In the Shade

by JennaSinclair

Summary

*In the Shade* is a novel with a Prologue, Twenty-five Chapters, an Epilogue, and an Addendum. Approximately 264,000 words.

*In the Shade* follows the lives of James Kirk and Spock of Vulcan after the end of the Enterprise’s five year mission. Spock has still not recovered the psychic powers he lost in *Promises to Keep*, although he and Kirk visit a Vulcan healer who might hold the key to his recovery. Kirk is promoted to commodore. In the wider world, political power is about to shift in a way unacceptable to some humans, and inevitable turmoil will result.

*In the Shade* is a very personal novel, an intense, intimate look into the lives of two extraordinary men and the events that threaten to tear them apart.

Notes

AUTHOR’S INTRODUCTION, WRITTEN ON MAY 25, 2005

Welcome to *In The Shade*, the third novel in my *Sharing the Sunlight* K/S series. You need not have read any other stories or novels in the series to be able to enjoy this novel; it’s pretty much self-contained with an explanation of the important events that have already happened within the first few chapters. The emotional dynamics will probably be most fully appreciated if you’ve read previous STS stories, but you won’t be lost plot-wise if you haven’t.

One of the subjects *In The Shade* touches on is female genital mutilation, sometimes known as female circumcision or clitorectomy. This practice is widely followed today in certain areas of the world. Sudan is one of the countries in the early twenty-first century that has the highest rate of genital mutilation, and that is what dictated my choice for the
backgrounds of two of the original characters in this novel.

Because no art is posted with this online version of the novel, I feel I’ve got to explain a bit about the titles to the four Parts, referencing Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos, and Fahtima. The first three names are the three Fates from Greek mythology. Clotho is the Spinner of the Threads of Life, Lachesis is the Dispenser of Lots, and Atropos is the Inexorable One. The concept of fate is an important thematic thread in the novel.

I dedicate *In The Shade* to two wonderful, incredibly special people. First, to my dear husband. Not only did he offer me encouragement and support every single day of the 30 months it took me to write the novel even though he doesn't "get" K/S at all, but...he has read every single word in this novel. He has not only read it, but he wrote notes in the margins, circled errors, discussed concepts with me, and in general gave me a wonderful global edit. Is this love or what? I don’t know why I am blessed with such an incredible spouse, but I love him so much and am grateful for every day I get to spend with him.

To my incomparable husband: thank you!

I want to dedicate *In The Shade* to Dusky as well. I leaned on her very heavily for moral support; how would you like it if a writer kept calling you up and whining? I absolutely could not have finished the writing without her gentle encouragement. But wait, there’s more! You want to be edited? By the very best? By an editor with an eagle eye who won’t miss much? Who won’t hesitate to write in the margins “this is just too much for me” or “cut a few pages here” or “this name isn’t quite right.” Unrestrained negative criticism is invaluable, and I got it from her. And friendship. I must mention the friendship that has enriched my life and is essential to my soul’s happiness.

To my incomparable friend: thank you!

**WARNING:** *In The Shade* contains original characters and an incident of explicit, personal violence that I found difficult to write and—if I did it properly—you will find difficult to read. Also, for those who are wondering, I’m the one who really did come up with the term *chenesi* to describe Spock’s secondary testicular system in my novel *Promises to Keep*, although the concept has been around from the earliest years of K/S.

Needless to say, all remaining errors, stylistic miscues, and typos are my responsibility alone.

As always, I would be delighted to hear from readers either through comments left on the archive or in emails to Hilary54@aol.com.

Thanks to everybody for your patience and encouragement! I really hope you enjoy reading *In The Shade*.

Love,

Jenna

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*In The Shade* is the fourteenth and final entry in my Sharing the Sunlight series. Each work was written so that a reader could catch up with what is going on if they haven’t read the previous stories, but of course you’ll get a bit more if you read the series in order. I use the name Jenna Sinclair for this K/S series. I use Jenna Hilary Sinclair for all other fanfiction and my professional work.
Here's the series in chronological order:

1. Sharing the Sunlight (novel)
2. Reflections on a Lunar Landscape
3. Pursuing Hyacinths (novella)
4. Heart’s Delight (novella)
5. Primal Scream
6. Parallel Courses
7. Double Trouble
8. Son of Sarek (novella)
9. Promises to Keep (novel)
10. Jagged Edges
11. Manna
12. Journey’s End
13. One Night
14. In the Shade (novel)

All stories and novels in the Sharing the Sunlight series are now posted to Archive of Our Own.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue: In The Sunlight

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ADDENDUM: Love and Fate

Love and Fate was never included in the printed version, but I always hoped it could be read as part of the entire novel experience.
Because the Archive doesn't give options for things like Prologues and inserted non-chapter prose, this section actually contains:

Prologue: In The Sunlight
News Article: The Galactic News
News Article: The Enquiring Eye
Chapter One: Shared Space

_____________________________________________________

PROLOGUE: In the Sunlight

Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire
Would we not shatter it to bits -- and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

FitzGerald: Omar Khayyám, Rubaiyat

“They’re coming for you,” Hamza gasped as he fell to his knees. “Aunt Medina, Zubida and Neimat and that woman who drove here last night. Batunde the priest is with them too. You’ve got to run away! You know they’ll do it to you if you don’t.”

Fahtima ran her fingers across the stubble of millet on which she sat. Yes, she knew, as she had known ten minutes ago that gazelle-legged Hamza had begun to run to her, as she now felt his chest heave and the breath whistle in and out of his mouth.

“Tima? Did you hear me? You’ve got to run away!"

She pretended that she was not afraid. The goats innocently grazed in the field, ringed with the sensors she had erected yesterday, and the water flowed in the plastiment-walled irrigation channel. The old dried-up dragon tree, the only tree for kilometers around, stood mute sentinel over them. She watched her brown fingers dig into the hard-packed dirt.

Hamza, cousin-friend, dear Hamza was caught in his caring. His reasoning was not sound. Where would she run to?

When she had lain upon her pallet in the night and caught the stray, adult thoughts—knife and control and the old ways—she had desperately considered running away. After the first paralyzing fear had left her, after she had closed her eyes so tightly that her lids hurt, and after she had tried one more time to make the sizzling light go away so she would be left in darkness as everyone else was in darkness—oh please, gods of all, whoever is listening, cover me in cool shade and let me be normal—it was after the prayers had gone unanswered that she had thought of going to the village.

She wouldn’t be able to drive the aircar because her father kept the keys on a chain around his neck, but she could walk across the acacia-dotted landscape. A day’s walk wasn’t too far for a healthy twelve-year-old girl. She would need water, and she must wear her sandals because the road was hard and hot and once she was there... Her relatives who lived there would bring her back.

She could have struggled as they put their hands on her, she could have screamed, “I’m changed! I’m different than I was! I am just like you now!” But she knew they would never believe her lie. Too many remembered how, before she realized she must hide, she had announced with child-like
innocence whenever a flitter took off from the village’s airpad to visit their isolated agricultural compound. In the beginning they had laughed and talked about the little girl’s sharp ears. Later she had told that the long-awaited truck with the sonic drilling equipment for the new well would be there within the hour, and laughter became frowns as the roaring vehicle breached the desert horizon. When a mere six-year-old, a female, the least of her family in status, had said that Tuomi was bringing a new wife home from his visit to the city, and they had arrived the next day, the fear was born.

It didn’t matter that she no longer welcomed the knowledge in her mind, had warred against it and turned her mind’s eye away from it. For years she had kept her head down and folded her lips over her exploding soul. But even in the village, so far from the family compound, they remembered and feared, and she had heard with her own ears: witch.

She might have traveled further to escape, to the railhead that would take her to the city. In Khartoum there was a small spaceport, and a ship could take her off the Earth to where so many were different. Not human.

Her mouth had formed the words in the night, soundlessly, in defiance of the order of the Eternist priest. She did not shudder as she said them, nor did she gesture to ward off evil, because in her darkest soul she sometimes wondered if she belonged with them. She wondered if she were not-human. No one else in the family saw the light as she did, she was sure.

But leaving in a spaceship took credits. How to get them? Women at Khartoum, her mother had told her before she died, sold their bodies to the spacemen in the same way a wife lay with her husband, and Neimat had said any farmer with a good harvest could buy an hour to fill his needs. Fahtima could provide that. It would mean no man would marry her, but what did it matter when all men feared her anyway? Her father would not look at her without gesturing behind his back.

But if she reached Khartoum, if she spread her legs for many men and the credits were enough to lift her to the sky.... She would still be Fahtima Gabon. Nothing would be changed. She would still blink even on the darkest night because the light within her was so bright, and no river ever came to extinguish the burning. She would still cry within the crook of her elbow because she wanted the darkness that existed between the stars so much.... But as much as she had tried, the light always was there.

That was when Fahtima began to think of staying. One night she hugged her knees as she sat under the little window in her room, and somehow, she did not know how, opened herself to the brightness in a way she hadn’t for years. The adults were gathered in her uncle’s small pre-fabricated house across the track that divided the compound, and when their thoughts reached her, she gasped. She bit her lip and rocked back against the wall. So many presences.... How could they think she wanted this?

But she remembered how she had focused when she was young, and soon she caught blood and antibiotic and from her aunt we must have a sterile field and if we do this will she be cured?

Batunde the priest said it. Yes. The old ways are best, when we understood a human’s place in the galaxy, to be first, and is this not one of your oldest ways? Female circumcision was used so a woman could control her passions. In the decades of chaos after the Eugenics War, and then after the third great war, a woman needed the help to keep her pure and safe when the outlaw men would take any woman not protected. The scars are a badge of honor. Cut the female parts and it will teach Fahtima the ways of control.

