidly diminishing supply of lubricant, he feels his body respond as easily, as instinctively, as if it had been accepting the casual invasion of another man's flesh for the entirety of Spock's adult life.

Jim rolls him, and Spock allows himself to be rolled. They discovered this last night—a maneuver that has, to date, claimed 1.6 hours' sleep deficit that Spock cannot bring himself to regret—and it is the primary cause of the unfamiliar sensation of oil and palpated skin between his upper thighs. Jim's arousal presses into the small of Spock's back as he slicks himself with one hand, the other gently working its way inside Spock's body, and Spock hears himself groan, push backwards into

the touch. Jim's breath catches at the sound, and Spock closes his legs together, tightening the muscles of his quads as Jim's erection nudges its way between his thighs. Teeth close gently on the cord of muscle at Spock's shoulder, one practiced finger working the sensitive skin of his anal walls, and a hand snakes below Spock's body to grip the solid length of his penis with a rhythm that matches the motion of Jim's hips.

It is difficult, sometimes, to believe that they have been lovers for scarcely thirty-six Terran hours. It is difficult to remember, now, why he fought this for so long.

Birds sing outside the window, sunlight streams through the pale fabric of the drapes, and Jim suckles at the skin of Spock's throat as they make love on sheets already stained by a night largely given over to passion. It is their last full day of indolence: tomorrow, they will return to the lives they've left behind, and they will find a way to fold together these new selves that they have discovered in the cradle of the mountain with the men they used to be. The fires burn again behind Jim's eyes, and the emptiness that has hollowed Spock's belly for so many years has left him; this was always the way that this would be. *Kaiidth*: there was nothing to be gained by denying it, and everything to be won by letting go.

Jim achieves climax first, and, though he's angled down and away from Spock's groin, still some of his ejaculate lands on the sensitive skin at the base of Spock's penis and he feels it hot and slick against his flesh. The motion of Jim's hands stutters slightly as his body spasms, but, by this stage in proceedings, it scarcely matters. Spock links his hand through Jim's and supplements his activities with a little of his own undepleted energy, and feels his orgasm rush him without warning, erupting from his abdomen and his psi-centers with force enough to level him. Jim's hands work him from inside and out, wringing pleasure from every corner of his body, and Spock releases himself to it, allows it to claim him, in the knowledge that this momentary fragmentation, this loss of control, is fleeting, transitory: an even exchange.

His breath is ragged, his heart hammers at his flanks, and his blood thunders in his ears. Dimly, he registers Jim's withdrawal from his body, the touch of a warm hand on his hip, the press of lips against his shoulder blade.

"Good morning," says Jim, and his voice is hoarse and a little unsteady. "How did you sleep?"

"Adequately," says Spock, and it's only partly a lie. He does not recall ever feeling so sleep-deprived as he has felt since he arrived at Jim's cabin in the mountains, but, conversely—and illogically—nor has he ever felt so rested.

After breakfast, they strip the bed again, and there's an air of transgression in the smile that Jim hides behind his eyes that Spock thinks he recognizes: it feels remarkably similar to the experience of attempting to disguise from his childhood tutors his failure to master the *tvi-sochya* at the prescribed level for the requisite period of time, only without the associated fog of shame and confusion. The birdsong outside the window has become a chorus, and, noting Spock's interest as he crosses to the sill to peer out through the condensation-frosted panes, Jim identifies a cardinal and a sparrow among the voices, though he shrugs his shoulders when Spock asks about the provenance of a more complex melody that underpins the refrain.

"There's a book or two downstairs, I think," he says, slipping his arms around Spock's waist and pressing his chest along the length of Spock's spine, which has the usual effect. Spock lets it happen; arousal is his default state right now, and, in any case, he's learning quickly there's no need to act upon each and every erection that stirs the fabric of his pants. For every spark of desire that he allows to mellow and disperse, there is always another to follow when the moment presents itself. "Sam tried to teach me a few of local birdcalls when we were boys, but I wasn't much of a student, I'm afraid."

It never ceases to amaze Spock that a man so accomplished as James Kirk can continue to find fault with his own expertise, but, he suspects, the comment is less self-reproof and more reminiscence. He says, "Your brother was gifted in the study of local fauna?"

A gentle laugh agitates the fine hair behind Spock's ear. "Sam was gifted in the study of *all* fauna. I can see the attraction, I guess, but it has always been people that have interested me." The arms tighten across Spock's belly. "In all their great diversity."

This much, Spock knows to be true: it is both the source of Jim's success as a commander and a diplomat, and also, he suspects, the reason that it has proved so comprehensively impossible to avoid falling in love with him. Still, he supposes that there's little enough reason for self-reproach: Spock stood at his right hand for five years while they traveled the galaxy together; the evidence suggests that, of all the diverse and multifarious varieties of sentient life in this corner of the universe, there are few enough who've proved themselves immune to the charm offensive of James T Kirk.

He raises his hands to cover Jim's where they rest against his stomach, and allows his fingers to open suggestively as they slide into place, in a manner that he knows Jim will recognize as lascivious. A small noise of approval, pressed into Spock's neck with the faintest of kisses, indicates that the gesture has been received as intended, though he suspects that Jim is as loathe as Spock to disarray an un-made bed. The mouth at Spock's throat is mobile and increasingly insistent; Jim's fingers link through his and contract against his stomach, begin their inevitable move downward; and Spock's thoughts have just begun to turn to a lazy contemplation of the logistics of copulating on the pile of soiled linens by the bedroom door, when a chirp from one of the communicators on the bedside table abruptly belays a reprise of the morning's activities.

Jim huffs a quiet laugh into the tendon that links Spock's jaw to his shoulder and removes his hand from the waistline of Spock's pants. "Mine, I think," he says.

He is correct, of course: Spock's commission may have been reinstated, but his status within Starfleet is, as yet, poorly defined; he has not precisely been overloaded with communications since his return to Earth. Given the Human proclivity towards sentimentalism and nostalgia, this is not a state of affairs that gives him any great pause, though he could wish that Jim's communicator were similarly inactive.

He turns with his friend as he crosses the bedroom to the bed, folding his hands at his waist and reconsidering at the last moment when he realizes that additional stimulation in that area is inadvisable at present. Jim turns a grin over his shoulder that telegraphs a clear understanding of Spock's line of reasoning, and rearranges his own stance into something a little more comfortable as he picks up his communicator and flicks it open.

"Kirk here," he says, and, though his eyes are tired and his shoulders slack, though his cheeks are flushed and his arousal is plainly visible at the front of his pants, his voice is even, steady, and polished by command.

This does nothing to mitigate Spock's condition.

"Jim?" says a familiar southern drawl. "That you?"

Delight creases the corners of his friend's eyes. It is sufficiently gratifying that Spock could almost overlook the encroach upon what had promised to be another successful exercise in scientific evaluation. Almost. Because it turns out that, though he is accustomed to experiencing the joy and happiness of James Kirk as though it were his own, this ability comes linked to a couple of hitherto unsuspected provisos.

Jim grins, pivots on one heel so that his he's free to turn the full warmth of his pleasure on Spock. "I should hope so," he says. "It's my communicator, after all, Bones."

"Well." A heavy note of irritation fails to mask the undercurrent of warm amusement in the doctor's voice. "The way you up and disappeared from civilization, Jim, a man can be forgiven for wanting to be sure. That doesn't sound much like San Francisco I hear in the background."

"That doesn't sound like much of anything you hear in the background," says Jim. "There's a

whole lot of silence out here in the mountains. I'm on vacation, Bones."

"I remember," says the doctor amiably. "Just never known you to take three days together away from your desk without chaining you to a biobed and standing two guards outside your office door. Must be a hell of a spot, out there."

Jim's smile is so wide and warm that it feels, illogically, as though it takes the chill off the drafty air. "It has its attractions," he says.

"Idaho, huh?" The voice is light, but there's an air of frank skepticism behind it. "Guess maybe there's some hidden beauty in frostbite and white-out blizzards that's lost on this old country doctor."

"No doubt the freezing rains of Beta Auraculi were much more agreeable to your Georgian sensibilities," says Jim cheerfully. "Still. It'll soon be academic, anyway. I'll be back in San Francisco tomorrow afternoon."

"So I hear," says McCoy. "Damned holos can't seem to talk about anything else. The amount of times I've seen your face grinning up at me out of a terminal screen this past week, Jim, it's like you never even left. Spock too; can't manage get away from his warm smile and cheerful demeanour no matter where I look. Say—did that green-blooded hobgoblin ever show up out your way?"

Jim's grin does not falter, but his eyes widen in sudden alarm as the question manifestly catches him completely off-guard. He meets Spock's gaze, hesitates, and offers a helpless shrug.

"In... Idaho?" he says, and though, as answers go, this one is clearly prevarication, there is at least no hint in his voice of the indecision on his face.

"Yeah," says the doctor easily—too easily, Spock thinks. McCoy has never asked an innocent question in all his life, and Jim certainly knows this. "Came by my digs a few days back, all bowed up about something, asking where you'd got to. Didn't see any harm in telling him; not after our conversation Tuesday night."

Spock feels an eyebrow arch as Jim purses his lips around a hasty, chagrined smile and drops his eyes in a manner that indicates the likely thematic content of the discussion in question. Interesting. No doubt there is a productive and mutually illuminating conversation looming large in their near

future, although Spock has an idea that he may be in no position to occupy any kind of discretionary high ground himself, by the time they manage to persuade the doctor to vacate the airwaves. But for now, it seems, there is little alternative but to submit to McCoy's unapologetic information-gathering endeavor, while it remains possible to retain at least some semblance of autonomy in the matter.

So he straightens his spine, adjusts his stance to ameliorate the uncomfortable manner in which his tunic has settled itself around his abdomen, and fixes his eyes away from Jim, whose grin widens conspicuously as he understands, abruptly, what's about to happen.

"I am unfamiliar with the term, Doctor," says Spock evenly, and takes care to ignore the increasingly disordered amusement emanating from his distracted lover. "However, extrapolating from your usual colloquial phraseology, I find it unlikely that I was 'bowed up' in any manner when I visited you at your lodgings."

There is a long, startled silence. Jim lowers himself onto the mattress and bites down on his fist as he manifestly stifles an inconvenient urge to laugh. And then, from the communicator, a heavy, contemplative breath, slowly released, ripples the hush in the cool air of the bedroom.

"Well, I'll be damned," says the doctor slowly, and Jim gives up. His laughter is light, effervescent—like sparking sunlight on the ripples of a clear-water pool—and it breaks a tension in the air that Spock had not noticed until it was gone.

"Mr Spock," says Jim, "it looks like you've finally managed to leave our CMO at a loss for words. Better make a note for the logs when we get back aboard, as I'm certain it's not something we'll see again any time soon."

"You're damned right," says McCoy, and, though he's clearly aiming for his habitual air of acerbic irritability, his tone barely achieves *mildly peeved*. "Never thought you had it in you, Spock."

There are at least two potential, and equally viable, meanings to his words. Given the choice, Spock would prefer to adopt the superficial reading, but, he thinks, as Jim grins up at him from the mattress and extends an out-turned palm in invitation, there is no pressing need to make any conclusive decision. McCoy's presence in the room is sufficiently pronounced that he cannot unreservedly accept the hand that is offered, but he crosses to the bed of his own accord and lowers himself into place at his captain's side, and the open smile that Jim turns on him tells him that the gesture has been received as it was intended.

"As ever, Doctor," he says, "I am gratified at my ability to confound your expectations."

A beat. And then, unexpectedly, McCoy chuckles.

“Well, Mr Spock,” he says, “I guess that goes double for me.”

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“I was simply aware,” says Jim, one hand gripping the lightning-seared branch of an ancient hardwood as he levers himself up onto a rocky outcrop that bisects their path, “that it might be unwise, under the circumstances, to leave San Francisco without a word to anyone.”

The sun is bright in the cloudless sky, but a thin layer of snow still blankets the ground. The trail they’ve chosen runs deep beneath a pine and aspen forest as it winds its way along the foothills of a low-lying peak, and the elevation, along with the south-facing aspect, has mitigated against the worst excesses of the recent blizzards, though Spock remains thankful for his newly purchased boots and the several warm sweaters that Jim thought to supply before they left the house. His core temperature has stabilized as they’ve walked, to a point where he now feels comparatively comfortable, and he finds, now that the creeping chill has left his bones, that he is enjoying the hike. The mountains are, as anticipated, geologically compelling, and there is an esthetic splendor to their environmental diversity that some part of his mother’s blood remembers, but, more than that, Jim’s cheeks are flushed and his eyes, where they sweep his surroundings, are alight with a simple joy that Spock cannot help but echo each time they fall on him.

His friend grins and reaches down a gloved hand towards him. Spock is unquestionably capable of managing the ascent on his own, but, nevertheless, he accepts it without hesitation and fails to relinquish his hold for several seconds after he finds his balance once more.

“I do not dispute your reasoning, Jim,” he says mildly. “Nor do I deny its efficacy or convenience.”

Spock has not tested the security clearance associated with his reactivated commission, but he suspects that, regardless, it would take relatively little effort to determine, at least to the nearest settlement, the location of the Kirk family holiday home. All things being equal, it would be the work of perhaps three hours’ concerted, focused searching through publicly accessible documentation, and would certainly have obviated any incriminating and potentially revealing conversations with members of the medical corps not known for their ability to restrain the free expression of their opinion and will. He wonders, briefly, why the notion did not occur to him upon his arrival in San Francisco, and abandons the query when the implications become uncomfortable. He would prefer not to consider the possibility that Thursday’s interview with Dr McCoy had less to do with the pursuit of information and more to do with a hitherto unsuspected need for external validation of his probabilities for success.

This is one line of enquiry, he feels, that does not need to proceed to its logical conclusion.

Kirk ducks below a low-hanging bough, and pushes it back to allow Spock to pass. His eyes are dancing. “Nevertheless,” he says, “I can’t help but notice that we’re fifteen minutes into our hike, and we’re still talking about Bones.”

This is unquestionably true. And, phrased like that, it does begin to seem... excessive.

“Perhaps,” says Spock, “you could expound upon the glacial geomorphology of the bouldering that we passed a few yards back....”

Jim grins. “You know perfectly well that I can’t,” he says. “And don’t change the subject.”

“It simply seems incongruous with the surrounding terrain....”

“And no doubt the explanation is fascinating, and I’ll be delighted to debate it with you to the very limits of my geographical knowledge, which is minimal.” Jim tests the frozen surface of a spreading puddle with the toe of his boot and finds it firm. He edges forward, bracing himself against Spock’s offered hand. “But we’ve got the best part of half a mile to clear before we circle back to the car, my friend, so before we get swept away with a spirited discussion of igneous rock formations, how about we put a couple of things to bed so we don’t spend the entire afternoon talking about our absent CMO?”

Spock allows himself to be guided in turn over the sleek skin of ice, and pushes down on a recalcitrant train of thought that is attempting to forge a morphological connection between the ground beneath his feet and the properties of coconut-perfumed oil. He says, “As I recall, the choice of conversational material was yours, Jim.”

It’s not likely to win him any points. He understands this even as Jim’s soft laughter mists the air in front of him. “Touché,” concedes his friend. “But only because you were thinking it.”

Which is also true, though, absent a direct meld, there is no way for Jim to prove as much. But Spock has known his captain for far too many years to make the mistake of protesting. Nor is there any point in attempting to obscure the truth: for a man born of a species so sorely lacking in psionic abilities, James Kirk has always possessed the disquieting capacity to read his contemporaries more accurately than any telepath.