There was so much under the words. Arrogance. The need to dominate not just one small girl but the whole circle of her family. Fear, of her strangeness, of losing his hold over the people. Certainty
that by causing them to do this to her he would solidify his position. They would all be joined in a conspiracy of silence.

But above all, Batunde believed in what he said. He thought he could conquer the light.

Her aunt spoke again, thinking of a strange child she would not have to fear, because she would be less than the others, not more. Where could we find someone to do this? I don’t want her hurt. It’s been seventy years or more since—

One of our own, an Eternist. She is a doctor. She can come here from Cairo when there’s time in her schedule. She’ll do this if a priest tells her to, she is a woman. I will call her on the comm line.

Fahtima had pulled back to herself and sat, shivering, thinking of what the adults believed. A cure for what she was. Perhaps the blood she saw in their minds would wash her clean.

She also saw what she would give up when they cut off the clitoris between her legs. It was the source of sexual pleasure in women. She had touched herself there a few times, but she’d been frightened by the tingling sensation and stopped. It reminded her too much of when she was small and still so open to the light, when she’d been forced awake by the bursting of adult pleasure in her mind. Back then, she had always known when people were coupling. Intercourse was irrevocably linked with the light, and it was easy to reject both together.

And so she had decided to stay.

She attended school by satellite and strung sensors to keep the goats in the proper field and waited for the woman to come, the woman whom she saw in the light agreeing with Batunde about what must be done.

Fahtima lifted a handful of dust and watched it blow away towards the channel of water that sliced through the landscape, where some of the goats were bending their heads to drink. The grains settled on the rippling surface, little dots of the Earth. Is that, she wondered, what all the worlds of the galaxy looked like when you saw them from a spaceship? Insignificant specks of nothing, hiding all their promise? She would never know. She gazed into Hamza’s broad, coffee-colored face. “I’ll go to meet them.”

Hamza awkwardly unfolded his long adolescent legs and stood beside her. She shook out the ankle-length skirt that her aunt had insisted she begin to wear last year and pulled her scarf tightly over her black hair. No trace of hair should be showing, the priest had said. The old ways were the good ways. In the old days, no one had seen the light, and in the old days women with knives advanced on girls who needed to learn control.

Batunde and the women were almost there. They were not half a kilometer away across the water, easy to see in this flat and arid landscape.

She turned to the only light she had ever wanted to see. “I’d better go.”

“No,” Hamza said. He clenched his fists in youthful passion. “They can’t do this to you. I won’t let them. I’ll stop them.”

She took his hand. “Hamza. I know you would try. But we can’t. They think we’re just children.”

His square jaw, sign of the man he would become, jutted with stubbornness. “You’re not. You’ve never been a child.”

It had been one of her curses, that she had not spoken at all until she was four, and then had opened
her mouth with adult phrases on her tongue. If only she had known what it would come to....

Fahtima squeezed his fingers. “It will be all right, you’ll see. I’m not afraid. I want this.”

“How could you? They’re going to hurt you!”

“They’re going to help me. Would you stay here and watch the goats? Don’t let them eat the sensor on the gate.”

She released his hand and walked towards the channel, and she knew he would remain behind, though he was a boy and almost a year older than she was. In this, his leadership gave way to mysteries yet beyond his awakening manhood. His muffled, heartbroken sob almost stopped her. Maybe she should try to explain to him how much she wanted to be cured. But even Hamza would never understand, so she kept walking.

A bridge, built by her father and uncles years ago, spanned the channel. She could have taken it but instead she detoured over by the tree and snapped off an ancient, leafless twig in a sort of defiance. Fahtima skipped down the embankment, suddenly feeling light enough to take wing. Her arms went out for balance as if she were a bird, and she flew past the goats into the shallows of the water so that it washed the hem of her skirt. She kicked the water up as high up as she could, letting it soak her.

She splashed again and thought of the sizzle a match made when it went out, of a lamp extinguished by the once-a-year driving rains, of how she would feel when it was all over.

She climbed the bank and her heavy wet skirt slapped at her ankles. Aunt Medina smiled around her bad teeth and said, “Good girl,” and Fahtima smiled back at her.

“Remember that little procedure I said you were going to have? The doctor is ready for it now. It will help you now that you’re old enough for children. Come with us.”

Fahtima nodded eagerly, and with her honor guard behind her, she almost ran to the compound.

She didn’t need the press of their thoughts to tell her to lead them to the community room attached to the rear of her aunt’s house. The priest had argued the house should be replaced with a human-designed structure because it was the only one in the compound made in the Vulcan way, but so far Aunt Medina had resisted because it was energy efficient and comfortable.

In one corner of the room was a diagnostic table that could be converted to a birthing chair for the laboring or a comfort for the sick. Fahtima climbed up onto the table where she had been born. Someone had spread a plastic sheet on it, and as she pulled her skirt to her waist and looked up at the sun-washed ceiling, she defiantly expanded the pinhole that she had fought so hard to keep from enveloping her mind. One last time, and then she wouldn’t have to fight anymore.

She touched the doctor’s calm competence, saw the sonic scalpel through her eyes. Knew Zubida’s fear and Neimat’s thankfulness this was not being done to her, and their reluctance to spread and hold her legs as the doctor told them to do. She felt no embarrassment as even Batunde saw her most private parts, and she felt no pain as a hypo hissed against her there.

“This should just take a minute,” the doctor said, and when the scalpel hummed, there was no pain when the tissue fell with a flick of her wrist. Fahtima felt nothing at all, and she wrapped herself in the doctor’s thoughts to stare down at herself, bleeding around the sterile gauze the woman held against her brown flesh.

The woman glanced up from between Fahtima’s legs. “Should I do it all?”
The priest nodded. “Everything, as they did in the old days.”

“I might have to transfuse her. She’ll lose a lot of blood if I’m not careful when I remove the labia.”

“Two hundred years ago girls lay on the dirt without anesthetic or sterile fields and they survived. After the war there weren’t any supplies, and they used twine to sew them up. My grandfather said they used camel hair.”

Camel hair. Those big, bleating, obstinate beasts. Fahtima gave a little gurgle of amusement. Aunt Medina looked at her with an uncertain smile. She lifted Fahtima’s hand in her own and patted it.

“Almost done.”

Yes. Good-bye to the nights of endless light. Good-bye to the signs made behind her father’s back and the whispered words of fear. It would all be gone, just as soon as the doctor made the next few cuts....

Even Hamza’s light would be gone. It was the price the unspeaking gods asked her to pay.

“Good-bye,” she murmured, and the doctor leaned again to her task.

PART ONE
Clotho: The Spinner of the Threads of Life

For in the days we know not of
Did fate begin
Weaving the web of days that wove
Your doom.

--A.C. Swinburne, Faustine

THE GALACTIC NEWS
October 12, 2271
Circulation: 50,000,248,020,963

News Item
Heading: Kirk to be Promoted
Stardate: 8742.3
Category: Starfleet
Date: October 12, 2271, 0820 hours
Author: Ralph Randolph
Field Information: Fahtima Gabon

Starfleet Command announced today that Captain James T. Kirk, formerly of the starship Enterprise, will be promoted to the rank of commodore. Kirk was the youngest man to hold the rank of captain of a starship when he attained command five years ago, and now, at age thirty-seven, he will be Starfleet’s youngest commodore.

The promotion will take place during the annual Federation Day ceremonies to be held October 25 in Paris, at the Federation complex to the north of the city. President Dubois is expected to attend, along with many representatives from the General Assembly.
“James T. Kirk is an exceptional officer,” said Starfleet’s Commander-in-Chief Admiral Heihachiro Nogura in a prepared statement. “His intelligence and bravery were amply proven during the recently concluded mission of the Enterprise. Starfleet is pleased to take advantage of his talents and loyalty by elevating him to the rank of commodore, where he will be able to make the greatest contribution to the expansion of the Federation and the protection of its people.”

However, the statement did not specify to which position Kirk would be appointed. According to the recently adopted Starfleet Deployment Guidelines, he is not eligible for a deep space assignment for two years except in the case of declared emergency or war.

One ‘Fleet official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said, “Kirk will go to Operations. He’s brilliant, tactically and strategically, and that’s where he belongs. With the Klingons hanging on our doorstep, he’s needed. Nkapa could use the help.”

Rear Admiral Kwame Nkapa, Chief of Operations for the past fifteen years, had no comment when contacted.

The Enterprise’s final mission took place when Kirk ordered the investigation of the unusual phenomenon known as a Graves Gravitational Mass (GGM.) Kirk and his first officer, Commander Spock, were able to remove the ship from the object’s influence only after all other members of the crew were rendered unconscious and the Enterprise was close to disintegration. The few mapped GGMs in Federation space have now been marked with buoys to prevent accidental incursion into their dangerous sphere of influence.

“The purpose of our five-year mission,” Kirk said in an interview with The Galactic News (Stardate 8679.1), “was not only to explore and defend, but also to ensure the safety of Federation citizens. It was appropriate that our very last undertaking should identify this exceptionally hazardous phenomenon. All credit must go to Commander Spock. He was virtually alone on the ship; I was conscious for only short periods of time and no one else was conscious at all. Commander Spock’s technical expertise in single-handedly devising automatic subroutines saved us all.”

Kirk was born in Riverside, Iowa of the North American Protectorate and entered Starfleet Academy on full scholarship at age 16. His first service was on board the light cruiser Farragut. Before he took command of the Enterprise in 2266, he captained the Hotspur during unspecified diplomatic missions for the Federation.

Kirk is unmarried with no dependents.

*****

THE ENQUIRING EYE
The cyberpaper for the discerning human

IT’S OUR OPINION!
An Editorial by William Henry Thompson

October 12, 2271
Circulation: 10,000,346
Eternist Earth Headquarters
The recent return of the USS *Enterprise* from the outer reaches of the Federation has been a cause for much celebration among the masses in the past few weeks. Listen closely. Can you hear the shouts ring across the land?

Hail our intrepid, multi-species heroes! Hail the fine and upstanding Captain Kirk and his stalwart, many-antennae crew! See how wonderful the easy teamwork and friendship between captain and first officer, so different, mythology in the making. Look at the *Enterprise’s* quilt of human, Vulcan, Andorian, Rigellian and Tellarite. As the author said many centuries ago, one for all, all for one.

Oh, yes, Starfleet has engineered the publicity with such a fine, unobtrusive hand, one could almost enjoy being manipulated. It does make a glorious story, this five year journey into the unknown.

Twaddle.

Don’t be blinded by what is nothing more than a publicity ploy touting an experiment in Starfleet staffing. There were 430 beings on the *Enterprise*, and 380 of them trace their ancestry to what planet? You guessed it—Earth.

The recent emphasis on Captain Kirk and his multi-species crew is nothing more than a smokescreen. Starfleet works hand in glove with the alien contingent on the Federation Council. Starfleet wants you to forget that a proposal has just been introduced before the council that would drastically reduce the voice of the human, outer-colony planets in the General Assembly. Or at the least, they want you to believe that’s just fine.

These humans of the outer worlds, so many thousands of light years away, have taken on a far less glamorous role than Captain Kirk and his mongrel human/Vulcan first officer, that of colonizing and making habitable planets that are far from the comforts of Mother Earth. But their voices will be reduced to a mere whisper in the conclave that forms the basis for our government if this proposal becomes law. Instead you will hear the languages from Andoria, Vega, Rigel, Sirius. Is this the life-blood of the Federation? What has made her great?

Is it Vulcan you wish to hear? Captain Kirk undoubtedly heard Vulcan while on the *Enterprise*, as Starfleet has made obvious the past weeks. “The *Enterprise* with its racially diverse crew,” they expound in the most recent promo-vid, “was led by Kirk and his right hand adviser, Commander Spock of Vulcan, who together rescued Federation planets from certain destruction when they bravely confronted a machine of immense destructive power....” Blah, blah, blah. Next they’ll be telling us that a Tellarite has come up with a cure for head lice and the common cold.

Stop cheering for the *Enterprise* and turn your attention to what’s really important, the defeat of the Utarf-Pren’felit proposal in the General Assembly.

Who developed the technology that has allowed the Federation to grow, our markets to reach more consumers? The humans.

Whose sense of adventure and quest for the unknown has propelled them from Earth into the darkest void? The humans.

Who made this Federation great and will keep it great? The humans.

Captain Kirk’s first officer is the son of Sarek of Vulcan, wealthy ambassador from that planet. But of course Commander Spock earned his position on the *Enterprise*, didn’t he?

First officers are not captains. The captain is human.
The Utarf-Pren’felit reapportionment draft, with its one planet, one vote proposal, should be jettisoned with the waste from old engine pods. It’s dangerous. Under Utarf-Pren’felit, humans will lose our influence and our ability to contribute as we have the past many years as we built the Federation from nothing to the mighty force it is today. John Clark’s (Eternist—Centaurus) proposal of one representative for every two billion beings is an equitable solution instead.

What was it that the human, Dumas, wrote so long ago? One human for all. All humans for each other.

CHAPTER ONE: Shared Space

The healers had kept them waiting for more than twenty minutes. Every once in a while the low murmur of voices came from the rooms that Kirk knew existed on the other side of the wall behind his back; that was the only reason he had to believe that Sluman and T’Braggia were actually present this morning in their consulting suite on a quiet, tree-lined side street in San Francisco. Vulcans didn’t countenance illogical delays. It was assumed that patients would arrive punctually, and then they would speak with a healer. He and Spock had already done that twice since the Enterprise had eased into orbit over Earth, and Kirk had approved the logic in well-timed appointments. What could be delaying them now? This visit was at their unexpected request.

Next to Kirk, Spock’s head was tilted as he examined the abstract painting that graced the opposite wall. He didn’t seem to be infected with Kirk’s own impatience. After forty years of practicing the ways of control, he didn’t allow his anxieties to show.

The rain pelted against the window as the wind gusted outside, and the energy of the elements pushed Kirk into action, too. He abandoned his pretense at contentment, jerked up off the couch and stalked across the room.

He forced himself to focus on the view outside: past the weeping, rain-streaked windowpane, to the two trees with a few leaves clinging to their branches, to a hurrying pedestrian. But the static visages of three-story brownstone houses with their attendant shops at street level could not capture his attention for long, and eventually he saw something else, a distorted reflection in the glass: his Vulcan, lean and dark and handsome in his blue and black dress uniform, sitting in silence and pretending to examine a third-rate work of art to which he wouldn’t have given a second glance at any other time.

Kirk watched as a raindrop streaked down the window, splitting his former first officer’s image into blurry halves. He frowned at the overt symbolism. It didn’t mean a thing. He’d learned long ago that worrying didn’t contribute to the solution of a problem. Or to put it another way, a different way from his but no less valuable: It is illogical to speculate. What is, is. Cor yhr mahr.

Better to focus his attention on the positive. Debriefing and separation were almost over. Another week, maybe two, then the Prime Directive Committee would release its official report, and he and Spock would be free to start new assignments and new lives, the bridges they both had to cross before time found them again together on a refitted Enterprise. Thirty-two months at least she’d be in drydock, with the possibility of the new transwarp engines at the end, and when she left on a new mission Kirk intended to be in the command seat with Spock by his side again. Why not? Nogura and the gray-haired officers on the Assignment Board would come to see the logic in it.
His thoughts were interrupted by the chirp of his communicator.

“Kirk here.”

“Andersen here, Kirk. No thanks to you, I’ve managed to rearrange some of those interviews you canceled on me. Li from *The Shanghai Express* at 1745, then Randolph from *The Galactic News* at eighteen hundred Paris time. Two short exclusives. I’ll have one of my people meet you when you beam over. You will be here, right? No more changes?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good. Andersen out.”

He slapped the communicator back on his belt with unnecessary force. PR gave him a headache. He rotated his neck and reached up to massage the tight muscles there.

It was a relief when Spock spoke, his words pulling Kirk away from his contemplations.

“I am concerned that our choice to schedule this consultation today was a mistake, especially if the healers do not see us soon. You have but a few hours before the promotion ceremony, and it may have been wiser—”

Kirk stopped him with a fierce look. “Spock.”

“Yes, Jim?”

“Don’t be stupid. It doesn’t become you.”

A light appeared in his Vulcan’s eyes, and Kirk returned the smile with a small one of his own. The top layer of his anxiety, the part that had kept him silent, evaporated.

“You know,” he said conversationally, leaning against the windowsill and gripping it lightly from behind, “I think my mother was impressed by you. It helps that I’ve been telling her lies all these years, that you’re the best thing since the Guttenberg press.”

“It is difficult to understand how you can gauge her opinion from the short lunch the three of us shared weeks ago. And considering your mother’s background in journalism, I fear that she will become disappointed upon closer acquaintance.”

The human’s eyes softened. “Not a chance.”

A gust of wind drove rain against the glass, in the same way that small asteroids had once pelted the shields of their ship. Spock spoke over the rising weather.

“Your mother will be able to join us after the ceremony tonight for a late dinner?”

“Uh-huh. She’s over in Prague at some media conference anyway, so it’s a short trip for her to Paris and then back. I’ve got reservations for midnight at a restaurant I’ve been to before. Small and quiet, on the Seine, where I hope the reporters will leave us in peace.”

“And you still plan to speak to her concerning our relationship tonight?”

“I think it’s only right, don’t you? Before we move in together.”

“I concur. However, I cannot help but speculate that your mother’s reaction might not be as positive as you anticipate.”
“Don’t worry about her. Her life is Kirk Communications, her small group of newspapers, and she hasn’t meddled in my life in years. She’ll ask if I’m happy, say congratulations, and then it’ll be back to work for her. Mom’s a workaholic.”

“Like her son?”

Kirk laughed quietly. “Not exactly. Wait until you get to know her better, you’ll see. I think I know how to relax. If I ever get the chance.”

A short silence. Kirk listened to the raindrops, turned around to watch the rain again, and thought of how long it had been since he and Spock had managed to relax together.

Starfleet Command separated captains and first officers to grill them over the five years they’d spent together in space—to ensure an honest appraisal of all mission assignments—so he and Spock had rarely been in the same room or even the same building when they faced questions from boards of sober-faced commodores and admirals. Fortunately, Starfleet PR, as directed from the CinC’s office, saw things differently. At least some of Kirk’s media interviews and public appearances had been in Spock’s company, especially in the past month. “Part of the spin for this campaign is to push you two as a team,” Commodore Andersen had told them shamelessly. “It’s effective ammunition against the arguments of the Eternists. The different races of the Federation working together on a starship—that’s what we want to present.” And though Kirk had grown sick of the sight of his own face on the holovids, he had to acknowledge the public seemed to be lapping it up. The previous day he’d been told that Starfleet approval ratings were on the rise, and if that meant the anti-alien, secessionist movements of the Eternists could be checked, then he’d smile at even more cameras.

But not right now. He looked again at the reflection in the window, his gaze resting hungrily on the strong profile of his lover. Exactly how his ideal sex partner had changed from petite, intelligent and blonde to tall, intelligent and strong, he wasn’t quite sure. From female to male. How could it be? But now it felt right, it was settled in his mind, in the memories that his body carried. The warmth of a woman’s breast against his tongue, the heft of it in his palm, those experiences seemed very long ago. The last two years on the ship, with Spock by his side on the bridge, on landing parties, and next to him in bed—they’d been good. Even with all that had happened to them, still very good, and so much better than ‘being alone or not sharing in Spock’s intimate life. Go back to being friends only? Never.