“I will not deny,” he says slowly, testing his words carefully against what is known, what can be established, and what is pure conjecture, “that the content of the doctor’s communication this morning was somewhat disconcerting.”

“And you’re wondering if I’ve been... indiscreet,” says Kirk. He does not look around this time. “Is that it?”

“No,” says Spock without hesitation. It is the truth: Jim’s discretion is beyond question. “I simply wish to determine the extent of Dr McCoy’s... knowledge.”

A glance back over his shoulder shows an unreadable expression on Jim’s face. “He has no knowledge, as such,” he says. “Nothing more substantive, anyway, than what he’s been able to glean from his own observations across the years.” A beat. “We... may have been less... uh... circumspect than we might have imagined, you and I.”

Spock is acutely aware that his past week’s adventures include an incident in sickbay, in full view of Doctors Chapel and McCoy, that leaves little room for interpretative ambiguity, and is obliged to reflect upon the accuracy of this statement. “I see,” he says.

The tree cover is thinning as the path winds upwards, and the temperature is dropping. The shale beneath his feet has crispened beneath its thin blanket of snow, and the wind is picking up strength. “Just a little further,” says Jim. “It’s worth it, I promise. And don’t worry about Bones, Spock. Whatever else he may be, he’s a good friend, and loyal to his core. For all that you’ve both had your differences, I know you know that.”

This is at least partly true. Commander Leonard McCoy, MD, is a man in whom illogic runs abyssal, and his life’s work, this past decade, has included the accumulation of an encyclopedic familiarity with Vulcan temperamental tolerances, but there is no question but that Spock would trust the man with his dying breath. He’s simply never considered the fact that the ferocious blanket of protection that the doctor has cast around his captain’s shoulders might extend, in any measure, to Spock himself.

This certainly clarifies a number of points of confusion.

Fascinating.

“You know how he is,” says Jim now, as they round a jagged, rocky spur. “He gets an idea in his head and he won’t let go until he’s resolved it to his own satisfaction.”

An unwelcome sense-memory calls forth the chill surface of a biobed beneath skin warmed by the approach of *plak-tau*, and Spock finds himself inclined to agree. But McCoy’s relentless interference in matters firmly marked as none of his concern almost certainly saved Spock’s life on that occasion, and, he finds himself reflecting, though he’s not generally given to hyperbole or poetic overstatement, perhaps, in some small manner, the same can be said of this.

“Besides,” says Jim now, with a half-smile thrown over his shoulder, “whatever ideas Bones has in his head right now, I suspect you’re as much to blame for them as I am. Look,” he adds, before Spock can so much as draw breath to voice the beginnings of a rebuttal that will be, at best, nominal, “right ahead, through those low branches. We’re here.”

There is, perhaps, some instruction to be taken from a personality so undeniable that the geographical arrangement of the planet beneath Jim’s feet can be relied upon to interject at a tactically appropriate moment. However, it’s not as though this is new information, and, in any case, Spock doubts he’ll emerge unscathed from any attempt to protest his innocence in this matter, the circumstances of his departure from San Francisco being what they are. And, besides, as Jim pushes back a low bough that sweeps the narrow path at chest height and they emerge from the tree-cover into the pale, snow-bleached sunlight of a February mid-morning in the Idaho Rockies, the view that opens out into the valley below is of an order that discourages any further debate.

It is, quite simply, one of the most breathtaking sights that Spock has yet observed on the planet of his mother’s birth.

Below them, shrouded beneath a thick blanket of white, a wide, clear circle of untouched snow marks the boundaries of what must be a small lake. Here and there, the wind has blown stripes in the drift, exposing ribbons of pearlescent ice that sparkle in the weak sunlight in all the shades of sky and cloud. The banks are fringed in high conifers, flashes of green peering through their winter mantle, that climb sharply with the peaks that surround them on three sides, and, on the fourth, mark the precipitous drop towards an unseen, lower valley beyond, where white-purple ridges shadow the sky and disappear into filmy wisps of cirrus. And everywhere he looks, stretching from horizon to horizon, from the banked snow of the lake to the delicate azure blue of the sky, there is nothing but stillness and complete, absolute, silence.

Strange, that he could spend so many years of his childhood and his early adult life on this water-rich world, and still have no real conception of the beauty that it holds. Strange that he’s never thought to look for it before.

It’s only when he feels Jim fall into place at his side, feels gloved fingers lace, wordlessly, through

his own, that Spock realizes that he's been lost in observation for more moments than he can count. "Told you it was worth it," says Jim softly, and exhales gently, steam curling on the air in front of them on a wave of body heat and contentment.

"It is..." says Spock, and finds himself at a loss for a sufficiently momentous close to that sentence. A number of adjectives in Vulcan and Terran Standard line up to present themselves for his consideration, but none of them exactly fit the sensation he's attempting to describe, and this, he suspects, is one more manifestation of the changes wrought by melding with a consciousness greater than the sum of the universe itself: two weeks ago, he would not have struggled to describe the curious sense of hollowness—almost a sadness—that pierces his chest as he attempts to assimilate the staggering beauty of a snow-bound lake in the mountains, but this is because, two weeks ago, he would have observed the scene with another man's eyes and seen only the constituent parts, never the whole. All things considered, he reflects, a minor semantic failure at this juncture is a price worth the reward. "...Striking," he finishes at last, and, if he's not satisfied with his selection, neither is he particularly inclined to belabor the effort. *Striking* will suffice. Jim will understand.

Jim *does* understand. Spock's eyes are fixed on the vista, so it's instinct rather than, strictly speaking, perception that tells him that his lover's gaze has slid sideways in search of Spock's, and he's not wrong: he meets the scrutiny and finds it warm and waiting for him. And it's easy now, easier with every attempt, to reach for the connection; to peel his scarf away from his mouth and lean in, past the limits of protocol and decorum, past the boundaries of personal space and command distance; to tilt his head towards Jim's when the moment demands it, press his lips to the lips that are always ready to meet Spock's. Jim's arms close easily around Spock's shoulders and pull him in, hard and close, and Spock wraps his gloved hands around Jim's head and the small of his back, fingers fisting in hair and thick fabric. Their lips crush together, their mouths open and their teeth and tongues collide, and he can feel the possessiveness in the power of Jim's kiss, as much as he can feel it in his own.

There is nowhere for it to go, of course. The sun streaks the mirador in bright buttercup-yellow from an unmarked sky above, but the air is sharp and cold and their clothes are a solid wall of fabric between them. Jim's hands snake down to cup Spock's buttocks through the layers that blanket him from the mountain's extremes, and the touch registers as the faintest of pressure; enough, more than enough, to cause his cock to fill and harden; not nearly sufficient to address the desire it provokes. Spock can feel Jim's answering frustration in the hunger of his kiss, the way he grips Spock's hips and pulls them tightly against his own, and he shifts his angle, cants his pelvic bone for better access, and succeeds only in lining up his erection against the inner seam of a zipper. Fortunately, there is adequate padding between his sensitive scrotal skin and the teeth of the fastening that it registers as little more than an abrupt shock, an unfamiliar but not quite unpleasant sensation that causes him to jerk hastily out of the way, but which is cushioned enough by layers of wool that it stops short of being painful. But, then again, that's part of the problem.

Jim breaks their kiss as Spock's hips flex involuntarily out of contact with his groin, inasmuch as separation by three inches of cloth could constitute any form of meaningful connection. His hands remain in place at Spock's buttocks, but his head drops forward to rest against Spock's forehead,

and a brief laugh frosts the air between them.

“Well,” he says. “So much for that idea.” His voice is unsteady, his breathing uneven, but his tone is warm, amused. “I guess some activities are better suited to the summer months.”

His hands remain in place at Spock’s buttocks, and the skin buried several centimeters beneath their touch is protesting the relative lack of motion with some very pointed dermal memories involving three blunt, square fingers, and an erection that’s ninety percent of the way to painful. Spock draws a cleansing breath.

“Might I enquire,” he asks slowly, “as to the expected duration of the remainder of our walk?”

“Ten minutes if the going is fair,” says Jim. “Twenty at most. Why—are you in a hurry to get back?”

Spock considers his reply. “Somewhat,” he says at last.

Jim laughs, raises his lips to press them, gently and chastely, against Spock’s. “What say we walk it off?” he says. “Divert the mind from the prison of the body, as it were.” A wide, artless grin fails entirely to temper the amusement in his eyes, and he adds, “I’m told the glacial geomorphology is quite spectacular as the path descends.”

It would need to be exceptionally impressive, Spock feels, to mitigate against the sensation of an engorged penis chafing at homespun Vulcan cotton, however well lubricated the skin. And Jim’s hands, inconveniently arranged above the cleft that guards the entrance to Spock’s body, are doing nothing to alleviate the pressure at his groin, which is, as of twelve hours previously, now primed to expect careful and solicitous attention to his prostate, as per the scheduled progression of his arousal. He lifts a gloved hand to Jim’s face, cups it around his cheek, draws him in for a reprise of their earlier embrace in a different key: soft, temperate and tender. Jim’s eyebrow quirks in surprise, but he allows himself to be drawn, and his lips, when they meet Spock’s, are turned upwards in a faint smile.

The idea has been growing on Spock that, along with his inadequately populated data set, there is an aspect of procedural methodology that he has neglected to examine in full. He is uncertain as to how the oversight has been allowed to persist, given its clear divergence from the archetypal arrangement from which his thesis has proceeded, but, he supposes, much of the endeavor, up until this week’s revelations, has been severely undermined by perceptual bias, so perhaps it’s not so surprising that it has taken him this long to understand the extended implications of their revised model.

He suspects that it only really became clear last night, when Jim's fingertip circled the ring of his anal sphincter; when the universe focused itself into one very specific point and there was suddenly nothing more important than that Jim's fingertip be buried deep inside him. It certainly felt like an epiphany at the time—or, at least, it did afterwards, once Spock was able to think again. Yes: in retrospect, and on the balance of probabilities, this was most likely the moment he understood.

Jim's hands fall away from their gluteal perch, sliding around and down to link with Spock's. "I'd say we could make it in a little under fifteen minutes if we set a brisk pace," he says. "I suspect it's a question of motivation, Mr. Spock."

"Indeed," says Spock, and inclines his head. Yes, he thinks, his methodological construct has been sorely lacking, but all is far from lost. The beauty of an evolving experimental procedure is its adaptability in line with sudden moments of revelation, whether they be prompted by an unexpected polynomial variable or a powerful, paradigm-shattering orgasm: the key is to restructure according to the revised data set and proceed as appropriate.

It remains only to find the words to make the case to Jim. But they have a long walk ahead of them: there will be time enough to consider his approach.

The air is cool, the path is frozen, and the drop towards the lake is precipitous. Undue haste would be inappropriate. But, as they strike off down the trail, Spock's left hand folded firmly and unassailably through Jim's right, he understands that the nature of *undue*, as with so many things, may be redefined according to operational necessity. And, in the end, it takes them fourteen minutes and twelve seconds to return to the car, and another nineteen beyond this to get back to the cabin, not counting the time it takes to slam the door behind them.

Chapter 53

Spock says nothing about his epiphany during their afternoon lovemaking, which takes place in the shower, largely, he suspects, because neither one of them can face the prospect of laundering another load of sheets today, and also because there is warm water in the shower and they're both too cold just now to contemplate nakedness without some kind of external source of heat. By either measure, the endeavor is an unquestionable success and his orgasm is, once again, eminently satisfactory. Were it not for the fact that he is now convinced of the efficacy of his revised approach, Spock thinks, he would have no cause for reflection on this matter, and they are undoubtedly becoming proficient in their current methodology.

Afterwards, towed dry and skin tingling with renewed warmth, they retire to the office to finalize arrangements for their return to San Francisco, and Spock, once he's given the necessary approvals and signed off on the final deployment orders for the senior crew, spends an instructive fifteen minutes on the cortex engaged in a little background research. Mechanically speaking, he does not believe that any of the maneuvers in question will pose a serious logistical challenge; however, it is his habit, in the face of the novel or the unknown, to apprise himself of any and all available information on the subject at hand, and, as it turns out, certain areas of the Federation's databanks are not lacking in this respect. His initial search parameters elicit something in the region of seven billion results, many of them with pictorial or audiovisual accompaniments, and Spock allows himself a moment of consternation, eyebrow arched, as he considers a series of refinements to his terminology.

He persists. It is important to be prepared. And the information available is unquestionably... illuminating.

Over dinner, he explains, as best he can, the pertinent facts of his latest theory, while Jim stifles nervous laughter in a glass of white wine and makes a show of concentrating on his pasta. When he has made his case, Spock sits back in his chair and steeples his hands on the table, and waits for a response. A plate of *penne all'arrabiatta* curls steam into the air in front of him and, though his stomach growls mutinously, he finds that his appetite has, illogically, deserted him. This has often been the case, these past few days. He does not care to contemplate the caloric deficit between energies expended versus energies replaced since he arrived in Idaho.

"All right," says Jim after a moment, though his eyes are still turned resolutely towards his cutlery, and a chagrined smile continues to play around the corner of his mouth. "I'll allow that this is something that has... ah... that's been..." A deep breath. A momentary hesitation, and then he drains his glass. "It's not an option that I've overlooked, put it that way," he says.

"Given the circumstances," says Spock, "it appears to be the most logical solution."

“Logical,” says Jim. He tilts his glass towards him; peers reflexively into the empty bowl. “Well. I’ve never heard it described in quite those terms before....”

“Naturally,” says Spock, when it becomes clear that there is to be no definitive conclusion to Jim’s train of thought. “Dermal contact is limited, in this manner, to an area not supplied by the *guvik-pi’nafek*, thus mitigating against any adverse reaction and minimizing the risk of inadvertent transfer of expressed *kavek-sash-guv-kastorilauk* onto skin not evolutionarily adapted to tolerate it. I regret only that it has taken me so long to understand the benefits this course of action.”

Jim reaches for the wine.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he says as he decants a generous measure into his glass, glancing briefly upwards to extend the offer to Spock. Spock declines with a small shake of his head. “I’m certainly not disputing your analysis, my friend. I’m simply.... What I’m suggesting is....” His brow furrows, and he buries it in a mouthful of wine. “I’m simply suggesting that this is the sort of thing that ought to be discussed first.”

Spock considers. “Yes,” he says.

An eyebrow arches. “Yes?”

“Yes,” says Spock. There is an air of what can only be described as mild hysteria hovering around the shoulders of the man across the table, and he’s not sure how to process this. “I have discussed my proposal at length, Jim. I look forward now to receiving your thoughts on the matter.”

“My... thoughts,” says Jim.

“You have objections?”

“No.” It’s out almost before Spock has finished speaking, and, inexplicably, it’s followed by a breath of slightly fraught laughter. “None,” Jim clarifies. “No objections. It’s not... the most romantic proposition I’ve ever received, Mr. Spock, but I certainly don’t object.”

“Then,” says Spock, “if we are in agreement...?”

There is a moment of silence. Jim blinks. “Right now?” he says.

There are dishes to clear and a fire to stoke first, but, beyond that, they have no pressing commitments. Spock feels an eyebrow begin to reach for his hairline and catches it before it can manifest. Very little of the conversation has proceeded according to expectation.

“Perhaps we ought to re-stack the cyclor before we retire?” he suggests.

Across the table, Jim sits back, glass cradled to his chest. His eyes fall on Spock’s and, slowly, he smiles.

“To hell with the cyclor,” he says, and pushes back his chair.

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The cabin’s environmental controls have been breathing warm air into the dark corners of the bedroom since they tumbled through the door some three hours earlier, damp and tight-skinned with cold, but the faint brush of snow and frozen winds still clings to the fabric beneath his head as Spock allows himself to be tumbled backwards onto the bed. Scarcely forty-eight hours have passed since he first felt Jim’s weight press him into the mattress beneath him, less time than it would take a starship at mid-warp to cross the distance from this planet to the planet of his birth, and yet, in the span of those two short Terran days, it has become impossible to remember how to be the man who did not know this touch. Jim’s lips are insistent; Jim’s hands in Spock’s hair are proprietary; Jim’s erection in the crease of Spock’s thigh is as familiar and as welcome, now, as the breath in his lungs. Spock wraps his fingers around the base of Jim’s skull, opens his mouth to Jim’s, allows his body to take charge.

Jim grins around their kiss as Spock rolls them more firmly onto the bed, and Spock feels him toeing off his boots as he’s pinned beneath his lover. The sound of heels striking the floor registers only dimly—two muted, muffled *thuds* as they hit the rug that streaks the boards beneath the bed—and Jim’s legs scissor up and around his hips, pulling Spock in more tightly against his groin. Their erections align, and Spock hears himself moan into Jim’s mouth and makes no effort to suppress it. It’s lost, in any case, in the sound that erupts from Jim’s throat as he begins to thrust.

Mobile hands are at his shoulders, striping lines of sensation along the length of his spine, digging knowing fingers into the soft skin of his buttocks, and Spock pushes down, forward, upwards with an urgency that he cannot command. Jim’s breath is shallow, rapid, and he arches up as Spock moves, inelegant but geometrically precise, and calculated, with the proficiency of two days’ near-constant practice, to meet arousal with arousal in a manner guaranteed to tighten Spock’s chest and

cloud out the edges of his vision. His hands are at the hem of Spock's pants now, fingers warm and confident as they slip beneath the fabric, and Spock allows his own hands to respond in kind, catching at the edge of Jim's tunic and tugging it upwards, exposing inches of taut, rose-colored flesh, the angle of a hip bone, the first brush of dark, wiry hair above the line of his pants. Jim shifts a little, pulling back his hands, his arms, to allow Spock to strip his torso, and the momentary loss of contact at his gluteus is amply compensated by the reappearance of Jim's chest and the ability to bend his mouth to Jim's nipple. A firm, suctioning pressure—just the lightest application of teeth—and Jim is writhing beneath him and muttering a litany of syllables in no language that Spock has ever heard, and this, the knowledge of this, the discovery of his ability to do this, is almost as erotic as the act itself.

Jim rolls them again, positions himself above Spock, straddling his hips, their erections linked by the lightest, most maddening touch. Slowly, he sits upright, moonlight shifting on the spare lines of his body as he moves, until he's kneeling above Spock, eyes shadowed, lips quirked upwards into half a grin. His hands splay on Spock's chest, ruching his borrowed shirt as Jim pushes upwards, exposing Spock's belly to the night air, head dipping as his angle decreases. Spock can feel Jim's breath twisting through the hairs that circle his navel, warm and uneven; the slight tremor in his arms as they slide back down his ribs, handful of fabric released, and his fingers seek out the fastening at the front of Spock's pants. His own breath catches in his throat as the clasp releases, the seam falls back, the cloth restraining his erection abruptly falls away, and it's not only the sudden sense of freedom skittering through the network of nerves running beneath the over-stimulated skin. It's also, and more specifically, the proximity of Jim's mouth to Spock's penis. It's the knowledge of what comes next.

Jim does not disappoint. His eyes slide upwards, meet Spock's, and a wolfish grin plays at the corner of his mouth. Spock holds himself very still, resists the urge to nudge his hips upwards, to tap the head of his cock in a meaningful manner against Jim's chin, secure in the knowledge that Jim's playful sexual badinage does not extend in any measure to serious self-denial, and, as expected, the smirk remains in place for a little under 1.7 seconds before it's stretched over and along the length of Spock's erection in one smooth movement that has Spock clutching fistfuls of sheet between his helpless hands and releasing a mindless, animal sound that, fewer than three Terran days ago, he would have refused to believe that his logical throat could make. He feels Jim's amusement in the breath of soft, amused laughter that warms the skin of his groin, but that's just about the only thing that registers beyond the pressure and the pleasure as Jim hollows his cheeks and works his mouth along the length of Spock's shaft. It is possible that Spock is muttering his lover's name, over and over again, through clenched teeth and a dry mouth, but his skull is a mess of white noise and short circuits; it is extremely difficult to be certain.

At the head, Jim releases his suction and circles the tip lightly with his tongue. Spock slits an eyelid and watches him, lips moistened and glistening with lubricant, cheeks flushed gray on white in the moonlight, eyes dancing. The fluids must be uncomfortable on his skin but there's no sign of it in his face as he pulls back, wipes his arm carelessly across his mouth, shifts slightly so that he's able to tug Spock's pants the rest of the way down his legs and cast them into the shadows on the floor. Spock cannot help but identify a growing power imbalance to his situation vis-a-vis his lover's, but, happily, there is a simple corrective that can be applied, and so he levers himself upright as best he can, spine still tingling from his recent fellating, and applies himself to the fastening of Jim's pants. Jim grins and reaches for the back of Spock's head, pulling him in for a

messy kiss as Spock's hands work at his hem, and he tastes of Spock's arousal: sharp and familiar and vaguely obscene.

Jim shifts, rocking back off his knees to free his lower legs, and, between them, they manage to disrobe him. Typically, he is careful once they're both naked—as is Spock; neither one of them finds themselves inclined to test the veracity of Spock's biochemical anxieties—but, as he leans in again, pants discarded, to reaffix his lips to Spock's, there's an air of restraint to his motion, to the chastity of his kiss and the moderation of his grip on either side of Spock's waist, that is unusually cautious. He pulls back, lifts one hand to cup Spock's jaw, rests his forehead against Spock's, closes his eyes.

Releases a breath. "You're sure about this?" asks Jim.

Spock has rarely been more certain of the accuracy of a hypothesis. "Yes," he says.

"It's.... It can be an acquired taste," says Jim. "You'll tell me if you want me to stop?"

Arousal has been their constant companion for the past forty-eight hours, and Spock has become accustomed to the ebb and flow of his body's responses. He is confident that, should certain nerve clusters continue to be ignored in the manner of the last thirty-seven seconds of conversation, they will begin to protest their neglect in the strongest and most unambiguous terms. "I will," he says, and is gratified to note his success in stripping his tone of all but the barest hint of growing impatience.

"All right," says Jim. He presses a kiss to Spock's lips: soft, gentle and chaste. "Turn around."

Spock complies. His research this afternoon elicited several detailed and informative diagrammatic representations, and he recognizes this position as one of several options conducive to initial penetration. Jim rests a hand on the curve of one of his hips and presses a line of kisses up Spock's spine as he reaches over him for the coconut oil on the stand by the bed, and Spock closes his eyes, centers himself, seeks the quiet place inside where the lines between mind and body soften and blur. It is too many days since his last meditation; his controls are worse than sub-optimal, and he knows that command of his involuntary muscles will be limited at best, but it seems sensible to use any means at his disposal to facilitate the process, particularly since, as he is increasingly aware, the entire endeavor appeared significantly less physically demanding when limited to the theoretical.

Kaiidh. This is the logical course of action. And the careful insinuation of one warm, oiled finger through the tight ring of his anal sphincter goes some considerable distance towards allaying his

anxieties.

He feels his breath tighten, his erection fill almost to the point of pain, and it is an effort to hold himself still, to keep from fisting a hand around himself and easing some of the unbearable arousal that spikes a little higher with every tentative advance into his body. Jim's hand is trembling; Spock can feel it inside him and out, and his breath is labored, uneven. A warm Human erection nudges at the back of Spock's thigh, as hard as Spock's own, and he understands that he is not the only one struggling to maintain his composure. Jim's hand pulls back, almost completely free of Spock's anus, and he hears himself make a small noise of frustration at the comparative loss of contact, but it's lost as Jim presses forward once more with at least one extra finger. It's more than they've tried to date, and Jim is gentle, careful, as he slides his way inside Spock, who closes his eyes, centers, adjusts.

"All right?" says Jim, and Spock nods tightly. He is experiencing some difficulty in articulating a more coherent response. That that the addition of an extra digit could have made such a disproportionate difference to the sensation seems improbable, but empirical evidence does not lie.

Jim's hand hesitates; stills. "You're sure?" he says, and there's a note of uncertainty to his tone that Spock, belatedly, recognizes as a response to his failure to verbalize his assent.

"I am," he says carefully, and there is only the faintest hint, he thinks, of abandoned debauchery to his voice. "Please proceed."

A momentary pause, and Spock thinks that Jim will press the matter, but, though he hears a sharp intake of breath, it is not followed by words, but, rather, the resumption of activity. Spock estimates that something in the region of seventy percent of his conscious thought is currently focused on the activity within his anal cavity, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to persuade his prostate to ignore—or at least repress—the clamor of overstimulated nerve impulses; orgasm, he suspects, is approaching at an unreasonable pace, with or without manual stimulation of his external genitalia. He was correct to speculate on the efficacy of this approach.

"Jim," he says, and he is alarmed to note the extent of deterioration to his diction in such a comparatively short period of time. "Jim... I believe...."

Three fingers, maddeningly, halt their activity. "Too much...?" says Jim quickly, though, thankfully, he makes no immediate move to retract them.

"On the contrary," says Spock, who would be appalled, under any other circumstances, at the raggedness of his voice. "I believe a more... expeditious approach would be wise."

A beat. Then: “Really?” says Jim.

Spock resists the urge to clear his throat in a meaningful manner, at least partially because he’s not sure what the effect will be on his groin. “Indeed,” he says.

The fingers inside him flex lazily, almost experimentally, scissoring against the sensitive walls of his anal passage. An inchoate noise erupts from Spock’s throat.

“All right,” says Jim. His voice is unsteady. “Far be it from me to question your superior....” A wet, oleaginous sound, and, by the way Jim’s words disappear into a momentary groan, Spock guesses that he’s slicking his erection from the pot of coconut oil. “...Wisdom,” he finishes, but weakly, and his fingers retract.

Vacancy. Silence and stillness. And then Spock feels the blunt head of Jim’s penis nudging up against the entrance to his body, and braces himself to receive it.

There is a moment of pressure; more than he is expecting. His body, which accepted Jim’s fingers without hesitation, resists the intrusion of his cock. Spock was prepared for this, but the extent of the discomfort is surprising; his hands, buried in the soft down of the comforter, contract, gripping fistfuls of cotton, and he closes his eyes, fortifies his controls, focuses on relaxing his muscles as best he can. Jim pushes forward, and Spock feels his body opening around him, slowly, hesitantly, little by little. And then, abruptly, there is a bright, red-white flash of pain that catches his breath in his throat—a sudden flare, gone before it’s fully registered—and a sensation of fullness, of distension, of being filled. Of connection.

Jim makes a sound that’s halfway between a moan and a grunt, and stills, half-buried, his hands on Spock’s hips. There’s a fine tremor in his grip that speaks of compulsion tightly leashed, and Spock suspects that neither of them has much stamina left in reserve. He finds himself unable to calculate the depth to which Jim has penetrated, though he knows it cannot be far, and, experimentally, he pushes backwards, feeling Jim slip a little further inside.

“Spock...” hisses Jim—a breath, a sigh—and then he’s moving again, propelled by neither grace nor caution, but, rather, a need that is impossible to disguise. He is not yet fully sheathed within Spock, but he pulls back now, inching free by tiny increments, almost enough to drag a noise of protest from Spock, before he presses forward again, harder and further, angled directly towards Spock’s prostate in a manner that makes Spock’s vision flash white, his brain hollow out, his arms lose their tension. He knows, from his afternoon’s study, that he must not orgasm first, and he is accustomed, even at the height of carnal pleasure, to retaining a modicum of control over his body’s responses; he had expected to better dictate the pace of his own arousal, but he cannot so

much as manage to maintain his position on the bed right now. His face is full of pillow; his spine is so loose that he is scarcely able to thrust backwards to meet Jim's motion, and neither he nor Jim has yet laid a hand on Spock's own erection, yet he is, unquestionably, moments away from climax. Spock bites down on the rising tide of pleasure as best he can as Jim's rhythm increases, loses its coordination, becomes a desperate hammering in and out of Spock's body. And then there is a sound from behind him, a kind of strangled cry, and Spock feels Jim stiffen, his grip on Spock's pelvic bones contract, and it's all the permission he needs. He's holding on by the thinnest of threads as it is; his controls are in fragments, and he is certain he could count the moments left to him in seconds, no more. His orgasm is ruinous, obliterating; it strips him of conscious thought, and it continues for many, many moments.

Vaguely, he is aware of Jim's faltering, uncoordinated movement behind him as he empties himself inside Spock, but it's lost, for the most part, in the noise and chaos of his own climax. He is face down in Jim's pillow, the scent of Jim filling his nose, his mouth, the sound of Jim's name, muttered through clenched teeth, muffled by goose down and cotton. Hot streaks of ejaculate stripe his belly and, though he realises, abruptly, that it's the comforter itself that they're ruining this time, when they've an early start in the morning and little enough time to launder another load of semen-soaked fabric, it is impossible to care just now. Jim's motion is slowing, tightening; Spock can feel him leaning forward as his movements lose any measure of fluidity and become, instead, involuntary jerks and spasms, and chest is chilled and damp with sweat where it folds against Spock's back. Spock hasn't strength enough left to support both their weight, and his knees buckle, dropping them both gently, so that Spock is prone against the mattress and Jim is prone against Spock. Jim makes no move to withdraw, and, despite the growing discomfort as his orgasm segues into residual pleasure and aftershocks, Spock makes no move to dislodge him.

They lie like this for a long moment, sprawled together. Spock's arms fan out on the pillows; Jim's hand traces a lazy, unsteady line along his bicep, and both of them struggle for breath.

Presently, Jim says, somewhat hoarsely, "Well. I'd call that a success, but I'm hardly impartial. Would you agree?"

"I would," says Spock. His speech continues to be muffled by layers of cushioned cloth and the weight of a grown Human body constricting the expansion of his lungs, but he lacks the energy or inclination to resolve either matter. At his shoulder blade, a quiet laugh gusts warm breath across his skin, and Jim presses a kiss into the tendon at his neck.

"Good," he says. The word is partially lost in a yawn. "It certainly seemed that way, but I'd hate to make assumptions."

It would, Spock thinks, be extremely difficult to mistake the nature of the contact-free orgasm currently stiffening the sheets below him, but Jim is, as ever, solicitous. His hand is gentle as it reaches down to prise Spock's buttocks apart in order to facilitate his withdrawal; it is careful as it

strokes the affronted circle of Spock's sphincter; it is tender as it pulls Spock towards him in his sideways roll onto the mattress. Spock allows himself to be drawn into the circle of Jim's arms, covers Jim's hands with his own, feels the skin beneath his fingers slick with oil and fluids. Jim is warm but the room is cool, and Spock is disconcertingly aware that he is leaking semen from an orifice that has never previously leaked any such substance; they will have to get up in a moment, make their way to the bathroom for their third shower of the day, find another comforter to keep the chill out of their bed while they sleep, but these things can wait. For now, it is entirely possible that they are both going to pass out with neither preamble nor warning, and sleep until the cold wakes them, and this, he thinks, is entirely acceptable. It might as well be. There's not much he can do about it either way.

"You know," says Jim at his shoulder, chin nestled into the hollow behind Spock's collarbone, and his voice is thick with sleep, "if you're feeling adventurous, there are one or two variations on that theme that we could try. In due course."

Spock is inclined to agree. His search parameters this afternoon were thorough.

"I will be glad to facilitate any further experimentation in this matter," he says.