But that’s how the last three months had felt. He’d been pursuing his relationship with Spock in front of holocameras, for God’s sake, and he was sick of it. He needed something more. It wasn’t just the sex. They’d managed to find time and privacy a few times away from Starfleet’s and the public’s demands. Twice in New York, once in Salzburg, again in New Delhi, and they’d been hot and sweaty and erotic encounters, memorable enough for comfort during the lonely nights in between, but though his physical tension had been temporarily eased, he needed more.

Better not to think about it. Only a few more weeks, things were starting to fall into place, they’d have their new assignments confirmed soon, maybe tonight when Nogura—

Spock spoke again. “I have been considering the question of our joint accommodation after debriefing.”

That brought Kirk around again. “Good, me too. Did you see the realtor’s simulations?”

“Last night after I arrived back from Singapore.”

“I liked the condo on Duke Street, or the townhouse in this neighborhood, though it’s more than we
“I prefer the townhouse. We could walk to the transporter station, and there is ground transportation nearby as well. I also prefer three bedrooms over two.”

“And the two story arrangement, so we won’t get into each other’s way.”

“Are you already concerned about excessive proximity?”

“Not likely. But call me realistic. We’ll both need some space of our own. We could have one of the bedrooms for us, one for guests, and turn the other into an office. I thought it was big enough for that, didn’t you?”

Spock nodded. “More than adequate. You would be able to use the back room on the lower floor for your own office needs, and I will take the second floor location. I am, however, concerned that the house may not still be available.”

Kirk snorted. “At that price? It’ll be there.”

“Let us presume so. However....”

“What?”

“I wish to be certain that you have not reconsidered this course of action. It is not strictly necessary for us to cohabitate—”

Another fierce look. “Spock.”

The amusement sprang more easily to the dark eyes this time. “Yes, Jim.”

“It still doesn’t become you. Besides, we agreed on this back on the ship. Are you getting cold feet?”

Pointedly Spock stretched his long legs out before him, considering his shining boots with a curious air, and Kirk laughed.

“I guess that means ‘No,’ right?”

“I have observed,” Spock said, tucking his feet back where they belonged, “that Standard can be most imprecise at times. Allow me to clarify. My desire to share a dwelling with you while we are posted on Earth has not changed. It has increased in direct proportion to the time that we have been housed in separate quarters during debriefing. Has your opinion changed?”

“Hell, no. You know I’ve missed you, too.”

“Then let us speak to the realtor at the earliest opportunity. I am required in London for the next three days, but there is some flexibility in my hours. What would your schedule allow?”

Kirk spread his hands with frustration. “I don’t know, I’m so booked up they’ve got an ensign at my elbow to get me from one debriefing to the next interview to the next meeting with one ’fleet board or another. Not tomorrow. Or the next day. Maybe the day after that? In the evening. I think I’m available after 1900 hours. If the powers that be don’t want me someplace else. Would that work for you?”

But before Spock could reply, the door to the interior of the suite opened, and a very short, elderly Vulcan wearing black pants and a long-sleeved black tunic stepped forward. He bowed his head
and the tip of his gray beard disappeared into his chest.

“Captain Kirk? Commander Spock? I regret the necessity of delaying our consultation.”

Spock stood and raised his hand in the taal. “Peace and long life, Sluman.” Kirk straightened and nodded.

“Yes,” Sluman said. “Peace is what we all seek, what we seek for you in particular.” He turned and walked along a hallway, and after a moment of silence Kirk gestured for Spock to follow him first.

From their previous visits Kirk had discovered that the suite didn’t appear to be a conventional medical facility, although Vulcans were as capable of treating ills of the body through invasive surgical procedures as any other species. Many healers were skilled surgeons.

They passed the two innocuous examining rooms he and Spock had been in before, passed a room filled with computer and other equipment, walked by a bathroom and a storage closet. Finally, at the end of the hallway, Sluman led them to a cramped, white-walled room where four chairs faced each other and took up most of the space. A window set high in the opposite wall revealed the ragged branches of an oak tree, dripping with the autumn downpour. T’Braggia, the slight, stooped-shouldered bondmate of Sluman and also a healer, stood just inside the room. She bowed as they entered, then silently left. Under the window, turning to look at them, was another, unfamiliar, Vulcan.

Sluman spoke. “This is Versin Z’mastlxpz, master healer from the facility at Golgotharen. He is the possibility of which I spoke during our last communication. You are fortunate that he has come to Earth to consult with the physicians at Johns Hopkins University on a rare visit. He has abilities I lack. At my request and with your permission, he has consented to participate in Spock’s treatment.”

Here was another male Vulcan whose name did not start with the ubiquitous “S,” only the second one whom Kirk had ever met. Kirk examined him, inclined to favor anyone who could offer them help. He was a contrast to the older healer: in all-white tunic and pants, taller than Spock by several centimeters, very thin where Sluman’s torso had slumped into the fleshiness of advanced age. Sluman’s hair was thinning, but Versin’s was black and bushy and hid the tips of his pointed ears. The two healers could not have been less alike.

Versin raised his hand and managed to make it look like an energetic gesture. “Peace and long life, Spock.” He spoke Standard quickly and with no discernible accent.

“Live long and prosper,” Spock responded.

Versin jerked his head up and to the right, a Vulcan mannerism that conveyed cursory acknowledgment and sometimes dismissal. Back in the days when he had been absorbing Vulcan language and customs through melds, Kirk had learned such things. He was not sure that he liked to see such a gesture directed towards Spock.

But Versin’s penetrating gaze immediately focused on him. “You are the human.”

How many times had Kirk’s mother briskly said *It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it?* It was the way this Vulcan said *human* that put the frown on Kirk’s face and made the back of his neck tingle. But maybe the healer wasn’t as aware of the emotional consequences of his inflection as a native-speaker would be.

Kirk nodded. “Yes. James Kirk.” He didn’t bother with the gesture of greeting.
Sluman put in, “Perhaps you have seen Captain Kirk on the video presentations. He has been much interviewed by the news media since the arrival of his ship, the Enterprise. Spock as well.”

Versin seemed not to have heard and addressed Kirk again. “You are the one who is conducting a sexual liaison with Spock in the human fashion, using only the body and with no ties of commitment to bind you?”

Kirk decided that he definitely did not like this healer. What did this being, whoever he might be, whatever powers he might possess, know about what he and Spock shared, what bound them one to the other?

Spock responded before Kirk could. “In its most elementary aspects, it is correct to say that Captain Kirk and I share a sexual relationship. There is an emotional component as well.”

The healer cut one hand through the air. “Of that I have no interest. It is against Vulcan and to be avoided. However, your case is an interesting one, and examining it would add to the database I am attempting to compile. Regardless of my judgment that the path you have chosen is illogical, and your alliance with the human especially so, I choose to participate in your attempted rehabilitation. Be seated. I will explain further.”

They sat, the two healers with little wasted motion, the two lovers slowly, exchanging looks as they took chairs next to one another. The quarters were so close that Kirk had to sit very straight to prevent clashing with Versin’s knees.

“Golgotharen is an orbital facility specializing in the treatment of diseases of the mind among Vulcans,” Versin began. “I have been master healer there for seven Vulcan years. That is six point six one years in human terms, Captain Kirk.”

There was a pause that Versin obviously expected him to fill. “Yes, I know,” Kirk said.

“I have never treated a being with a disability such as Spock’s; it is most unusual. However, I have considerable experience with other mental dysfunctions suffered by Vulcans. I have examined the file. Spock, you lost all psychic abilities when you were attacked?”

“Yes,” Spock said evenly, as if his equanimity now could deny the turbulent emotion and the pain of the past year. His hands rested quietly in his lap. “I have been unable to initiate or sustain melds, have not been able to exercise specific control over my body, have not been able to heal myself, have had to compensate for sensory perceptions in a way that is less than optimum. However, I did regain my time sense nine weeks and two days after the initial dysfunction.”

“No improvement since that time?”

“Correct.”

“Sluman told me that despite your apparent mind blindness, you experienced contact shortly after the attack.”

“Affirmative. One of the members of a group-mind, a leader named Gri-Ta, was able to communicate with me non-verbally three times. The third time she pulled two humans, Captain Kirk and Doctor McCoy, into a shared mental experience.”

“Yet no other healer has duplicated the contact.”

Kirk offered, “We’ve been to an Andorian exchanger, a human neurologist, and another Vulcan healer besides Sluman. Nobody’s been able to touch his mind.”
Versin’s glance flicked off the surface of Kirk’s dress uniform. It clearly said: unimportant. He returned his quicksilver gaze to Spock and arrowed another question at him.

“Theorize. What made the union with this Gri-Ta possible?”

Spock spoke slowly but steadily. “I was sensitized by the needs of the body. The first contact was immediately before an out-of-season pon farr, the second,” a perceptible pause, “during the mating experience, the third immediately after.”

Silence, broken only by the passing of a ground car on the wet street outside. Kirk stared down at the gray squares of the tiled floor.

The mating experience. Three words to describe the glory of finding his lover in the desert of the mind, barely alive yet waiting for the nourishment that only their mental joining could give. It was profanity to speak of that most private experience to others, and Kirk hated doing so as much as Spock must hate it. But to give back to his lover his unique Vulcan life, he would talk about anything, encourage Spock to talk about even this.

The strained silence must have lasted a full ten seconds—forty-four Vulcan dranaths, Kirk translated defiantly—when Versin said in a harsh voice, “You must not speak of it before this outworlder—”

Spock squared his shoulders. “Versin, you must be aware that I joined with Captain Kirk in my Time. He is already fully cognizant of the ravages of the pon farr, for I inflicted them upon him. There is nothing to hide for he knows it all. To pretend a discretion that is not needed would be illogical.”