Soft laughter, half-asleep. "You haven't heard what I'm proposing yet."

This is unquestionably true, but Spock does not believe, right now, that there could be any modification to the act just consummated that he would be disinclined to attempt. "I will await your further input," he says.

"Have I mentioned," says Jim, "that I love your scientific mind?" A wide yawn shifts his jaw against Spock's. "So open to the unexplored. It's... beguiling."

Something unseen, something long-buried, shifts in the depths of Spock's unconscious thoughts in a manner that he cannot name and cannot quite describe. His hands tighten on Jim's.

"Indeed?" he says, and he is neither so soporific nor so obtuse that he cannot recognize that, as responses go, this is woefully inadequate, but his throat does not seem to be fully under his control at present. *Indeed* is the best that he can manage.

"Indeed," says Jim, with a warmth that speaks of deep amusement and, perhaps, deeper understanding.

Eventually, Spock thinks, he will need to devote some considerable period of meditation towards absorbing and assimilating the fact that this man, this remarkable man, this man whose regard Spock has spent the best part of eight years abjuring, not only knows Spock as well as any sentient creature alive or dead; not only accepts, unequivocally, the sum of all his parts; but, in the light of this knowledge and acceptance, chooses Spock over the many, many others who would stand at his side. It will, he suspects, be no small undertaking.

“And I look forward,” adds Jim, “to exploiting this to its full potential. However,” he says, and, though Spock can’t see it, he can *hear* the grin playing at the corners of his mouth, “it strikes me that your initial hypothesis is missing one very important consideration.”

Spock blinks. He thought they’d covered this already. His initial hypothesis was missing several very important considerations; it is, essentially, how he ended up at Gol.

“It was my understanding,” he says slowly; he is absolutely going to have to sleep soon, “that the efforts of the past few days have been directed towards correcting this oversight.”

A breath of warm laughter ghosts across his chest. “True,” Jim concedes. “But I’m thinking of something a little more... uh... specialized. The omission of which I’m not sure you could have inferred.”

“Indeed?” says Spock again, though he’s aware it’s liable to open him up to a fresh round of gentle provocation.

But his only answer is silence and a deep, measured breath at his ear. Jim is asleep. Either that or he’s avoiding the question, but, on reflection, Spock thinks, the net result is the same. He knows that tone: when Jim’s temperament tends towards the enigmatic, there is no surer recourse than patience and a firm resolve, because he will not answer until he’s ready. And, in any case, circumstances are scarcely conducive to pursuing the matter, even without the loss of his conversational partner to post-coital unconsciousness. Fatigue is like liquid lead in his veins, and Spock himself is asleep before the thought has finished forming.

Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's dark outside when Kirk opens his eyes, but a quick review of his chronometer—both the one inside his head and the one blinking in the shadows of the nightstand—tells him that he has not slept late; it's simply that the sun is loath to make its way over the eastern peaks, this early in the year. Beside him, Spock sleeps the ordered, logical sleep of an ordered, logical mind—one hand tucked neatly below his chin, the other pillowing his left ear, sheets drawn up and over his shoulders and falling neatly around his motionless body—and only the regular rise and fall of his chest, the faint flush of cold to his cheeks, and a milky-white line of dried saliva trailing from the corner of his mouth, gives any sign that Kirk shares his bed with another living being. He props himself up on one arm and indulges an urge to just watch, silently, for a moment, as the usual rush of warmth slams into his chest, tightening his throat and hammering at his ribs, because, two days and three mornings later, it still doesn't get any easier to believe that he's actually here. He wonders if it ever will.

They need to get away early if they're going to make the mid-morning briefings, but he can afford to let Spock sleep a little longer yet. And, besides, there'll be time enough to fall back into the old ways: the casual competition to save each other's lives the hardest, the protocol, and the exceptions to the protocol. For now, for the next two hours at least, they don't have to be anything other than lovers who've waited entirely too long, and that means that it's still all right for Kirk to slip quietly out of bed, throw on a robe, and pad down chilled stairs to set the synthesizer to brewing a pot of Earl Grey the way he knows Spock likes it.

Idaho has been a moment out of time; an intermezzo; a prelude to the next act of a narrative of years. He knows this, he thinks, as he carries a steaming cup of coffee to the oriel and watches the sunrise frost the treeline in dazzling ambers while Spock's tea brews. Tomorrow, they'll beam back aboard their ship and let their real lives start in earnest: no different, in many ways, to the lives they knew before, but for the fact that the thing that has always been there, that's burned between them since the hour the transporter beam released Kirk onto the deck of his new command, can now be acknowledged, spoken aloud, permitted to grow. And Idaho will be consigned to memory: a faded photograph caught between the leaves of an old book; something to return to, in years to come, but slipping a little further into history with every passing day.

He's not sorry, not precisely. He's going home again. He's going back to the only place that has ever felt fully real to James Kirk, and he's going there with the man he loves. A fragment of memory hovers at the edge of recall—something Edith said, once upon a time, back in the days when Kirk was still trying to convince himself that friendship would suffice; that friendship was all he felt: *you belong at his side, as if you've always been there and always will*. She was talking to Spock, but, Kirk thinks, she could have meant either of them. He's going home again, but the truth is, he's already there.

Because home is upstairs in his bed, sleeping the logical, ordered sleep of a logical, ordered mind. Home, tonight, will be his billet in San Francisco, and tomorrow it will be on a thin styrofoam mattress built from cost-saving measures and the bitter tears of frustrated designers, while the stars streak Warp 6 past his window. Home is not a place, it's a person. It always was.

He drains his mug, and makes his way back upstairs with a cup and a steaming teapot, to be there when Spock wakes.

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Travel time to Starfleet Headquarters, the navcom informs them in tones of abject apology, will be two hours and seven minutes, due to a storm front rolling in from the north that's likely to bring strong side-winds and the sort of weather they'll have to go around. It's longer than the hundred-some minutes that Kirk was expecting, but, pressed back into clean, crisp command whites, and with a Vulcan First at his side in a form-fitting uniform that does unspeakable things to Kirk's libido, he's slipped back into Starfleet mode without conscious thought, and their departure time will, blizzard conditions notwithstanding, return them to San Francisco with at least half an hour to spare before he's expected in Nogura's office. He stows their cases in the trunk of Spock's rental car, locks the front door, and crosses the few short steps to the porch railings, where Spock is standing Vulcan-straight, hands folded behind his back, looking out over the snow.

Kirk hesitates for only a moment before slipping his arms lightly around his lover's waist, folding the lines of their bodies together and tucking his chin over Spock's shoulder to wait and watch with him a moment. The uniforms change things, no doubt about it, but they are, as yet, unobserved. There will be many moments like this. They'll have to learn to use them.

"We'll come back again," he says after a moment, breath curling with Spock's on the chilled air. "In the summer, perhaps. I promised you the Rockies, after all."

Spock's hands unfurl from their clasp at the small of his back, circle around his body to cover Jim's where they link at his stomach.

"I will be glad to accompany you on a return visit, when circumstances permit," he says. His fingers are cold where they lace through Kirk's, and his soft sigh mists the air. "But I do not believe that the mountains, by summer, could be more striking than they are this morning."

The sun is low in the sky, spilling pale yellow-white sunshine across the western slopes that rise around them; the sky is ice-blue and flawless; the valley is alive with high, clear birdsong stitched, like the threads of a fine tapestry, across a blanket of purest silence. This, Kirk realizes, is how

he'll remember these days: this moment, stretched into hours, tucked around the lovemaking and the quiet conversation and the ease. Spock is right. It doesn't matter, really, if they return a hundred times: these hills will never be more lovely than they are right now.

He presses a kiss into the corner of Spock's jaw, feeling the pulse skip restlessly just below the skin. "Come on," says Kirk. "We've got a flight to catch."

And they watch, together—as he knows they will—the house and the snow and the hillside dropping away beneath them; the smooth slide of the peaks towards sea-level; the thinning of the blanket of white that lines the ground as the steel and asphalt of Boise begins to claim the landscape. They sit together on the seat, hands joined in the lightest of touches, and Spock is silent as the car slices through the miles of empty air, fingers linked through Kirk's, face turned towards the window. Kirk leaves him to his reverie as they pass south into Nevada, skirting the western edge of the Santa Rosa range, and it's Spock himself who breaks the hush, turning back into the car with that look on his face, the one he gets when he's lost in the abstract.

"It is," he says slowly, "illogical that the return to San Francisco, which is of similar duration and which follows a broadly similar route, should appear to pass so much more quickly than the outward journey."

Kirk nods. His own thoughts are not a million miles removed from this particular line of reflection. "True," he says. "But, then again, if perception were always strictly logical, we'd have no need for science."

He's expecting an eyebrow arch, but he gets none. Instead, there's a kind of softening to Spock's eyes, a glow that few enough but Kirk would recognize as a smile.

"I am attempting," says the man he loves, "to devise a mathematical model to describe the anomaly."

And Kirk says nothing to that, because there's nothing, really, to say, and, even if there were, he's not sure he has the words to do it justice. So, instead, he just smiles and grips Spock's hand a little tighter, and wonders if this thing he feels will ever cease to take his breath away.

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The skies above San Francisco are overcast as the car pulls in to the Presidio, the unquiet waves of

the Bay spreading out below them in shades of teal and smoke, and, if it weren't for the whisper of spring on the air, the toothlessness of the breeze and the hint of sunlight peering through the cloud cover in bright shards of yellow that scatter the ground, it would be possible, Kirk thinks, to believe that he'd never left. That his office is expecting him, seventeen stories above them in the tritanium-blue tower, with fleet deployment orders to review and diplomats to pacify; that Lori is waiting at for him at his Yeoman's desk, where she knows he can't avoid her, ready to flash that sunshine smile as she sidesteps his questions with the grace and ease of a dancer. It's so sharp, so present, that Kirk feels his shoulders contract as the gray veil threatens to descend, and, at the edge of his vision, he sees Spock turn his head, eyebrow raised, distraction scented in the air.

And that's all it takes to shatter the image into fragments and send it twisting on the wind. Spock is at his side, hands folded neatly at his back; sharp angles of his pelvis and collarbone too prominent through the unforgiving fabric of his uniform; eyes a little older; face a map of the years they've spent apart. But he's here, beside him, and they're ready to go home. Kirk sucks in a breath, feels the world reorient. Find its center.

"I'm not sure how long this will take," he says, glancing sideways so that Spock can see his eyes; see that the darkness has passed. "A few hours, at least, I'm sure. There's no point in you waiting around--they'll call you when they're ready to talk to us together, no doubt."

"No doubt," says Spock mildly. "I will retire to my lodgings and await further instruction from the Fleet Admiral's office."

Of course he has secured a temporary billet in San Francisco. He would have arrived from Vulcan with no reason to think that it wouldn't be needed, but still. It's something of an abrupt return to reality, temporarily suspended these past few days, and it is entirely unwelcome.

"Good idea," says Kirk, who suspects he doesn't come close to looking like he means it. "But... tonight...?"

He's not sure how to finish the sentence. They are, after all, no longer sequestered away in a mountain cabin far beyond the reach of prying eyes and ears, but Spock, he thinks, will catch his meaning.

He's not disappointed. "Tonight," says Spock, in tones that, in another man, might pass for rich amusement, "should I fail to return to a billet in which I have not yet passed a single night's rest, I expect that my absence will go unremarked."

"I... see," says Kirk. He does not grin from ear to ear. He is, as ever, discreet. "In that case,

Commander, I'll leave you to your final pre-mission arrangements. Keep your communicator on, won't you?"

"Yes, sir," says Spock, and there is nothing about his manner that is other than scrupulously correct. Only someone with intimate knowledge of the complex tapestry of mood and meaning that plays out endlessly behind his eyes would recognize the humor that layers his words with all kinds of nuanced and interesting secondary meaning. Some day, Kirk thinks, he's going to have to put some considerable time and effort into processing and coming to grips with the fact that, of all the sentient beings the galaxy across who've tried to find the man behind the Discipline, it is James Kirk to whom Spock has chosen to show this quiet, secret self that no one else sees.

It will, he suspects, be quite the undertaking.

"Very good, Mr. Spock," he says, and, because it's allowed right now, because nobody could suspect or fault him for it, he lets a wide and jubilant smile spread across his face, and raises a *ta'al* as he turns towards the Phoenix Building.

The world has not stopped turning while they've been buried in the Idaho hills, and 'Fleet HQ, it seems, has yet to catch its breath from the crisis just past. He could have guessed as much, Kirk thinks, from the excitable tone of some of the past week's communiques, and he experiences a moment of mild anxiety as he considers, properly, and for the first time, the look of his abrupt disappearance only hours after his return to Earth. The offices of the Fleet Admiral's staff have the quality of a van de Graaf generator in the moments before a major static discharge, and Chavez, who catches Kirk's eye as he enters the main lobby, in the second before he's able to gather himself to drop his gaze, looks like he hasn't seen the inside of his bedroom in several days.

"Admiral!" he says, with a tight-lipped grimace that might, half a week and thirty-six hours of sleep ago, have passed for a jovial smile. "Admiral Kirk! Welcome back to San Francisco, sir."

Chavez is not the world's most soft-spoken or retiring man at the best of times, but, sleep-deprived to the point of possible psychosis, he might as well have a bullhorn surgically grafted to his vocal chords. Worse, this is an audience still primed for the mention of Kirk's name, and the cubicle farm reacts like foraging meerkats to an unexpected rustle from the brushwood. There are something in the region of fifty officers in the office, ranked Lieutenant Commander and up, and, as one, they turn to Chavez and then in the direction of his line of sight, and immediately break into applause.

Kirk smiles as genially as he can and resists the urge to duck his head and make a break for the command corridor at the far end of the suite. Chavez is leading the ovation, clapping hands raised theatrically above his head as he falls in alongside Kirk en route through the room, and Kirk finds himself abruptly and unexpectedly glad that Spock is not here to witness this. It's not as though he'd *say* anything, but he'd get that look in his eye, the one that's unquestionably mordant delight, and

that would be that for the last vestiges of Kirk's dignity, already under strain and, quite frankly, vulnerable to the lightest of pressures.

The worst of it is, Chavez knows it's ridiculous--it's in the knowing glance he casts towards Kirk as they pause by the exit that leads them out of OpTacs' public face and into the real halls of influence--but admitting as much would open a chink in the brightly polished armor of Fleet PR, and give Kirk the kind of wiggle-room he can parlay into an excuse to avoid the five thousand press events he's no doubt expected to attend between now and tomorrow morning's departure. Lori couldn't stand the man, he recalls suddenly, and he remembers wondering at the time if her antipathy didn't have something to do with the fact that Chavez's job relies, just as much as hers, on the ability to read the people around him like an X-ray film—just directed towards less lofty, high-minded ideals.

Stern is talking in low tones into her communicator as they arrive at Nogura's office, but she breaks away from her conversation, with neither apology nor explanation to her conversational partner, to greet them with her habitual unsmiling courtesy.

"He's waiting for you inside, Admiral Kirk," she says briskly. Exuberance would not be Stern's style under any circumstances yet encountered in 'Fleet history, but Kirk is grateful, nevertheless, for her restraint. "Admiral Chavez, if you could take a seat over here, the Fleet Admiral will call for you when he's ready."

The briefest flicker of consternation in Chavez's confident smile tells Kirk that this development is not consistent with the admiral's expectations, but he covers it easily enough. "Sure," he says amiably, and offers a corporate laugh. "Just so long as Admiral Kirk doesn't go giving any interviews to the holos in the meantime."