“Do not lecture me of logic, Spock. You have turned from many of the disciplines, and I— “

The patient did not give the healer a chance to finish. “Do you wish to treat me, Versin?”

Versin allowed signs of his annoyance to be expressed: a tightening of the muscles of his jaw and between his eyes, a shifting of his lanky frame. “I have said it. Data provided from your case may be useful.”

Not: you are a sentient being whom I wish to help. Not: you suffer and I can alleviate your suffering. Instead: useful data. No other doctor had been so cold, not even the other healer and certainly not Sluman. Kirk wished he knew the bio-feedback mechanisms to regulate his blood pressure, and thought of McCoy instead. Bones would have had a fit during this interview.

“I wish to contribute that data,” Spock said. “However, Captain Kirk is my chosen partner, and that must be accepted by all. Let us move to other subjects.”

Versin nodded. “Speak to me of this Gri-Ta. She appears to have considerable psychic gifts.”

“Yes. However, her orientation as an individual being was quite different from our own. She is primarily of the group mind.”

“She was unable to help you further? Did she make the attempt?”

“Yes, she tried but was unsuccessful. However, she believed that it was possible that all my psychic abilities or some part of them would eventually return, spontaneously, although it was equally likely that they would not. She based her belief on the bond that had begun to grow between the captain and myself. Some part of it must still exist, or I would not have been drawn to him during the time of my need.”
“The bond. You are certain it existed, that a spontaneous bond came into existence between you and this psi-null being?”

“Affirmative. It was rudimentary in nature when it was destroyed, but it did exist.”

“If such is the case, I agree with Gri-Ta’s hypothesis. If a beginning bond functioned during the extremities of your Time, then other aspects of your psychic abilities may also be present, although hidden.”

Sluman spoke. “I concur. I searched for evidence during my initial attempts at joining with the patient, but I was unable to confirm my theory. There was no true contact. Spock’s mind is impermeable; primarily, the psychic indexing centers of the hippocampus appeared to be non-functioning. I considered recommending that he go to Vulcan for further examination when I learned that you would be on Earth. You are far more suited to examine him than I.”

“Agreed,” Versin said, acknowledging what was only logical. “However, my reflection on the problem does not initially lead me to wish to examine Spock as you did. You and others have done so and discovered only residual energy. I consider a different approach.” The bushy-haired Vulcan looked directly at Kirk. “I will meld with you, Captain Kirk.”

Surprise swept up Kirk’s spine, pulling him straight. “Me?”

“Yes. The roots of this so-called bond, or perhaps merely a link, may be present within you. If it does indeed exist in some form, I may be able to uncover and stimulate it. Sluman will then attempt to draw Spock into a joint experience as was done before, with my link with you as an inducement towards the autonomic functions of the bond. The link may thus be re-established. Or perhaps not. Spock’s condition is unique and therefore calls for experimental measures. Do you consent?”

“Yes,” Kirk said.

“No,” Spock said just as quickly. “It may be harmful to the captain. I cannot allow such an intrusion. At the least we should delay until we encounter a healer familiar with humans.”

Kirk turned halfway in his seat to face his lover. “I’ll be all right. You know I’ve never had a problem with mental contact.”

“Except that you became overly fatigued during our deepest melds. Do you not remember? We were not able to join as frequently as we wished because of your problems.”

“Of course I remember,” Kirk said sharply. “Do you think I’ve forgotten anything? Anything at all?” He tried to catch his sudden indignation. It wasn’t Spock with whom he was angry. “I remember,” he said softly. “And I know that problem was early in our relationship. You adapted and so did I. It got better. With only one meld with Versin, I shouldn’t have a problem.”

“The human will not come to harm.”

“Captain Kirk is due to participate in the Federation Day ceremonies in fewer than three point two hours,” Spock said. “It is inappropriate for us to jeopardize such an important—”

Kirk touched the sleeve of the blue tunic, enough to stop the flow of words. “Spock,” he said, and for a moment he simply lived within the mystery of the dark gaze. There had been a time when he had shared the secrets there, when he had trod the inner landscape of this most extraordinary being’s life.
“I’ll be all right.” He wished they were alone so they could talk about this privately, but they weren’t and the healers were probably not even aware of the emotional necessity. “No one has tried this approach before, at least not since Gri-Ta did. It’s an opportunity we can’t pass up. I’m going to meld with Versin, and it isn’t logical to put this off. You’ve waited long enough, haven’t you? More than a year we’ve waited. Now, maybe, there’s a new chance....” He turned back to the healer. “When? Now?”

“There is no logic in waiting.” Versin’s hand rose towards Kirk’s face, but Spock was there, capturing the healer’s fingers before they made contact.

“There is at least logic in caution,” Spock said, then he released the healer. “Have you ever joined with a human before?”

“You overstep your authority, Spock,” Sluman said. “Versin has great skill. You need not fear for your partner.”

“And I have experience in melding with humans. I have done so with many individuals, and it is only appropriate that I present my accumulated information.”

Versin’s face froze, a Vulcan’s substitute for frowning. Slowly, the healer’s hand returned to his lap. “This is logical. Proceed.”

“I warn you, Versin, to avoid confrontation with the ego center. Humans do not react well to it. A gradual approach is best during the period of stabilization, although later full functional integration should be possible. Above all, project using concrete images or the captain will supply them for the experience instead.”

Both healers blinked in understated, astonished unison. Sluman spoke. “That is unlikely with a psi-null being.”

“That is the perceived wisdom, yet I have found it violated on several occasions. The captain is perfectly capable of attempting to control the meld, even if inadvertently, simply through his mind’s need to translate images into familiar constructs.”

“I understand,” Versin said. “You reveal a possible avenue of approach. We should proceed now.”

“Fine,” Kirk replied, jumping in before Spock could come up with another reason for delay. He wanted to do this. “I don’t think I’ll have a problem.”

“Your experience with one to whom you were never properly bonded holds no relevance. This will be different. I suspect the pathways the two of you forged in your lust will be so warped that I will have great difficulty following them. I must not be distracted; therefore, you must be controlled. Will you cooperate?”

Tightening jaw muscles were the only manifestation of his anger that Kirk allowed. Versin with his narrow shoulders, narrow features and even narrower soul was Spock’s last realistic chance. Their last chance. No one had said it, but everyone in this little room knew it. Where else could they go after Versin?

“I’ll cooperate.”

“Very well. We will begin.”

“A moment.” It was Sluman, rising from his seat and inching his way around the chairs towards the door. “If we are successful, then I will need to act as a bridge to Spock as well. This would be
better accomplished if I enlist the services of T’Braggia and our fla’arsun. Our apprentice,” he explained to Kirk. “They will act as stabilizers and focal points if we are successful. Wait while I call them.”

A minute later two Vulcan women entered behind the elderly healer. T’Braggia Kirk knew from before. She was as emaciated as Sluman was fleshy, with the bones of her elbows looking sharp enough to pierce her fragile, paper-like skin, but she had the same calm demeanor as her bondmate. She also had that certain spark in her eye that Kirk had found in other beings who were not human but who nevertheless understood the universe in the same ways that he did. It was a similar spark that had arced and sizzled between a determined captain and his focused first officer on the Enterprise five years before.

She too had tried to join with Spock during their second visit, and Kirk liked her because she had been dismayed when her attempt had been unsuccessful. She had actually said I grieve with thee to both of them as her fingers slid from Spock’s face. Perhaps because he liked T’Braggia, he also liked Sluman, and he thought that within the intimacy of their own bonding, which surely had lasted at least two centuries, they must understand the loss he suffered with Spock. The severing of their mental contact reduced them, it left them unlinked except in the human way of love and desire, and he had learned that it was not enough.

Behind T’Braggia was a young Vulcan woman, so young in comparison to the ancient healers that she seemed like a child with her unlined skin taut over pale cheekbones. She bowed in the doorway, her eyes taking in Versin, Sluman, Kirk and then….

When her gaze reached Spock, a small gasp escaped her prim lips. Immediately, she folded her hands within her robe and lowered her head as if in shame.

“T’Genia.” The name was a rebuke from Sluman, who radiated disapproval.

“I beg forgiveness. I should have anticipated the absence of an aura.”

“Indeed, your reaction reveals a lack of forethought, as well as inadequate control before one who requires your assistance. We will discuss this later. For now, you are required as I explained. Take your place.”

T’Genia stood next to T’Braggia, each of them behind Sluman’s chair, and Kirk gave Versin his attention.

Versin’s fingers weren’t long and beautiful as Spock’s were, they were sticks, but they settled just as warmly on the meld points that hadn’t been touched for months. Kirk looked at his—partner, Sluman had called him—at his partner, his life’s partner, and he allowed himself to feel hope that this would work, that when it was over Spock would be himself again. But he didn’t let his hope show, hope had a way of hurting sometimes, so he closed his eyes and gave himself up to the pressure on his temples and cheeks. The healer said loudly, so unlike any mantra Spock had ever used, “My mind to your mind, Kirk. Open to me....”

And suddenly no one else was there. The one named Kirk was—

—a k’tekerel,

—no, nothing at all in deepest darkness,

—no, he was small, so small, like a—

—a minute particle of sand in an endless desert. He was a grain of sand, and he was buried deep
beneath the surface. He felt the weight of all the other grains pushing him down. So heavy. Too heavy to breathe. How could a body breathe with so much weight on his chest? How could a heart beat? Out! There was no way to live in this darkness/desert /k’tekerel get out—

A twist of his body, a flash of light towards which he kicked, squirmed, angled, and the sand parted and he surged up, and up, and something pulled on his legs (sand with legs and chest? Discontinuity—) and from far away he heard a voice he knew *Terminate the meld Let him go I insist* and faintly from where the hands gripped him a new mantra *from the autonomic to the subconscious to the conscious*....

…and then he breasted the surface of the ocean of sand and there wasn’t any pressure and he was James T. Kirk in a meld with Versin from Golgotharen.

A desiccated touch, ethereal and yet oh so definite. Not words—Vulcans were telepaths too, but melding was another gift, telepathy turned on its side, twisted and forced into the service of a unique sexuality. Kirk had never found the words to describe it. Contact that was not physical, an understanding, a projection of self and intention…. There was nothing similar in the physical world.

But he remembered what he’d shared with Spock, the press of flesh upon his face, so often they’d started with a kiss, tongue in mouth, so hot, the so-sexual way Spock’s mind had eased into his, their mutual hunger for the sliding of their thoughts together, the joy they shared with each perception, one being in all its *being* overlaid upon another—and he knew even as he shuttered those images that Versin had seen them. No matter, this was the truth, the way it was. But not what Versin wanted, he knew.

//This isn’t a true meld, is it? You’re minimizing your input. I can’t read you…//

Perhaps, a flicker of surprise. //There is no need for you to perceive me. All that is necessary is for me to perceive you.//

Rebellion, quickly suppressed. Arrogance had always grated against him.

//What happened at the beginning?//

//The entry proceeded more swiftly than I had anticipated.//

He awaited Versin’s next move, using what he could to replace the nothingness. For another few hours or so he was still a starship captain, and he faced the unknown. Shoulders back, hands with fingers uncurled by his side, weight balanced over his hips, ready to shift to the balls of his feet at the first sign—

//Ah, this is an example of that to which Spock referred. Interesting. Are you unable to go beyond this merely physical projection to participate in a full Vulcan mental experience? So Spock never —//

//That is between my bondmate and myself.//

//No bond partner for there is no bond, unless we discover some portion of it here. Put aside your manifestations of aggression. I am no danger to you, Kirk.//

//My apologies.// There was no regret in their shared space. //The urge to protect that which we love is instinctive in humans.//

//You love the bond that was? What you say is illogical—//
//I love Spock, who is. I’m not ashamed. Humans need love as part of their lives.//

//But not Vulcans. It is against the ways of Surak.//

//I don’t know about Vulcans. I know Spock.//

//Perhaps. Lead me to him. Think of him.//

Spock at their only joint debriefing, elegant hands folded before him….

//Negative. Proceed.// Versin deepened their contact. The distance between them thinned.

…Spock over the scanners on the bridge, deep voice warning “Incoming fire”….

//Possible. Proceed.//

…Spock glancing at him across the briefing room table, a nod of agreement, the merest hint of a smile….

//Interesting. An emotional reaction where there should be none.//

…Spock with a towel over his wet head after a joint shower, igniting desire all over again….

//Desire is surrender to insanity. But you are closer. Perhaps, emotional intensity. Again.//

…Spock in the sanity-draining intensity of pon farr, shivering with repressed need, hunched over himself as he denied, and denied, and denied, and Kirk’s soul ached each second that kept them apart until finally they were alone and Spock’s hot body slammed against his, pushing him down….

//Negative! Negative!/ The healer abruptly retreated, leaving Kirk to experience alone the pain of rough penetration, to know the fear that physical contact was not enough, and to remember his desperate scramble as Spock heaved within him as he tried to find something, anything that would keep Spock alive…and then his call to Gri-Ta. Her unique powers brought him to a trickle of water in the desert where Spock waited for baptism. They embraced and rolled in the water, laughing. He felt the wet-hot hands on his shoulders, his hips, and the shocking joy as their minds slid together. Such joy. Always. Ecstasy better than any orgasm, that place the two of them inhabited, the most private place. They were meant to be together.

But not any more.

Kirk waited twenty Vulcan dranaths before projecting: //Too much emotional intensity? I lived through it. He did too. That was the last time the bond funcionated. It should add to your database.//

Versin was a dark bulk with sharp edges, a decisive presence that loomed closer as he tightened his control with a sudden wrench. //Kirk, you have no right. You mock all of Vulcan.//

Kirk flowed with Versin’s strength, gave himself up to it willingly. //What is, is, right? This is what we are, Spock and me. I attempt to aid in your search for the bond. You implied emotional intensity would help. That’s what pon farr is all about. Did you find anything before you turned away?//

//Negative. You are a ruthless human and not a suitable partner for a Vulcan.//

//Damn right I’m ruthless. The man I love is hurt.//
Love? You base this bastardized relationship on the ephemeral, that which followers of Surak must avoid.

Bastardized. That hurt. Versin had said they had no ties of commitment. Untrue, for they were here in his heart. But no one saw them.

The idea isn’t to avoid emotion but understand it, take what’s good in it and make it part of your life.

You speak of what you do not know.

I know this. The most important part of Spock’s life, of our life together, has been ripped away. Ask me what I’d do for him, to see him whole and happy again. Ask me!

There is no need. I see your conviction.

Anything, healer. Anything.

Generalizations can be dangerously illogical. Beware the promises you make, human.

I keep my promises.

This discussion is irrelevant and you are too emotional to aid me. We will not be successful. I will end this union now.

No! Wait!

For what purpose?

So you keep your promise as a healer. See me? I know you do, you control the meld. Look!

I perceive you.

Do you? Do you really? Or are you ignoring the emotions that you find so distasteful? I’m bleeding inside.

A fanciful human metaphor.

Effectively descriptive. I know you don’t care about me, but think about your fellow Vulcan. Your patient. If you could see inside him, you’d know what pain is, and courage and despair. Imagine what it must have been like, to have everything that made him a Vulcan ripped away.

Emotional empathy is a dangerous path for any healer.

You’re a healer. Heal us!

You step beyond yourself.

Heal us!

Then give me your mind. All of it.

Less than one dranath. That was all it took for Versin to expand their joining to cruel, overwhelming brilliance that shattered any illusions Kirk had about asserting himself. Versin’s power was stark and hard-fingered—nothing like the life-sustaining light of his unions with Spock—and the healer chose to exert all of his might now. Electricity shot through him in a screaming
line of fire, taking whatever it was that was Kirk in this exploding world and stretching him with it as it streaked away, so he was thinner, thinner still, until he was utterly transparent, he was a pane of polished glass, no, a sheet of ice, his heart frozen since he and Spock couldn’t touch anymore….  

He struggled not to resist, to give all of himself for inspection as the essence of the one named Versin flowed inexorably over him: a flood tide of grating sand shrieked across the ice of his being. This was a surrender of that total other self, a different self usually hidden by the body, hidden even by thoughts, but revealed now. He couldn’t prevent it, he remembered in flashing but perfect detail how it had been with Spock, and oh God he wanted it again and Versin chose to walk on him with all his weight, there, to observe the memory and the surging emotion. One step, two, crunch and crackle, he shattered under the scrutiny, he was destroyed, and he fell with the ice shards cutting him….  

//…From the conscious to the subconscious to the autonomic. You are free. There is no bond.//  

He became aware that he was trembling. He clasped his hands between his black-clad knees, elbows on thighs, he bent over them while he breathed in great gulps of air. A murmur of voices washed over him, and then came a tentative touch at the base of his neck. Spock warmed him there, gently massaged, his hand a bridge back to equilibrium. But such exhibitionism was anathema to the measured way of Surak.

“No,” Kirk murmured and made a feeble attempt at shrugging his shoulders. He wasn’t going expose his partner to the healers’ ridicule. “It’s all right. I’m okay.”

Fingers squeezed and then fell away.

He felt as if he’d been turned inside out and then shaken. It was not cold in the consulting room despite the autumn rain pelting against the window, but Kirk shivered.  

Spock went down on one knee, his arms forming a protective circle as they rested on the chair’s back and arm. “Jim. Are you well?”

“I’m fine.”

“Then look at me.”

He lifted his head and their gazes joined. What beautiful eyes Spock had. They were brown, deeply set and some might say ordinary, but from the day on the bridge so many years ago when he had caught within them a glimpse of the complex hidden man, Kirk had thought them extraordinary. Because Spock’s eyes spoke the truth to anyone who cared to look into them, he had realized they need not be separate and always different with a gulf of misunderstanding between them. They could be friends. They could be brothers. T’hy’la.

Beautiful eyes. He had seen them struggling with pain more than a year ago, when Spock had first been attacked and later as they slowly came to terms with all he had lost. He had seen them raging with anger against the capricious injustice of the universe. Now, they regarded him with calm strength.

He could not lie in the face of that courage. “He didn’t find anything.”

“I am aware of that.”

“I had hoped—”

“But I had not. I am resigned to my condition, you know that.”
“I know,” he said hopelessly.

“Now I am concerned about you.”

“Don’t be.”

“Always.”

“Spock…” He wanted to reach out and touch his lover’s cheek. Damn it! Not here. Never here, never now, never free. For too long they had lived apart, danced to the tune Starfleet played with Spock in bachelor officers’ quarters and Kirk thirty kilometers away in ’fleet’s prize penthouse. They had met and nodded, been efficient officers, suitable candidates to tout a starship’s success, allowed themselves to be paraded as friends, dedicated comrades-in-arms—but not what they truly were.

Spock’s face was very close, he could see the short, spare eyelashes and the little endearing bump next to that prominent nose. His hard-fought control evaporated, and Kirk remembered, so clearly, the possessive press of Vulcan lips against his own, and what it meant to him to have Spock’s powerful body surrender within his arms. And he remembered the rhythm of the days they had lived together on the ship, and the way life had been right and good.

He spoke softly, just for Spock, though it was probable that the damn Vulcans could hear every word. It didn’t matter.

“Tomorrow,” he said very deliberately, “we are renting that house. I don’t care how much it costs and I don’t care what schedules we have to rearrange. All right?”

The ghost of a smile gained life for a moment. “On one condition.”

“And that is?”