Kirk smiles, offers the expected genial chuckle, and resists the urge to count the hours, minutes and seconds left until he can warp his ship right the hell out of the circus and into the relative sanity of deep space. It's more, he thinks, as the door to the Fleet Admiral's office slides open, than he wants to know.

Nogura is sitting at his desk, eyes focused on a PADD, but he looks up as Kirk steps inside, face breaking into a smile that, if it's not genuine, is a damned good imitation of what genuine ought to look like. If the past ten days have been difficult for him, there's no sign of it in his face. Kirk knows his CO better than to think that he would ever, in a crisis, consider devolving control of his organization into the hands of a subordinate for longer than the minimal, medically mandated rest-break that he's required, by Fleet constitution, to honor, but his eyes are bright, his lined skin clear, and no hint of fatigue stoops his shoulders as he gets up to greet Kirk with a warm handshake and a hearty slap on the back.

"Jim," he says amiably. "Good to have you back. How was Idaho?"

"Cold," says Kirk, as he lets himself be led to the circle of armchairs, where coffee and pastries await. "But... refreshing. I believe it was exactly what I needed, sir."

"Good," says Nogura, lowering himself into his usual seat and gesturing to Kirk to do the same. "Good, that's good. And now you're back and ready to take charge of the *Enterprise* again. That's wonderful. You've seen the reports from Engineering?"

"I have," says Kirk. "Commander Scott is extremely thorough. If he says she's ready to head back out, then she's ready."

"More than ready, I hear," says Nogura. "It's quite some time since I've had hands-on control of a starship, but, if memory serves, this fleet has never seen specifications quite so advanced as the refinements to the *Enterprise's* operating capacity. She's quite a bird, Jim."

Kirk sits back in his seat, lets a commander's smile play easily across his face. Heihachiro Nogura has never made polite conversation in his life, and he doesn't trade in banalities. He's leading to something; the trick is to keep pace with him as he gets there.

"Yes, she is," he says. "And she has quite the crew to man her. All we need now is a mission brief, sir."

"Indeed you do." Nogura cannot be rushed. He cannot be cajoled. And there is no point in trying to outmatch him: victory, in a verbal battle with Starfleet's CIC, is measured in how egregiously or otherwise one loses. He leans forward now, helping himself to a coffee from the steam-curling urn, and his movements are slow, exaggerated: the movements of an elderly man. Kirk doesn't believe it for a moment, but he appreciates the effort.

Nogura sits back, saucer in hand, cup cradled to his chest. "Would it surprise you," he says slowly, "to learn that we've had this particular mission in mind for you for several months now, Jim?"

It absolutely would surprise Kirk, whose work with Fleet Ops, these past two years, has involved nothing in the way of starship command. "I guess that would depend on the mission, sir," he says, and Nogura smiles.

"Yes," he says, though there's no way he's mistaken Kirk's answer for anything other than deflection. "I guess it would. Computer," he tells the open air, and a screen descends from the ceiling to cover the wall to his left. "Display starmap T-384 Sigma 14G."

The screen sparks into life, but Kirk's brow is already reaching for his hairline even as it's buffering, clarifying, resolving into scattershot circles of light on black. He doesn't make a habit of memorizing starmap designations--he has a Vulcan for that, after all--but he sure as hell knows that one. He doesn't need a legend to know what he's looking at.

"Ilion," he says, and he has to work hard to keep his voice steady.

Nogura nods. "Ilion," he says.

Kirk swallows; centers himself. "The distress call...?"

"Was not, in fact, a distress call." Nogura smiles placidly. "As I believe Admiral Ciana attempted to point out to you, on several occasions."

Kirk feels his throat tighten at the mention of Lori's name; forces himself to set it aside, to focus, to run through the content of their final conversations. *That signal is poorly aimed—if it's aimed at us at all—and it's erratic*, she tells him from across a gap of weeks. *There's no reason to think that's what it is*. And he'd felt his temper fraying, the way it often did when she tried to tell him just a little bit and nothing more, and she probably rolled her eyes and said something sarcastic, and let him simmer for a bit before she flashed her golden smile and found the words to pull him back from that ever-present precipice, the place where he went, three times a day, to do his best to end his career. He'd known, known in his gut, that the signal was another attempt to call for help, to force Starfleet's hand and oblige them to come in and end the war they'd accidentally started, but she'd shaken her head, soothed him with vagaries and fragments of the truth, promised an update that never came.

"The thinking is," says Nogura now, as though Kirk's silence indicates nothing more substantive than the natural progression of their discourse, "that we have an opportunity in you, Jim. This organization has never before, in its 150-year history, granted command of a starship to an officer above the rank of commodore. Giving you the *Enterprise* affords us the possibility of expanding our horizons somewhat, but we have to be careful. We have to be conscious of what we're doing and make sure that we're using our resources appropriately. A voyage of exploration and discovery is all very well, and I've never had cause to regret the decision-making process that put you in charge of your former mission, Jim, but you're an admiral now--and that rank carries with it certain... connotations. Connotations that we can use."

"Connotations," says Kirk, whose thought processes have not yet moved past the Ilionian signal.

"It was not a distress call," says Nogura calmly. "Not this time." A beat. "This time, it was handshake."

Kirk blinks. Stunned silence is clearly not an option, but he's got nothing, and, in the absence of alternatives, his mouth says the first thing that comes to mind: "The Klingons...?"

"Not the Klingons," says Nogura, "no. The call, when we were able to trace it, turned out to be a preliminary greeting issued by the newly instituted Grand High Office of the Ilion Space Command." A pause for effect. Let nobody say the commander of Starfleet lacks a keen sense of dramatic timing. "They took back their world, Jim, on their own and without our help. And now they want our assurances that we're never going to put them in that position again."

Kirk steeples his hands, drops his gaze to his knees. *There's no reason to think it's a distress call*, Lori had said, but he'd been so determined, so convinced that he was right. He wonders how much she knew when she came to see him in his office. How much she would have told him when she had the chance.

"The last thing we heard before Ilion went dark," he says, and tries not to think too hard about what else was going on that day, "was that the main thrust of the resistance had been completely destroyed. How certain are we that this isn't a maneuver by the occupying forces? The Klingons have always been less invested than the Federation in the spirit of the Treaty."

Nogura's smile is serene. "Were we not 100% certain of that fact," he says, "we would not be moving on this at all. We had to wait until we had all our cards lined up, Jim. We made the wrong play last time. I have no intention of allowing that to happen again."

All told, Kirk had approximately five hours' sleep last night; maybe the same again the night before. He's not unaccustomed to sustained periods of activity at the expense of proper rest, but, in moments of heightened threat, the hormone flooding his system has tended to be adrenalin, and that, it seems, makes more difference than he might have thought. He feels like his synapses are firing one beat behind the rest of the world, and that makes them at least three beats behind the man across the coffee table from him.

Carefully, he says, "Several months, you said."

"Hmm?" says Nogura, all wide-eyed innocence. He sips from his cup.

"You've had me in mind for this mission," says Kirk, "for several months, sir. That puts the idea in your head long before I asked for the *Enterprise*, in any capacity."

The smile deepens, changes quality. "There are men," says Nogura, "whose extraordinary gifts can act as both a blessing and a curse, Jim. Wouldn't you agree?"

"You were always going to put me back in the air." Kirk's voice is flat, even. He's pleased with that. There is not so much of a trace of accusation to his words. "That was always the plan, sir, wasn't it?"

But Nogura shakes his head. "When you returned to Earth at the end of your mission," he says, "I would have been a fool to lose you to deep space again, Jim. I know you've always understood that, no matter what your personal preference might have been. I needed your particular brand of leadership and charisma here, at home, where it could do the most good. And I stand by that decision--it was the correct decision. That's been your curse, Jim: you were always too damn good at what you do, and the proper exercise of your talents wasn't always consonant with your own desires. And, let me tell you, it would have taken a hell of a lot to persuade me to let you disappear back into the unknown. A figurehead, I can use; hell, I can even use a martyr, though believe me when I say that's not a story that I ever hope to have to spin to the press. But a shadow? Yesterday's news? A face that nobody sees for months at a time? Whatever good that might do for the advancement of Federation knowledge, Jim, you've been entirely too valuable as a hero and an icon to let you vanish in a puff of smoke. Make no mistake, Admiral Kirk: this was not *always my plan*. This was *never* my plan, and it took some considerable persuasion to change my mind."

It's the *persuasion*. The *persuasion* is when he knows. He may be firing a beat behind, but Kirk knows who he married. The *persuasion* is when he finally understands.

"Lori," he says.

"Lori," says Nogura mildly. "She was a hell of an officer, Jim, but I don't need to tell you that. There are not many people in this world, and a hell of a lot fewer in this organization, who can make me rethink my strategy, but Admiral Ciana was one of them. When her team decoded the Ilion signal, yours was the first name out of her mouth, and she never changed her recommendation, even after I turned it down flat. She insisted that there was nobody else in Starfleet with the specialist knowledge of the Ilionian people necessary to make this assignment work, and she insisted that we could manage your probable demands for a return to deep-space command in a way that worked for the service."

Damn it, Jim—you play a better game than this, she'd said, and Kirk had thought she was just worried that she couldn't trust him to be discreet. "She advocated for my return to active command of a starship," he says.

"On the *Camden*," says Nogura. "As far as we knew, the *Enterprise* was Will Decker's for the foreseeable future, but she made the case that we could use a man of your skills and experience in the air, and that Ilion would be the testing ground to see how it could work. She was a *hell* of an officer, Jim. Don't prove her wrong now."

Kirk's thoughts are a mass of white noise and unsuspected connections falling into place, and it takes him a moment to corral them into something that makes sense. So, to buy himself the time he needs, he leans forward, pours himself a cup of coffee, sits back in his chair. He's neither naive nor arrogant enough to think that this is in any way about him: Lori was a good woman--one of the best he's known--but she was Starfleet before she was a friend, lover or wife. This isn't about what Kirk wants; it's about what's best for the organization, and he knows that. But she also knew what this meant to him. She knew what she was giving him back.

Slowly, he says, "You haven't told me what the mission entails. Sir."

"The mission," says Nogura, "will fall somewhere between diplomacy and negotiation. Ilion wants our assurances that we're not going to ruin their lives again; we want Ilion in the Federation. That hasn't changed. Now they're ready to talk to us, I need somebody in the room who can persuade them that the best possible way to keep the Klingons from their door is to be part of the Federal family and subject to the Treaty. I want you, in the first instance, to be that somebody, Jim."

"They've just got their planet back." Kirk sips from his coffee; figures it can't hurt his processing power. "And you want us to barrel in and start talking to them about mining rights?"

Nogura's smile thins a little. "If that were what I wanted, Jim, I wouldn't be asking you."

"No." It's not hubris; he knows it's not. Ilion is personal. There's probably not another commander in the fleet who can do this; Lori was right about that. "What's on the table, sir?"

"For Ilion?" The smile is back, along with a little, knowing light of victory behind the aged eyes. Nogura knows he's won, but, then again, the outcome was never really in any doubt. "Whatever you need to put there, Jim. You know these people best. For you?" And he sips from his cup, but his gaze never leaves Kirk's, and it's like cold steel. "Get this right, Jim, and you can write your own ticket. Within reason, of course."

Kirk feels an admiral's smile tighten the edges of his mouth. "Of course," he says.

"It's going to be the high-level stuff only," says his chief. "The things I don't intend to trust to those bull-headed idiots in the diplomatic corps. But you have a damned good crew behind you: you know their skills and you know how to use them. I'm only sorry it took Admiral Ciana to point it out to me—I must be getting old."

Heihachiro Nogura, Kirk is privately certain, will never knowingly allow himself to get old. If Lori were here, she'd be shifting in her seat right now and pursing her lips around the sort of grin that her CIC permitted from few enough of his officers, because, whatever he might say out loud, she hadn't *won* anything, not really, but she'd unquestionably failed to lose. In another world, Kirk thinks, he should have fallen in love with this woman.

"And if I get it wrong, sir?" he asks. "What happens then?"

"Now, Jim." Nogura drains his cup, and sets it back into its saucer with a decorous little *click*. "You know as well as I do that you won't get it wrong."

No. He won't. Kirk knows that, and Nogura knows that, and, once upon a time, Lori knew it too. Spock is right: she was a remarkable woman.

"Thank you, sir," he says quietly, and he hears the tightness in his voice, but it doesn't matter now. The lines have been drawn, the territories claimed, and there's no further need for pretense. "I won't let you down."

"I know you won't," says Nogura. "But it's not me you should be thanking."

"Perhaps not." Kirk purses his lips, drops his eyes. "But my other options are a little limited these days."

Nogura inclines his head. "That reminds me," he says. "I have something I need to give you, Jim."

It's less likely that he's forgotten than that he's been waiting for the right moment to bring it up, Kirk thinks, and the timing doesn't exactly bode well for his continued peace of mind. He drains

his cup and sets it carefully back down on the coffee table as Nogura gets to his feet and makes his way over to his desk, the far side of which, as far as Kirk knows, has never been available to any officer in the corps. A well-oiled drawer slides open with the minimum of fuss, and the admiral extracts from it a rectangular package, wrapped in brown paper, that Kirk recognizes immediately as the proportions of a sturdy, well-filled book. There are few enough people in the galaxy who'd have cause to make such a gift to James T Kirk, and Nogura himself, he thinks, is not among them.

He finds himself hoping it's from Bones, even as instinct informs him, cheerfully and without apology, that it really, really isn't.

"Admiral Ciana came by my office a few days ago," says Nogura as he makes his way back over to his chair, and Kirk, whose mind is still reeling, takes a moment to process the fact that both of Lori's parents held that rank before they retired, and both are still alive. "They don't want to see you, Jim, and nothing I could say or do would change their minds, but maybe give them a little time. It's still raw for them. But they found this in her study when they were closing up her apartment, and it was addressed to you. She obviously meant for you to have it."

Kirk takes the package without a word, fingers closing around a hidden spine where it's buried beneath a layer of paper. There is no way he can open it here, but he's certain that Nogura will understand. "Thank you, sir," he says after a moment, and makes no effort to strip the emotion from his tone. His name is scribbled on the front of the parcel in Lori's untidy script, now forever stilled; he couldn't keep his voice steady if he tried.

"The life given us by nature is short," says Nogura quietly, "but the memory of a well-spent life is eternal."

"Cicero," says Kirk automatically. He has never cared for Cicero.

Nogura nods. "I'm going to call Admiral Chavez in for a moment," he says. "Stern will fetch you some fresh coffee, and I'd like you to take some time to go over the mission brief on the PADD she's prepared for you. The three of us will talk again in half an hour, and then I'll have her page Commander Spock to the office. Captain Spock, I guess," he corrects himself, and smiles.

"Captain Spock," agrees Kirk, who likes the way that sounds. Much better, he supposes, than his lover ever will.

He gets to his feet; wonders vaguely if there's anything else to be said before he takes his leave. Nothing about this exchange feels like business as usual, but protocol is protocol. "Thank you, sir," he says, and stands to attention. "Permission to be dismissed."

"Permission granted," says Nogura, who has picked up a PADD and is scrolling absently through its contents. Every muscle in his body speaks of unfinished business carefully withheld, but he will, as ever, not be rushed, and the only thing to do is play along and wait for him to be ready. So it's no surprise, besides his commitment to prevarication, when he stills Kirk's motion, two steps from the door, with a brusque, "Oh—and, Jim?"

Kirk purses his lip, folds his hands at his back, turns back to the room. "Sir?"

"I've kept a lid on the rumors for now," says Nogura, without glancing up from his PADD, "but I'm going to need you to do better than that, if you're going to work with the man. Not everyone knows you as well as I do."

Kirk blinks. "Sir?" he says again, but coldly.

"You know what I mean." Nogura taps his screen; looks up from under hooded eyes. "Idaho wasn't sensible, Jim. You're a command team and two very public faces of this organization, and I can't afford to have it look like there's favoritism or preferential treatment happening on my flagship. So keep it under wraps, will you--at least until you're out of this system."

Kirk clears his throat, fixes his eyes on his boots. He can feel his hands trembling at the base of his spine with the effort it's taking to control his anger.

"I'm not aware," he says icily, "of any rumors, Admiral."

"No," says Nogura. "And I intend to keep it that way. Even Chavez hasn't caught wind of this, Jim, and, believe me, that's how you want it to stay. You're his direct superior, for heaven's sake. Just because I know you'd never compromise the chain of command doesn't mean I can sell that line to the holos if they get ahold of it. Don't put me in an impossible position, please."

The tips of Kirk's fingers are beginning to lose sensation. "What exactly are you forbidding, sir?" he asks.

"Nothing," says Nogura calmly. "I'm forbidding nothing, Jim. Deep space is a long way from here; that's why they call it deep space. It won't be the first time we've turned a blind eye to natural Human behavior and it won't be the last, but I'd rather not have to go live on holo and defend this organization's actions to the Federation if it looks like we've been keeping protocol violations out

of the public eye. It's the rumors I want to keep under control, Jim, not my officers--your personal life is your own. Provided it doesn't come back to bite me, that's all. Now--dismissed, Admiral. Please send in Chavez on your way out."

~*~

It's early evening when Kirk finally makes it back to his billet to pass his last night for the foreseeable future on his homeworld. The sun is sinking behind the headlands as the door slides open onto the chill shadows of his apartment, unopened package tucked beneath his arm, and he has no idea how long it will be before Spock finds his way over from his lodgings at the bottom of the hill; no idea if he's going to be tired or hungry or pissy; no idea if he'll want to shower or sleep or make love; no convention and no precedent for the situation, and no idea if the day felt as pointless or as leveling to Vulcan sensibilities as it did to Kirk's. He knew it would be long; he just forgot how long a Starfleet day could be.

His Yeoman has been packing for the best part of the week, and he trusts her, he guesses, after almost two years together, to know what can safely be left in storage for the next five years and what he's going to want when he's eight hundred billion kilometres from home. His sitting room is a tower of boxes stacked with geometric precision around the couch, all scrupulously labeled with that ruthless efficiency that made her indispensable to the smooth functioning of his life within four days of his arrival at Fleet Ops, and, he's pleased to note, his bourbon collection has made it into one of the cartons labeled "For Transit," and bundled by the doorway. Glasses are a little more problematic, but Spock, he thinks, will hardly choose to join him in a drink when he arrives; anything vaguely bowl-shaped will do, since it's not as though anyone's ever likely to know that Rear Admiral James T Kirk, on the night before he shipped out into the great unknown, sipped a fourteen-year-old malt from a souffle pot because his need outweighed his sense of shame. And so it is that, rifling through the box marked *Kitchen (Misc) / Fragile (Misc): Handle With Care*, he comes across the last, the very last, thing that he would ever choose to leave behind.

It's not as though Ramirez could possibly have known. She'd have seen a picture on a wall—an old clipper, framed in hardwood, with an inlaid brass plaque that bears the same name as the ship he's about to rejoin—and she'd have read nostalgia, perhaps a little bit of the obsession for which he has gained a reputation, and decided that it belonged to the life he was leaving behind. He can't fault her reasoning; he's just glad that he found it in time. Along with an amply proportioned brandy snifter that will hold three fingers of whisky just as efficiently as it's ever held a Cognac, so he'll count the expedition a success.

Kirk pours himself a generous measure from the first bottle that comes to hand, and carries it to the window with his parcel from Lori folded against his chest. His couch is stripped bare and unoccupied by boxes, but he rejects it in favor of sinking to the floor in front of the cool, shadowed glass, swallowing a gulp of Laphroaig and allowing himself no more than a moment's glance at the words on the front of the packet—a dead woman's final farewell—before he tears back the paper to reveal an elderly copy of Tacitus's *Germania*, bound in tooled leather and easily three hundred years old. They'd talked about it once, he remembers, back when their story was very young, and

he remembers her saying that she'd read it for the first time as a precocious child of eight or nine; that it had stirred her love for the Other; that it had been the first time she'd understood that her life would be the study and understanding of cultures beyond her own. And he'd remembered his bookish thirteen-year-old self happening across a copy in the Riverside library, freshly returned from Tarsus and looking for something, anything, to occupy his brittle mind, and feeling like, many years later, those days spent buried in the observations of an old explorer from days gone by were when he'd first begun to entertain the possibility of one day stepping back into the black vaults above.

Tacitus. Tacitus and the *Enterprise*. She always did read him far too well.

And he knows, because he knows Lori, that there will be an inscription on the frontispiece--it was the kind of casual vandalism of which she approved: fragments of lives preserved for generations to come, safe within the folds of another writer's words. Hers is not the only message passed from one hand to another: a woman called Adeline wishes Henry a very happy twenty-first birthday and hopes he will enjoy this as much as the *Agricola*, while a Geo. H. Maguire claims the volume for his own on August 19, 1946. But there, beneath the echoes of a long-vanished past, are the words his ex-wife wanted him to read, scrawled in black ink:

Audeat esse aliud atque statuere tuum archetypon.

Vivet vita tua, et ambulaveris sidereo tua.

~*~

Spock finds him there, unmoved, when he arrives three quarters of an hour later, overnight bag slung over one shoulder and a dress uniform, neatly pressed, folded into a garment bag that he carries over one arm. Kirk has drained his glass and made no effort to refill it, but he's allowed his spine to go slack, boneless, as he's rested his head against the window, and he can only imagine how it looks to the casual observer. He doesn't need to imagine, in fact: it's written all over Spock's face.

"Jim?" says his lover, uncertainty clouding his eyes, and this is when Kirk realizes that he's neglected to turn on the lights.

"Yes. Spock," he says, and he hears the fatigue in his voice, feels it in his bones as he struggles to his feet. "I'm sorry. Are you hungry? I think the synthesizer is still online...."

"I am well," says Spock, and the unspoken partner to that statement--the implicit question--hovers

in the air between them. Kirk could choose to just ignore it--it's what he'd like to do, really--but, he thinks, he's not the only person in the room who's had a hell of a day, and Spock does not have to be here. If they're going to do this, they need to do it right.

So he bends down, retrieves the book from the floor where he's left it, unread, and passes it to Spock, whose eyebrow only arches halfway before he manifestly thinks better of it and accepts it without a word.

"Nogura gave it to me today," says Kirk quietly, as his lover runs one elegant hand over the binding. "It's from Lori. She was planning to give it to me before she died."

"Admiral Ciana," says Spock, almost to himself, and, because this is what they do, because it's the sort of thing they've never needed to be told in words, he opens it to the frontispiece, scans the writing there, glances up at Kirk. "Latin, I believe," he says. "A language that, I regret, I do not read."

"Spock," says Kirk, and feels the first twitches of a smile playing at the edges of his lips. "You're fluent in seven spoken dialects, conversant in twelve more, and you have the basics of goodness knows how many dozen others. Your failure to learn a long-dead Terran language is hardly reprehensible. It's a fragment of poetry, translated from Terran Standard. It's the sort of thing that Lori would do."

"I... see," says Spock, who does not look as though he does. "And this poetry has particular meaning for you?"

The shadow of Kirk's failed marriage is like a presence in the room, darkening Spock's eyes and inflecting his words with an anxiety that Kirk only hears because he knows it's there. There's no competing with a ghost, he knows; Lori told him as much, once upon a time. Spock wasn't there; he doesn't know the way his memory spilled into the gaps in a threadbare love that was never going to endure; he doesn't know that he was the rock against which their marriage broke. He sees only sentences in a language he doesn't understand, and a woman inviolate whose image can never be tarnished now; a woman whose name has slipped into history and legend; a woman that James Kirk chose when Spock was not there to be sought. Kirk can't explain to him that Lori's final gift to them both was, in some ways, her compromise for the loss of the man that she could never replace; there are no words for something like this, and no way to make them understood. So he doesn't use words. He closes the space between them in two rapid steps, hooks one hand around the back of Spock's head and the other around his hip, and pulls him in for the kind of kiss that will do his talking for him.

This is it. This is who they are. This is home.

And, as the book falls to the floor as Spock's arms close around him, Kirk understands that, for tonight at least, he wants all of this man. The scent of spice loads the air as he shuffles Spock backwards in the shadows, towards the bedroom door, hands fumbling with the clasp of his uniform pants as they move, as he feels Spock's cock lengthening, hardening beneath the fabric. He wants all of him, caution be damned; he wants to know, to feel, that what was lost hasn't been lost in vain.

His nightstand has been emptied, of course, but there hasn't been a man in Kirk's bed for all the time he's lived here; his mother could have rifled through the contents of his bedside cabinet and come away untroubled by the experience. But there was time, on the way home from HQ, to make the kind of purchases that are unlikely to be readily available in deep space, and he's taken the precaution of stowing one small tube in his pants pocket, in preparation for the fact that his apartment is all out of coconut oil. Kirk pulls it free and tosses it onto his bed as Spock's fingers find the opening clasp at his hem, and Kirk buries his groan in Spock's mouth as an elegant hand closes on the length of his cock.

They tumble sideways, striking the mattress together without breaking their kiss, and Kirk kicks off his boots as he shucks his pants free of his legs and onto the floor. Spock is toeing at his own heels as Kirk rolls him onto his back and applies himself to the task of removing his lover's tunic, and Spock, who misses nothing, is already reaching for the lube where it has bounced to the edge of the bed. This is going to be quick and hard, exactly what Kirk needs right now, and he feels himself go boneless as cool, wet fingers wrap themselves around his cock, slicking him from base to tip in one smooth, polished movement.

Kirk tugs his tunic over his head and casts it carelessly into the shadows. The fastening of Spock's pants is hanging open, erection tenting the fabric, and Kirk pulls them down as far as he can without breaking contact with Spock's hand where it pumps his cock with practiced ease. Spock shuffles his legs all the way free of his trousers and Kirk presses in for a kiss, hand snaking down to grip Spock's cock and trail a messy line through the thick layer of lubricant. Spock groans, arching up and into the touch, and this is all the invitation Kirk needs.

Olive oil, he thinks, and grinds his cock down, hard, against Spock's.

He's half-expecting an instant flare of heat, but that's not what makes his breath catch in his throat. Spock makes a sound that's half alarm, half pure pleasure, and Kirk thinks he hears his name in there somewhere, but it's hard to be certain over the rush of blood in his ears. He reaches between them, clutches their cocks together, and this time, when he thrusts, he can feel the first tingle of protesting skin, but it's not painful; not even close. Rather, it's somewhere between the sensation of submersion beneath room-temperature water and an unexpected touch in the dark, and, though the heat is building, it's building gently, inexorably, blood rushing to the surface of his overstimulated skin. He's going to come, and come hard, if he carries on like this, and that's not what he wants—not yet—but it's not easy to stop; not with Spock's fingers gouging crescent moons in his buttocks,

not with Spock's groin rising up to meet him with each roll of Kirk's hips, not with his body and mind registering the wash of chemical arousal on his cock as the build to orgasm. In the end, it's Spock's superior willpower that saves them from a prematurely ruined bed and an untimely post-coital coma, rolling upwards and out from under Kirk, and pressing him into the mattress with a kiss that temporarily distracts him from the sudden lack of contact at his cock.

Not for long—the buzz from Spock's lubricant is good, but it's not *that* good—but long enough at least for Spock to rock back on his heels and scoot down the bed a little way so that his head is level with Kirk's groin. And, yes, Kirk *knows* that it's less to do with an overwhelming urge to perform fellatio on his over-excited lover and more to do with a sudden and pressing need to examine Kirk's dick for signs of potential injury; of course he *knows* this. It's just that the motivation behind the maneuver seems much, much less important than the fact that his cock is now in Spock's mouth and the man has, it seems, spent the past few days applying his considerable intellect to the task of learning exactly how to make James Kirk's eyes roll in his head and his mouth make sounds that no Human mouth ought to be able to make.

But Spock, brisk and efficient as ever, has taken stock of the situation; has judged, no doubt to the nearest pascal, just how much pressure Kirk's straining arousal can take before his body takes charge of matters and levels all his good intentions. His mouth contracts around the head of Kirk's cock and then retracts, lips swollen and glistening in a manner that Kirk cannot help but lean up and crush to his. Spock rolls them again, hooks a long leg up around Kirk's hip, and his meaning couldn't be clearer: he knows how close Kirk is to orgasm, he knows that, if they're going to do this, it has to be now. The tube of lubricant has worried its way almost to the edge of the bed, but they scramble for it together, and Kirk fumbles the lid as he presses Spock back into the pillows with a hungry, inelegant kiss. Their cocks brush again, and, sucked clean of its protective layer of silica gel, the burn is sharp enough to draw a hiss from between Kirk's teeth.

It ought to be a warning. It feels, instead, like a challenge.

Lubricant spills onto his right hand and he snakes his left in beneath him to work Spock's dick: a diversionary tactic designed to obfuscate the activities of his right as he slides two fingers inside himself. It's awkward, graceless, necessarily urgent: what he doesn't want is for Spock to work out what he's doing before he's ready to show him why it's what he wants, what he needs right now. His ass is tight, unyielding; his spine is aching with the effort of holding himself in place, unsupported, above Spock, but he works a third finger inside, scissors, thrusts, feels his body begin to respond. He has no idea if the coating of lube he's working into the walls of his anal passage will be enough to dull the heat to a comfortable, background blaze. Part of him hopes it won't.

Spock is breathing heavily now, hips canting in time with the motion of Kirk's hand, eyes closed, neck thrown back on the pillows. They're both ready. Kirk breaks their kiss as his fingers slide free of his ass, and he sits back on his heels, poised over Spock's groin. His left hand is still gripping Spock's dick, and he shuffles slightly, lining it up with the entrance to his body, holding it in place but moving no further. Spock's eyes crack open, and Kirk reads alarm there, uncertainty, perhaps a little disbelief. But not distaste. Not disgust.

Not refusal.

"Jim..." he says slowly, voice hoarse. He does not say *stop*.

"If this is not what you want," says Kirk. "If you don't want to do this, Spock, just say the word. Say the word and it will not happen." He swallows. Spock's lube is leaking copiously onto the tight ring of muscle at his anus, and, no, as it turns out, a coating of silica gel is not quite enough to keep the burn at bay. "But if your only objection is concern for my safety—if that's the only thing that's holding you back right now—then... I'm asking you to trust me. Do you trust me?"

Silence. Spock is motionless, but for the ragged rise and fall of his chest.

"Spock," says Kirk again: softly, almost a whisper. "Do you trust me?"

Spock's breath catches in his throat. A beat. And then he nods.

"Yes?" says Kirk.

"Yes," says Spock.

Kirk closes his eyes. Presses down.

It's years since the last time he's done this, but his body remembers. There's resistance at first, the usual muscular rebellion, and the flare of pain is so sharp, so bright, that his vision flashes white for a long moment and he hears himself suck in a harsh, ragged breath that has almost certainly seriously alarmed the man beneath him. Liquid heat floods his ass, an advancing line of fire that scrapes a trail into his body with the progress of Spock's dick, and he almost cries out; it's almost too much. But he needs this; he needs to feel himself filled and completed; he needs the connection, the sense that he's given as much as he has taken. He wants *all* of Spock.