“That we take possession of the dwelling the day after tomorrow.”

“You’re so precipitous,” Kirk murmured.

“Logical, considering the situation. Do you not agree?”

“You know I do. Not one more day apart.”

Spock gifted him with that smile again, then he stood and was a proper son of Vulcan. Beyond him Kirk could see both Versin and Sluman by the door. It was, predictably, Sluman who came towards them with a scanner in his hands.

“You show signs of stress for a human: elevated blood pressure, increased respiration, the release of specific hormones. However, I do not believe you have suffered any lasting ill effects beyond an understandable fatigue. Do you need to rest in another room?”

“I’ll be fine.” He stood carefully, flexing the stiffness from his knees and elbows, pulling on the hem of the rustling tunic, and then he faced the two full Vulcans squarely. Sluman’s words, at least, had been considerate ones, although there was nothing but aloof serenity in his countenance.

“I appreciate your concern, but I care more about what Healer Versin saw. What was there? Anything that we could build on? What’s our next step?”

Versin moved forward, in the tiny room it brought them very close, and although there was nothing overtly emotional in his action, Kirk imagined the trace of a sneer on those finely logical
features. He knew exactly what Versin thought of him, and he wouldn’t soon forget the fire and desiccation of the final meld that had been closer to an assault.

“There was nothing there, Kirk. Only the disordered patterns of an illogical, emotional being. I would doubt that there was any contact with a Vulcan mind, ever, let alone a rudimentary bonding, if I had not experienced your memory of it.”

Spock would not allow that challenge to go unanswered. “There was a bonding, Versin, do not doubt it.”

“It is illogical to speak thus, as I have said I saw it in this one’s memory. As to the next step. It is obvious that I must attempt to examine you, Spock, although I do not believe there is a great likelihood of a positive outcome. Nevertheless, there are several additional tests that may be of use; they have recently been developed by a most gifted protégé of mine and have proven to be enlightening in the treatment of other mentally-incapacitated patients brought to Golgotharen. They have not yet been administered to you. It will take but an hour, perhaps two because of the complexity of your case.”

“T’Braggia is preparing the equipment now,” Sluman contributed. “It is an interesting approach. We will be able to start in a few minutes.”

Spock stood as solidly as one of his planet’s rare ibatha trees, all serene black strength. “Perhaps another time. Captain Kirk is needed at Federation Headquarters in France.”

Again Versin jerked his head up and to the right, dismissing the statement. “My time on Earth is limited, son of Sarek, and my schedule confined. I have agreed to give you hours this morning. It is illogical to resist.”

Much as he hated to admit it, Kirk agreed. “Let’s stay. He can—”

“Negative. You have an obligation to Commodore Andersen, and I will not interfere with that.”

“The interviews aren’t essential. I’ll stay.”

“Jim, this is a most important day in your life.” Spock’s impassivity, displayed so easily for the other Vulcans, melted into earnest words. “You are being promoted to the position of commodore before the eyes of the Federation and will justly receive the congratulations of your peers and your superiors alike. Admiral Nogura will be present. Your mother will be at the reception beforehand, as well as many friends. You deserve to enjoy this day. I do not wish to dilute its impact by excessive attention to my problem. I have already interfered more than I wished.”

“What are you talking about? This ‘problem’ is us, Spock, right? What’s more important than this? I’m staying.”

“Then you will converse with the healers on your own, for I am not staying.”

They stared at one another fiercely until Versin’s grating voice broke through their stubbornness.

“You provide an excellent example of why you must terminate your relationship with this human.”

That was enough to interrupt their concentration on each other. Versin addressed Spock as if Kirk were not standing there next to him.

“You behave in an overtly emotional manner. This human encourages the emotion in you, and it lies on the surface like exposed rocks for any to see. Have you no perspective on your own
behavior? He causes you to make illogical decisions. I offer you help that may not be repeated from another lacking my skill, and you reject it for what reason? For an excessive and shameful attachment to one not of your race, not of your beliefs, not one who is a suitable mental partner. He seduces you in the deceptive manner of humans, who disguise their faults as gifts.”

Each word was a stone thrown by the perfect accuser who felt he had no part in their sin. Kirk felt his anger rise not for himself but for Spock, standing stiffly and so far silently.

“I have seen this human’s mind now and the echo of his katra, and I know he is not capable of providing you with the full mental joining any Vulcan requires. How can you pursue this travesty of a bonding? He is not capable of it. It is not beneficial, it cannot ever be complete, it is not of Vulcan. You are being illogical.” He eyed them from a haughty, self-contained height.

“Nevertheless, I have said I will participate in this search for your Vulcan psychic self, and I will. Perhaps, if you are ever rehabilitated, you will come to realize that what I speak is the truth, and you will reject him and seek a compatible Vulcan who can freely give of his or her mind to fill your needs. I allow you five of your human minutes—one thousand, three hundred and twenty dranaths, if you remember that much of the ways of your home planet—to join me in the examination room.”

He turned and walked with stately strides from the room and down the hall.

Sluman was the one who broke the silence. “I would not express myself in such a fashion. My examination of your situation does not lead me to the same conclusions as Versin. In the view of some, choosing a male, human companion goes against community and accentuates individual needs, but T’Braggia and I have lived in communities off-Vulcan. These experiences have led me to form attitudes different from Versin’s perspective. However, there is no fault in his logic if one accepts his basic premises.”

“We don’t accept them,” Kirk countered.

“Which is of no consequence,” Spock said almost wearily. “There is a logical solution to our difference of opinion. I—”

“You’ll stay here and let them examine you. Please, Spock. He’s right, we need to take advantage of him while he’s here. Better here and now than going off to Golgotharen. You stay and I’ll—”

“You can be assured, I will never go to Golgotharen. But you must go to Paris. Now. I am motivated by more than the desire to have you fully relish this day; you also have a duty to continue to represent Starfleet with the media. There is a task to be accomplished and no need for you to stay here.”

“All right.” Kirk lifted his face to the small window and addressed the dripping tree branch. “I know you’re right. You don’t need me here to hold your hand.”

Kirk could imagine Spock’s eyebrow rising as he assimilated yet another human idiom. “Indeed not. We have already scandalized Versin sufficiently for today, I believe.”

“Spock, I—” But Kirk was interrupted by his communicator.

“Yes?” He stabbed the word at the inoffensive unit in his hand. “What?”

“We’re waiting for you, Kirk,” Andersen’s voice growled. “Don’t let me down.”

The time spent with his mind in the healer’s must have been longer than he’d realized. His melds with Spock had always seemed to last forever, and yet in real time only seconds would have
elapsed.

Good. His connection with Versin hadn’t allowed that effortless union.

“I’ll be on my way soon, Commodore.”

“How about right now? I’ve got a priority lock on your coordinates through Space Dock, we won’t have to waste any time going through a station and you can avoid the demonstration going on in the square. Come on, Kirk, what else could be so important? I’ve got a mighty testy press corps here. As it is there’s only an hour before the reception starts.”

He looked from the comm unit to Spock. “Dinner tonight at midnight Paris time, and then tomorrow, right?”

“Affirmative. Ten hundred hours? I will notify the realtor’s office.”

“Ten hundred hours sounds fine.”

“I will arrive in Paris in time for the ceremony, Jim. You can be certain of that.”

“I know you will.” Duty called again. “Andersen, permission given to energize.”

The disorientation of transporting took over for a moment, then he opened his eyes to Paris.
CHAPTER TWO: Sensor Readings

An autumn sprinkle was falling in a fine mist when Spock materialized into the nighttime air. He registered the uncomfortable dampness on his head and neck as soon as his body re-formed enough to shiver from the cold. It was an indication of his agitated state that he had not thought the weather in Paris might mimic that on the west coast of the North American continent, albeit several degrees colder. A jacket to protect his dress tunic and provide warmth would have been welcome.

But that item would have been difficult to procure, as he was already late. The invasive and uncomfortable tests to which Versin had subjected him had lasted far longer than one hour, and he had been forced to commandeer a high-priority transporter slot to hasten his arrival at the reception and ceremony. Spock disliked using his position in Starfleet to garner favors over civilians, but it could not be helped, for he had been determined to arrive at the reception as soon as possible. The technician in the neighborhood station, the one that he and Jim would be using in the future if they managed to secure their hoped-for accommodation, had been impressed with his uniform and possibly also intimidated by his obvious alien nature. The woman had promptly beamed him to the main Starfleet trans-station ahead of the other early-lunch commuters already in line. At headquarters the lieutenant on duty had straightened before his rank and suggested the local transporter safe-coordinates in Paris for materialization instead of the main, underground facility that was much further from Friendship Hall.

And so Spock was now only a few hundred meters from where the official reception in the Federation complex had already started, and where at 2130 local time, Jim would be promoted to commodore.

He stepped briskly down the pedestrian-way, hugging the shadows near a pink granite building to minimize the precipitation’s effect on his uniform. As was to be expected in the inclement weather and at this time of evening, the sidewalks were empty, and there was only an occasional groundcar to throw up water from the puddles on the streets. His booted feet made sharp clicking sounds that echoed off the high concrete walls. A more emotional being would have found the silence, the darkness, the outdoor lights reflecting off the wet surfaces, and especially the solitude an eerie combination.

Spock did not find it so. He welcomed the solitude most of all. The time with Versin had been wearing, and the results of his tests were disturbing. Jim would have to be told.

Spock didn’t trust Versin or his conclusion that the lack of mental stimulation and the damage to his linkages were serious problems that would inevitably lead to periods of unconsciousness and worse. Vulcans, the healer had said, even half-Vulcans such as Spock, required some sort of psychic input, and Spock had none. Surely Spock had known no Vulcan could survive so isolated within his own mind.

Perhaps…or perhaps not. He had lived this half-life for almost eighteen months.