Spock does not move while Kirk sheaths him inside his body. He does not move when, having taken as much as he can, Kirk braces himself against his knees and breathes for a moment. He does not move when Kirk takes his own wilting erection in his hand and pumps a little of his lagging arousal back into the slackening shaft. The burn is building to a crescendo but the pain is easing as

his skin adjusts—it's like heated silk, now, where before it was like red-hot sand—and he tries an experimental thrust. Lubricant bathes his asshole on the downward motion, but the sting is background noise now. And the head of Spock's dick just grazed his prostate.

He'd forgotten about the prostate.

He moves again, arching up, sliding back down, burying Spock a little deeper, and, this time, the groan that erupts from his throat is of a different quality entirely. Kirk can feel his cock filling again as the burn levels off—chili-pepper hot, but innervating now, like the third mouthful of the hottest dish on the menu—and, this time, Spock's hips flex on the downward thrust, meeting Kirk's motion with the smallest motion of his own. Kirk leans forward, takes his weight on his left arm, presses his mouth to Spock's as his lover's hand reaches up to twine with his around Kirk's cock. Instinct is taking over now, for both of them: for every backwards thrust of Kirk's, Spock thrusts upwards, and there's a frantic edge to his movements now that indicates the rapid approach of orgasm. Kirk understands that very well. He's not far behind himself.

They come, in the end, almost together, Kirk lagging by no more than a second. He feels Spock shudder and jerk inside him, and then his own orgasm is leveling him and he's pumping thick streams of ejaculate onto the coarse, dark hair of Spock's chest and gripping the pillows on either side of Spock's head with force enough to turn his knuckles white. He thinks he yells Spock's name; he's certain he hears his name on Spock's lips, and this moment, this connection, this thing that he feels that will never cease to take his breath away.... It begins to lay the ghosts to rest.

Chapter End Notes

Lori's inscription is a translation of Wilferd Peterson's excellent advice, first brought to my attention by another brilliant woman who was taken too soon. Thanks to miloowen for checking the grammar—it's a long time since I studied Latin.

Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sleep doesn't come easily, this final night on Earth. In the end, it barely comes at all, but that's just fine with Kirk. There are other ways to pass the hours of darkness, and, as he wakes from a light doze to find the shadows just beginning to gray, Spock stretched out beneath him and sleeping the sleep of the carnally exhausted, he thinks that, if nothing else, he's said farewell in style to these long, hollow years on the planet of his birth.

Everything is ready. They're ready. It's time to go home.

He shifts slightly, unwilling, just yet, to trade the warmth and comfort of a bedful of recumbent Vulcan for the uncertain temperatures of the apartment at large. His gluteal muscles protest the movement, and a residual throbbing from his anal cavity retraces every step of every moment of the hours just past. He's going to have to put a lot of effort into walking normally today, Kirk thinks, and he grins into a nest of wiry, black chest hair. It's not as though Spock's stride is likely to be any less disjointed; they probably need to have an uncomfortable and extremely delicate conversation about a couple of things before they brave the glare of the world's press.

A glance at the chronometer tells him that he has time enough to close his eyes again, but he knows better than to think he's got any kind of a shot at meaningful repose now that his brain has decided it's morning, and, in any case, if he weren't capable of commanding his ship on the fumes of four nights of broken rest, he wouldn't have made it to the end of his first week on the *Enterprise*. There's a restlessness building in Kirk's bones—the lure of the possible—and it's too late now to soothe it back into stillness and silence. So, moving quietly, he peels back his share of the blankets, eases his shoulders free of Spock's encircling arm, and steps, naked, into the chilly darkness of his last Terran pre-dawn for years to come. Affronted flesh hums a memory of hours lost to lovemaking, and, Kirk thinks, he's going to stand on his bridge today, hands lightly grazing the bruises on his thighs, his hips, his arms as he goes about the business of running his ship, and remember every thrust, every grip, every bite.

He has no idea how he's going to make it through the day. The new uniforms are not exactly cut to hide the captain's erection. He wonders vaguely if they ought to have some more sex in the shower before they leave, just in case.

In the kitchen, Kirk dials up a pot of coffee and carries it to the darkened window to watch the first wash of morning frost the far reaches of the horizon. Lori's book still lies where it fell last night, and he picks it up, smooths down a corner that's been dogeared by incautious handling, and opens it to the frontispiece. Her voice is an echo in his ear; her shadow is at his shoulder, but she's slipping into memory now, like mist dissolving in sunlight. Kirk looks at the words she's left him,

familiar curling cursive in a language she loved to read, and then he closes the book, the snap of the cover shattering the silence, and carries it to the stack of boxes that line the side of the sitting room. He finds one marked *Personal - Assorted* and slips it inside, and feels something in his chest, something tight and long-buried, release at last.

Where would you go? he asks her, glass tilted into the light of the Casa Lavanda, tilted into the gulf of years. *If they gave you your ship—what's your course heading?*

I don't know, Jim, she says, and she smiles her sunlight smile. *You tell me. Where's good this time of year?*

He hopes she'll still be with him next time he makes planetfall. He hopes she finally found her ship.

An ancient instinct tells Kirk that he's watched, and he turns back over his shoulder to find Spock in the bedroom doorway, dark eyes hooded by shadow, face unreadable. He's slipped into Kirk's robe, which has the effect of reminding Kirk that he's naked as the day he was born—in more ways than one—and he says nothing as Kirk's gaze meets his, simply unfolds his hands from their clasp at the small of his back, and crosses the room, slowly, methodically, deliberately. Kirk lets him come, sips from his coffee and sets the cup down on top of the box at his side as Spock makes his way towards him and comes to a halt just inside Kirk's circle of personal space. His hair, Kirk notices, is disarrayed by sleep and sex, and something about his failure either to notice or correct this feels more intimate by far than anything they did last night.

Spock reaches for Kirk's hands, laces them with his, rests them between their bodies where their hips almost touch. Softly, he says, "We will honor her memory."

Kirk lets his fingers slide into place against Spock's, curves locking against curves, and thinks he can feel the faint trace of energy, of life, flowing just beneath the skin.

"I believe," he says quietly, "that she'd tell us we already have." And he pulls Spock's lips to his.

~*~

Afterwards, freshly showered and pressed into command whites, they breakfast together at the kitchen counter as the skies above the Marin Headlands pearlesce and the city below them slowly begins to come to life. They eat in silence, air scented by the perfumed steam curling from Spock's mug, and Kirk finds himself wondering if it's going to be possible, these next few months, to find

this kind of simple moment of quiet togetherness, away from the all-seeing eyes of a starship crew far from home. Living a shared life in low profile is going to take a little bit of negotiation, he thinks, and a whole lot of compromise, but this is the advantage of falling in love with a member of an insanely private species: the necessary adjustments are already made. There's probably something important in that for Kirk to take away from the experience, something about this whole thing never having anywhere to go but right where it's ended up, but he'll finish that thought some other time. For now, he's going to eat breakfast with his lover, and then they're going to work.

"That reminds me," he says aloud, and Spock's slowly arching eyebrow reminds him that, though Kirk is sleeping with a telepath, it's still necessary to verbalize the thoughts that inform the lead-up to any new conversation he might wish to start. He buries his grin in a sip of the last decent cup of coffee he's likely to drink for some time. "I've been thinking," he corrects himself, "that it might be sensible to arrive separately at the transporter room for beam-up."

Spock tilts his head, considering. "I believe your logic is sound," he says. "I concur."

Insanely private species, Kirk thinks, and buries a smile in a sip from his mug. It has its disadvantages, of course, but, once you get past those, there's a whole world of confusion, misunderstandings and offense that you get to live without.

"Good," he says. "It's just something Nogura mentioned yesterday—I'd prefer not to add any kind of fuel to the fire if we can."

To his left, there is a sudden and complete cessation of motion. Kirk glances sideways in time to see Spock's other eyebrow reach for his hairline, and realizes, abruptly, how that last sentence must have sounded.

"It's nothing really," he adds quickly. "You know how he is. He was concerned about the possibility of the press getting hold of the... ah... the nature of our trip to Idaho, and raising questions about the impartiality of my command."

"Your impartiality," says Spock, with that immutably obstinate loyalty that has the tendency to make Kirk's stomach flip over like a twelve-year-old boy in the throes of his first crush, "is beyond reproach."

Kirk grins. "Thank you, Mr. Spock," he says. "Though I'm not sure they'd accept your word on the matter, I'm afraid. In any case, he seems to think that there've been rumors that he's needed to quash, and I'd prefer that he didn't have any reason to micromanage our first mission. We're going to need room to maneuver if we're going to get it right."

"Rumors?" says Spock, because of course this is what he'd take away from everything Kirk just said. Not the mission, not the triumph of autonomy restored, not the thrill of the challenge. The privacy thing. Of course.

"There are no rumors," says Kirk firmly. "Nogura just doesn't like the look of the thing, and I can't blame him; not really. It plays poorly for the holos, but we only have to worry about that for the next few hours. The man's a living chess board: it's his nature always to think three moves ahead. But he's fighting theoretical fires before they've started; there are no rumors. I'd bet my stripes on that."

Spock's hand has frozen halfway to his chin, in the act of bringing his cup to his lips. It does not move. "Rumors," he says, "relating to the nature of our... association?"

Association? thinks Kirk, and wonders if he ought to be offended. Not thirty minutes have passed since Spock was on his knees before him on the shower floor, enthusiastically fellating Kirk's dick; moments before that, he was busy ejaculating his third orgasm of the past twelve hours deep into Kirk's body. Kirk thinks that counts as something a little more exalted than an *association*.

"Rumors," he clarifies, with the faintest hint of ice, "relating to the question of whether or not you and I are, in fact, intimately involved. Yes. I imagine that was what our CIC was getting at."

"I... see," says Spock, and sips from his cup.

Kirk blinks, wonders what he's missing. It takes a moment for the pieces to connect, but that could be the hour of the morning and the past week's sleep deprivation.

"You've *heard* them?" he sputters.

Spock peers uncomfortably into his tea. "I... have not been directly informed of their existence..." he says.

"But you're aware of them?"

Vulcans, Kirk suspects, do not do *awkward*; it seems like the sort of thing that would be firmly

classified under *illogical emotional reaction to dispassionate stimulus*. But Spock is giving a damned good impression of a man trying hard to pretend he's in no way ill at ease.

"In my former capacity as instructor at the Academy," he says, and his voice, though steady, sounds like every word is carved from stone, "the matter found its way to my attention." He sets down his tea with a muted, dignified little *click*. "I considered it of little consequence."

Given the state of affairs between the two of them in the first months after their return to Earth, Kirk privately doubts the accuracy of Spock's assessment. But, more to the point, and considerably more pressing, is the question of just how long the entire faculty of Starfleet and its associated body of teaching staff have been wondering if he was sleeping with his first officer.

He ought to be furious at the casual appropriation of his private life by persons unknown, but the whole damn thing is entirely too surreal for anger. It's not only the discovery that Nogura's concerns are based in actual, substantive fact; it's also the revelation that there was a rumor concerning the probability or otherwise of carnal relations between the captain of the *Enterprise* and his Vulcan Exec, and *Spock* knew of them before Kirk. It's probably a good thing, he reflects, that he did not go so far as to actually wager his command against their existence. It'd be a damned embarrassing way to drop a rank.

"Let me get this straight," he says, and he finds, to his alarm, that he's having to work hard to suppress the urge to burst into fits of slightly hysterical laughter. "Three years ago, when we returned to HQ, you encountered rumors that you and I were lovers?"

Spock could not look more discomfited were he perched on top of a sharpened spike. "Correct," he says.

"Several months before we had, in fact...?"

"Correct," says Spock again. "Although, if you will recall...."

"I do," says Kirk, who is unlikely ever to free himself of the memory of Amanda's rose garden, particularly now that there's no pressing need to do so. "And the source of these rumors was...?"

"I regret that I was unable determine their precise origin," says Spock, and Kirk takes a moment to reflect upon the fact that any regret that may exist is likely to be disproportionately shared by whomever was responsible for bringing the matter to Spock's steel-faced attention. "I first became

aware that such speculation existed via a conversation that I overheard upon entering a lecture theatre some moments before the lesson was due to begin."

Kirk's eyes widen. "*First* became aware...?"

"Indeed." Spock glances sideways. "The Academy is, one might say, extremely fertile ground for gossip and idle speculation."

Which is, perhaps, as gross an understatement as Kirk has ever heard his first officer utter, and it has some serious competition in that respect. "How many times," he asks faintly, "have you encountered this rumor?"

Spock considers. "It is difficult to be precise."

Kirk just bets it is. "All right," he says, "let me rephrase. When did you first encounter this rumor?"

"Almost immediately upon assuming my assignment at the Academy," says Spock, "and regularly thereafter. It... appears to be a popular subject of debate among the student body."

Kirk aborts the action of sipping from his coffee moments before he's obliged to spit it back into the mug. "I... see," he says, and he's abruptly afraid that he does. "And how... what did... how did you respond?"

Spock says nothing, but, slowly and deliberately, he turns his head so that he's facing Kirk, and allows his right eyebrow to creep pointedly upwards in a gesture of silent, incredulous irritation so manifest and so pronounced that it must, at the very least, make its recipient question the wisdom of continued deliberation on matters outside his field of expertise. Kirk has been on the receiving end of that pointed scrutiny on more occasions than he cares to remember, though it has long since lost its power to cause him to rethink his life choices. It doesn't take too much imagination, however, to put himself in the shoes of the unwary cadet foolish enough to pontificate on the specifics of Spock's sex life in his immediate aural range. Kirk feels a grin begin to spread slowly across his face; *surreal* no longer seems entirely adequate as a descriptor for this conversation.

"Of course," he can't help but point out, "you realize that, while that's possibly a dismissal, Mr. Spock, it is in no way a refutation."

Spock takes a moment to contemplate his position, then, slowly, elegantly, he inclines his head.

“Indeed,” he agrees, and sips from his tea.

~*~

Spock leaves before the sun is fully up, and Kirk lets him go without regret. This isn't where their relationship, however it may shape itself, plays out; their place is waiting for them in the lightening vaults above, and all that remains, now, is to close the door on his life-in-waiting and let the future unfold as it will. And so, when the car arrives for him, sixteen seconds shy of 0800, there's no shadow of grief or nostalgia to follow him out of the apartment that's never really felt like his; only the restless hum of all the days to come, like the static build-up before a storm. Today, he feels unbeaten, invincible. Today he feels like James Kirk.

Nogura has invited half the world and most of several others to see them off, of course, and the crush of cameras and bodies and questions erupts around Kirk before the transporter beam has fully released him into the Centroplex's press room. He's ready for it, admiral's smile fixed seamlessly in place, so calm and practiced that he's certain it looks, to anyone who doesn't know him well, as though it sits naturally on his face; and it's only when the crowd parts to let him through and he sees, waiting for him on the dais at the far side of the room, the one person that he wants to see, that Kirk feels it settle, ease, jaw muscles releasing their tension as something approaching genuine warmth rushes in to fuel his manufactured good humor. Bones is there too, at the front of the crowd, and Scotty, and Uhura, and Sulu, and they get to their feet to greet him, hands lifted in applause, but it's Spock's impassive nod, the elegant glide of his right hand as it rises in the *ta'al*, that moves Kirk forward to meet them.

Ready for this? he hears himself ask, long ago, from the wings of an auditorium bathed in mid-spring sunlight and the excitable chatter of hundreds of waiting voices.

Insofar as it is possible, answers Spock, *to adequately prepare for a venture that is, by its nature, both illogical and unpredictable.*

Neither am I, says Kirk's shadow self, and he steps out onto the stage.

~*~

"I swear," mutters Bones, some forty-five minutes later, dark-eyed and mutinous as they follow a terrified ensign along the back corridors to the Centroplex's main transporter bay, "this whole damned Federation gets giddier and more empty-headed with every passing year. Anyone mind telling me what in blazes that damned nonsense was all about?"

The question is either rhetorical or else exaggerated for belligerent effect, since their party consists of precisely four people, one of whom is Bones himself, and another of whom is almost certainly not yet past his nineteenth year, and who is, in any case, currently over-awed beyond the capacity for coherent speech. Still, Kirk has some sympathy for his friend's position. Some of the questions skirted disconcertingly close to uncomfortable territory, and Kirk suspects that his CIC is probably now nursing the beginnings of a stress-related ulcer on the back of nothing more momentous than one unscheduled trip to the Idaho Rockies. But, on the whole, he thinks, he deflected pretty well, even if he didn't dare chance a look at Spock while he answered. James Kirk can prevaricate with the best of them, but he's damned sure he wasn't going to keep a straight face if he caught sight of his First's expression during *that* particular information exchange. Kirk swallows a grin; there's something effervescent bubbling a little higher in his chest with every step, and he's entirely too jubilant right now for Georgian irascibility, no matter how familiar—or justified—it may be.

"Come now, Dr McCoy," he says cheerfully. "You weren't gone long enough to forget a good, old-fashioned Starfleet send-off, I'm sure?"

Bones glowers sideways, though it lacks its customary ire. "Some things," he says stubbornly, "shouldn't ought to be remembered."

"As I recall," says Kirk, who cannot keep the smile from his voice, try as he may, "you got off somewhat lightly last time."

"You talking about that time they kept us all holed up in orbit for the best part of three damned days while the whole world fawned and fainted over Starfleet's newest golden boy," says McCoy, "or about that time you had me drafted?"

"Just the former," says Kirk. "I got off somewhat lightly the second time, too."

"Depends what you mean by 'lightly,'" says Bones, with just the right balance of choler and restraint to make his point for him. That point, of course, might be anything from the state of Kirk's coronary arteries in the twilight weeks of his thirties, to the holosphere storm that's followed him like a godhead for the past seven days, to the doctor's medical opinion of the weight of emptiness that Kirk has carried around on his shoulders during three long years of absence and loss. Bones's meaningful glares tend to rely heavily on context for full interpretative effect, which rather dilutes the impact when the context itself is somewhat lacking in precision. Still, it hardly seems like the time to mention as much.

Scotty and Sulu and Uhura have been aboard for almost half an hour. They'll be settled at their stations by now, hands gliding easily across consoles that they know as well as the contours of their bodies: focused, absorbed, one with their work. Kirk can feel the pull of homecoming tugging at the cords of his chest, dragging him upwards and out into the vast, velvet blackness, and he knows, because he can feel it in the warmth behind the doctor's downturned mouth that calls him a liar, because he can see it in the crease of Spock's eyes and the light that dances behind them, that he wears his impatience like a sparking cloak of white noise and restlessness. They read him very well, these two men, but he's happy, these days, to be read.

Lightly, amiably, Kirk grins. "I'm not sure it matters anymore, Bones," he says. "We're done with the circus, for now at least. For now, we've got an entire galaxy to get through and only five years to do it. So perhaps you'd better get to your transporter pad, Doctor—it looks like Lieutenant Cowan is waiting for you."

He's not so ruthless in his pursuit of the last word that he's prepared to actively enjoy the look of horror that blanches the doctor's face as he glances sideways and evaluates the truth of Kirk's statement, but he'll concede a small moment of satisfaction at the proper order of things, the return of the conventional and the known. The terrified ensign finds his voice just long enough to direct Kirk and his First towards a small waiting room tucked behind the transporter bay, as Cowan steps forward to guide their protesting CMO towards the platform in a flurry of refusals, statistics and demands for a shuttle, and Kirk considers, for a moment, pulling rank, finding a pilot and a craft to ferry his friend the seven miles from the Centroplex to their ship, holding back the launch while they wait for the doctor to come aboard. But, in the end, he thinks, if it were really so important, Bones would have come to him apart, spoken quietly with his captain and made the request himself in private and without the eyes of the spacedock tech crew to bear witness to his insubordination. This is not, at its heart, about objection: this is about restoration. It's about remembering who they are and what they do, and, he thinks, he's going to let his friend know best, for now at least.

Kirk glances sideways as the ensign retreats, at the elegant, angular figure of his First, flanking him to his right. Alone and unobserved, he could reach for Spock's hand, twine their fingers together surreptitiously behind their backs; take this moment as it is and make it theirs, but he knows he won't. Not just because their seclusion is, at best, illusory, and not just because he knows that Spock won't welcome the gesture, but because they need to find a way to fold together these new selves that they have discovered, and the moments that will be truly theirs will be moments that they've earned, not stolen.

So, instead, Kirk stands shoulder to shoulder by his dress-uniformed First—casually close, but also casually distant, and it occurs to him, suddenly, that this is how they've always stood: as colleagues, as friends and as lovers; almost—but not quite—touching, for all the years they've known each other. There was, quite literally, no other way for this to go but where it has gone, and he's only left to wonder how it took him half a damned mission to realize it was love. Kirk feels a wide, easy grin melt the tension from his face and from the room in these final moments before Spock is called back to the transporter platform, back to their bridge: no wonder there are rumors about them.

"You realize, of course," he says quietly, "that we'll have our own bathrooms, this time out?"

"Indeed," says Spock, whose eyes are fixed on the door.

They contemplate it together for a moment in silence. "That could pose," adds Kirk, "a couple of logistical issues."

"Indeed," says Spock again. His tone is even, composed, professional: formal accommodation, as of an officer experienced in humoring his superior. "However," he adds, just as Kirk is reconciling himself to the fact that his lover has elected to perform Fastidious Exec for the transporter crew and won't allow himself to be drawn, "I would direct your attention to the institution, during the course of the *Enterprise's* refit, of double beds in the senior crew's quarters."

And this, this right here: this is why James Kirk never had any hope of resisting the ever-present lure of Spock of Vulcan. This is why it's so damned impossible not to fall in love with the man. This is why he fell so hard.

"You're right, of course, Mr. Spock," he says calmly, lips pursed firmly around the kind of delirious, euphoric grin that's not going to win him any points in the conversation. "The 'Fleet giveth, and the 'Fleet taketh away."

Spock's eyes slide sideways, lock with Kirk's, and, though his manner is scrupulously correct—parade rest, shoulders squared, face carefully impassive—there's a light behind his eyes that perhaps one person the galaxy across would recognize as laughter. No, there was never any hope for James Kirk. Not in this respect. Not with this man.

"Indeed," says Spock again, and there's a promise in those two syllables.

A knock at the door puts paid to Kirk's gathering arousal before it can become pronounced enough to raise any more eyebrows, and Lieutenant Cowan's voice, from the other side, informs Spock that the *Enterprise* has signalled her readiness to beam him aboard.

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant," Kirk tells her, and takes a step back, just far enough to get a last look at his First in these final moments before everything changes. "Captain Spock will be right out." That earns him an eyebrow, imperiously arched in protest either at the use of a title that has not yet ceased to chafe, or at Kirk's decision to answer on the new captain's behalf, and Kirk can't help it:

the grin breaks free. "I'll see you on the other side, I guess," he tells his lover, his first officer, the other half of his heart, and Spock nods, opens his mouth to speak; thinks better of it, and turns to leave. "Oh, and Mr. Spock?" adds Kirk as his friend approaches the door—not close enough to activate the sensors; close enough to call him back at the threshold. "Do something for me, will you, before the end of alpha shift?"

"Of course, Admiral," says Spock, who has almost certainly connected the reference to the end of their working day with the amusement dancing its way irrepressibly across Kirk's face, but whose expression describes the careful collision of *duty* with *long-suffering*, in the manner of a Vulcan long accustomed to serving alongside Humans in general, and alongside Kirk in particular.

"I'd like you to schedule us a regular slot in the gymnasium," says Kirk cheerfully, but quietly, just in case Cowan is still on the other side of the door. "Tuesday evenings, perhaps. Preferably in one of the smaller sparring rooms."

Spock's eyebrow does not arch. His expression does not falter. "Admiral," he says mildly, but in tones that manifestly challenge the professionalism of his superior officer.

Kirk can't blame him for that. But neither can he bring himself to care. "With a privacy lock, if possible," he adds. His head feels full of air. "My *Suus Mahna* skills are a little... rusty these days."

"Admiral," says Spock again, meticulously correct, but there's a crease to his eyes that Kirk recognizes as a censored smile.

How he got so damned lucky, Kirk is not sure. Perhaps he never will be. Perhaps this is his life now: to wake in the morning to a dark, tousled head on the pillow beside him; to sit on his bridge and turn his head towards the science console, now inconveniently situated out of the captain's eyeline, as an elegant neck twists over an elegant shoulder to return Kirk's gaze; to open the doors to his quarters at the end of a long day to the scent of spice and heat; and to spend every waking moment wondering how on earth the stars aligned so perfectly above him as to allow these things to be true. If it is, so be it. Everything he has ever wanted is here in this moment; it all fell out right at last.

And so, when Spock doesn't make any immediate move to leave, Kirk, on impulse, steps forward, closes the short distance between them. He doesn't lift his mouth to Spock's—not here, not now—but he stands in front of him, close enough to touch; close enough to feel the radiant heat of Spock's body; close enough to catch the first scent of spice on the air. Spock draws in a deep breath, unsteady in his throat, leans in a little nearer so that their heads are almost touching. Slowly, unhurriedly, he lifts his right hand, every measured movement a performance for an audience of one, and bends his fourth and fifth fingers to his palm. Kirk knows what he's doing, of course, but he watches, transfixed, as the movement unfolds; eyes following the curve of Spock's arm as his

left hand moves to lift Kirk's; as his right moves to places his extended index and middle fingers gently above Kirk's radial pulse. His skin is cool, soft, where it rests against Kirk's, and, deliberately, languidly, like chilled silk on glass, Spock trails his fingers across Kirk's wrist, his palm, the creases of his knuckles, to rest against the tips of Kirk's.

"*Nam-tor wak vah yut s'vesht na'fa'wak he pla'rak,*" he says softly. "*I'wak mesukh-yut t'on.*"

Kirk nods. His breath feels suddenly tight in his throat. "*Taluhk nash-veh k'ish,*" is all he can think to reply, and he hopes that, for *k'ish*, Spock hears *k'du*.

They stand like this for a moment, hands linked, skin on skin, and it's only when Cowan's voice slices through the silence with a polite but firm, "Captain Spock, sir—it's time," that Kirk realizes he's forgotten to breathe.

He sucks in a ragged sigh as Spock's hand drops away, the memory of those long, cool fingers printed into Kirk's flesh like a brand. "Thank you, Lieutenant," says his First in a voice that's only slightly hoarse, only slightly uneven. "I will make my way to the transporter pad directly."

Between them, just to the right of Spock's heart, Kirk twists his hands so that his fingers lace through Spock's. Spice floods the air.

"Tonight," says Kirk, who is abruptly glad that embarkation protocol will keep him sequestered away, alone and unobserved, for the next ten minutes at least.

Spock inclines his head. There is a faint flush to his cheeks the *Enterprise's* CMO will unquestionably notice, and Kirk suspects he'll be beaming up to an eyeroll at least, perhaps an exasperated shake of the head, but there will be no fire in it, no real pique. Because Bones will know what it means. Bones has always known what it meant; it just took a little while for his friends to catch up with him.

Spock inclines his head and his hands contract, long fingers pressing silent promise into his lover's hand before they release Kirk's.

"Tonight," he says, and steps through the door.

The room seems a little smaller without him, in the way that the world itself seems to shrink when

Spock's not there, but, Kirk realizes, there's a skill to letting him go, and a whole lot of it depends on the understanding, possible now, that it's not a parting, just a hiatus between meetings: the necessary ending to one moment that allows the next to fall into place. Because, really, Kirk thinks, there was no other conclusion for their story but a series of beginnings: for all the times it has looked like it was over, it was only ever paused, only ever gathering momentum before leading inescapably to the next cycle. Their life together has been a succession of ever-decaying orbits; paths through time that circle relentlessly back towards each other, towards this moment, towards an endless parade of moments. The past is a river, flowing carelessly out of reach, and some day, Kirk thinks, that's going to bother him again, but not yet. Some day, he's going to look in the mirror and see more years written into the lines of his face than he remembers passing; some day, he'll look at the man across the bridge from him and see that the time they have ahead of them is less than the time that they have spent. But not today. The past is a river, flowing carelessly out of reach, but it carries the future in ripples on its restless current, and the present is wherever the two connect. That's good enough for now, Kirk thinks. It's good enough for whatever comes next.

So he's ready for Cowan's knock before it comes, spine straight, eyes fixed on the door as it glides open on her deferent face. He's ready, and he follows her with a nod along this final stretch of this particular road, turning a smile and a friendly greeting on the transporter tech as he passes, feeling the tension melt from his spine, feeling the weight lift from his shoulders, feeling the path return once more to the familiar, to ground he's walked before. It started once with Ilion, and that's where it starts again: circles without beginning or end, only waypoints on the journey, and his feet have learned the road at last.

Tonight, they will stand in his quarters or Spock's quarters, and they will watch the starlight stream past the window, feel the tremble in their feet of a ship at warp, feel the world resolve, set itself right; feel the blanket contentment of belonging. They will stand together, hands entwined, and there will be no need to hurry, no need to rush; their lips will meet when the moment arrives, and they will undress each other without haste, letting their hands roam freely over hard-won bodies, letting the silence fill with words there's no need to speak, letting touch say everything that needs to be said, and, when they are ready, they will make their way to the double bed and make love there, while their ship streaks through the void. And tomorrow, they'll wake together in Kirk's bed or Spock's, and they'll know that they've made it home.

"Systems online, sir," calls Cowan from the transporter console. "*Enterprise* reports ready to receive her commander."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," says Kirk and his grin, which is already at capacity, manages to find another quarter inch across his face. "Engage at will."

"Engaging, sir," she says, and there's a moment of weightlessness inverted, an endless sucking pull, and the first thing he registers is the sound of applause as his atoms reconstitute, the shrill whine of a ship's whistle and Scotty's voice, bursting with pride and contentment, barking, "Admiral on the deck!"

The second thing he registers is Spock's eyes on his, ready to meet him as he recalibrates, re-orientes, finds himself again in the center of his brave new world.

Kirk's hand tingles.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Guys, it's been a blast. Thank you to everyone who's stuck with this monster fic, thank you to everyone who's commented, and thank you most of all for enabling my obsession over the past three years. Huge, gargantuan thanks to my betas—frodolass, penguin_attie, and miloowen—for their insights, knowledge and help, and for the inordinate amount of work they've put in to get each chapter postable; and to T'Lara, who came up with the Lava Lube idea in the first place (though I claim credit for the name!), and didn't immediately go, "Uh..." when I asked her if she'd mind very much if I angsted it up, eimeo-style, and then took a Prologue and 46 chapters to get to the actual challenge.

I am now in advanced post-Spice cold turkey and cannot remember how to live a full and productive life without writing these guys, so, if anyone's still interested, I guarantee there will be more stories in this universe. Thank you all for reading, and, because I seriously cannot sign off any other way: dif-tor heh smusma, everyone.

Translations:

Nam-tor wak vah yut s'vesht na'fa'wak he pla'rak. I'wak mesukh-yut t'on - Surakian saying: "Time is a path from the past to the future and back again. The present is the crossroads of both."

Taluhk nash-veh k'ish - "I cherish it."

K'du - "You."

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