Whether the prognosis was valid or not, he would not be telling Jim about any of it tonight. Spock would not impose his personal problems on the celebration, no matter Jim’s questions or concerns. This night was to be for James T. Kirk.

He checked for traffic, then jogged across the street. When he reached the slippery sidewalk again, he paused to look up at a cloud that shadowed a half moon. The light mist fell upon his face, like
fingertips caressing him. Two years ago he would not have allowed himself to be aware of the sensation, but since he had taken to his captain’s bed and his captain’s heart he would ignore neither his emotions nor his body. It was illogical to disregard an elementary part of one’s being, although that was not the Vulcan philosophy in which he had been trained. Vulcan philosophy was to twist the twig as it grew, and it also leaned toward the controlled passion of self-sacrifice. Vulcans, Jim had once ruefully declared, were born to die as martyrs.

Versin would be scandalized at his connection of moonlight and mist with emotional, sexual sensations. Perhaps Sluman and T’Braggia would be as well. That, too, was disturbing.

Voices alerted him that he was close to his destination. Human voices that appeared to be… chanting?

He emerged from the long canyon of the pedestrian-way to a large open area embraced by the wings of a stucco Andorian-style building. A group marched in a circle holding placards displaying messages. Humans have rights, too and Who built the Federation? and Keep Earth for humans and, alarmingly, Pure humans only, no aberrations! This must be the Eternist demonstration that Commodore Andersen had mentioned. The individuals numbered only about twenty and looked bedraggled and miserable with hunched shoulders. They walked in a slow circle, and the soft splatter of the rain muffled whatever it was they were singing or saying.

Unobserved, Spock remained in the shadows. He believed he understood the thinking that propelled the Eternists. All sentient beings feared loss of power and influence; they feared change. The Federation was changing for good or for ill as the influence of the non-human races grew. The future would be different. He, himself, was one symbol of the slow but steady infiltration of other-than-humans into Starfleet, into Federation administration, and into the everyday life of commerce and the arts that humans for so long had taken as their given areas to dominate and command.

Many humans were not threatened when a Tellarite headed the Federation Commission on the Arts or an Andorian led the giant corporation that provided most of Earth’s transporter components, but many were. Some of those who were threatened moved beyond a quiet unease to more aggressive action. Most animals would defend their homes, their caves, or their burrows, and humans were no different.

But humans were sentient and should be able to find the good in change that seemed inevitable. They should be able to accept those who were of mixed races or a different sexuality or a different religion from their own. Spock pressed his lips together and walked forward.

When he mounted a flight of shallow steps, the demonstrators saw him. “Look,” said a husky female voice, “it’s him. Spock. The half-breed.”

“Where?”

“Right there, you idiot. See the ears? He must be trying to get in.”

“Really? It’s Kirk’s buddy, all right. I’ve never seen a Vulcan before. Looks more human than I expected. Skinny, isn’t he?”

He ignored a growing murmur that grew to shouts as he maintained his measured pace; he felt no threat from such a group. On other occasions he had been subject to far worse than words for being different. It appeared, however, that the local security forces took the demonstrators more seriously. Before him on the steps was a Starfleet Marine in white helmet and with a Malinkovsky rifle phaser cradled in the crook of his arm. The man stared pointedly at the protesters as he extended an escorting arm toward Spock.
This way, sir.”

Cries of “Alien, Go Home” punctuated his entry into the gilt and curtain-draped foyer. Through the archway that led to the reception space came the clashing strains of Chopin and conversation, and a glimpse of an overabundance of decoration, both on the muraled walls and on the milling bodies.

Two Marines guarded the doorway. They wore one-piece, dress-blue uniforms, but each also displayed a Markov Type II hand phaser in a holster strapped to a leg. The weapon was field equipment with an enhanced firing range and a wide selection of settings above stun; it was not typical embassy issue.

As they snapped to attention when he approached, another figure advanced, one Spock immediately recognized. It was Commander Giotto, former leader of the security forces on the Enterprise: gray, grizzled, and thinner than he had been before the grievous injury that had forced him off the ship and into a full year of recovery and rehabilitation.

“Commander Spock,” the man said with a touch of welcome. Giotto had always been undemonstrative for a human, a trait Spock thought appropriate for security personnel.

“Commander,” Spock returned. “I had not known you were back on active duty.”

“And I’m glad to be back. At least temporarily, I’m in charge of security precautions here in Paris.”

“I see.” Giotto had been an excellent field officer, a man of experience and talent. He deserved to be posted to a starship, if that was what he wanted.

The comm on Giotto’s belt beeped and he murmured a few words into it. Slapping it back on his belt, he said, “Excuse me, Commander, duty calls. My people here will take care of your screening.”

Giotto left and one of the soldiers extended a box-like instrument.

“Good evening, Commander. Identification, please?”

Before he bent his head for the retinal scan, he noticed that the other soldier before him, a woman who met his gaze squarely, actually stood at the ready with her hand on her thigh, as if he were potentially dangerous. Spock had witnessed Marines in action before. He would do nothing to provoke her, for she and her fellows were capable of reacting to a hint of hostility in an exceedingly short period of time. Swift reflexes were one of the criteria for entry into the Starfleet elite ground force. But her very presence—and Giotto’s, too—made him curious and concerned.

“Is there some problem anticipated?”

She maintained a poker face and shook her head. “No, sir, just routine.”

“These precautions appear to be excessive for the merely routine.”

She did not respond, but there was little probability that one of her rank would know the true reasons behind her orders. Spock bent to the instrument with some unease.

The ID procedure complete, the man examined the results on the display. “Welcome to Paris, Commander Spock. All guests will be asked to enter Friendship Hall for the ceremony at twenty-one hundred hours. We’re conducting personal scans here.” He flourished a tricorder. “Permission
to scan, sir?"

Another unusual procedure. “Permission granted.” Spock waited while the instrument charted his body from his head to his Starfleet boots. The machine beeped as it registered the congested mass of metal and ribbons on his chest; the Marine made an adjustment and continued with no comment.

“All clear, sir. Please proceed.” Spock nodded as the guards stepped back and saluted.

He paused at the door to the reception and surveyed the noisy confusion. Although the inevitable humans predominated, there were also beings of many different species. Many of the guests spoke so avidly that Spock’s sensitive ears registered the beginnings of pain. He seldom allowed himself to regret the loss of his ability to compensate for physical distress—emotional indulgence was a perilous pastime—and so he resigned himself to a modicum of discomfort. It was of no consequence.

His task was to slide through the cracks in the crowd and make contact with James Kirk, or at a minimum catch his attention so that Jim knew he was present. It would also be wise to gather more data concerning the presence of the security personnel. Spock was acutely conscious of his lack of information and his lack of power to act upon data once presented. On the Enterprise, information had flowed through his scanners and computers, through his own experience and analysis before being presented to the captain. For five years Spock had stood at the center of a data-laden whirlpool. Here on Earth he was far from that most satisfying life and far from being able to shape action, and in this gathering he was one of the lowest ranking of attendees. Starfleet Command did not inform mere commanders of its affairs.

He could hear snippets of several conversations. As expected, some spoke of newly de-classified missions in which he had taken part. A round-faced attaché from Mars Colony Four was speaking vociferously enough that Spock could hear every word from six meters away. “…and it won’t pass in this session, no matter what kind of coalition the aliens manage to…. A sky-blue ribbon adorned his sleeve, indicating his allegiance to the Eternist party in the Federation Council. There were other such tokens in the hall. One ingenious woman had managed to incorporate it into the hologram radiating from her collar so that it stood audaciously above the crowd, giving her and her cause a prominence that in Spock’s opinion was undeserved. Spock saw that there was a scattering of such ribbons throughout the gathering. The Eternists were few in number, but as he had noticed outside, they had a knack for making themselves heard.

The crowd shifted in that fascinating way that gave massed entities a life of their own, and suddenly Admiral Komack was in view. Komack was now a permanent and powerful figure at headquarters, a trusted member of Nogura’s personal staff, and Spock nursed the unlikely hope that he would remain far away from Jim and himself. The differences between Komack and Jim Kirk were fueled by more than the admiral’s resentment over T’Pau’s interference when Jim had taken Spock to Vulcan in his Time. The two men favored radically different approaches to life and to service in the ’fleet, and their basic incompatibility had widened over the years into thinly-veiled animosity.

However, now Komack unwittingly worked in Spock’s favor, for he and a Capellan with whom he was in intent conversation chose that moment to turn toward the refreshment table, leaving an opening suitable for a determined Vulcan. Spock stepped forward, but before he could move to traverse the room, Jim’s mother discovered him.

She emerged from a cluster of Starfleet officers in blue, both hands on the full skirt of her gold and green velvet gown. She was not the type of woman, he had already surmised, who would come toward anyone, much less a Vulcan, with arms outstretched.
“Commander Spock. It is good to see you again.”

It was impossible to continue without committing a social impropriety, so he inclined his head and slipped smoothly into the diplomatic mode he had observed from his earliest days on Vulcan. “It is a pleasure to see you also, Ms. Kirk. Your dress is most becoming.” The gown complimented her red-gold, cropped-close hair and green eyes, so his statement had the merit of being truthful.

She smiled at that and shook out the skirt before allowing her hands to fall to her side. “Thank you. I’ve had it for years, but it does its duty for formal occasions. I’m pleased to see,” she scanned the high-ceilinged room, the groups of policy-makers and their hangers-on, “that formal in Chicago and Rome also works well in the headquarters of the Federation.” She returned her gaze to him. “And I learned a long time ago that the people are the same, too, regardless of their braid and fancy titles.”

He was unsure of exactly what she meant by that. An ironic commentary on her surroundings or a favorable one upon himself? His understanding of Sarah Kirk was far from complete. When he and James Kirk had dined with her at a restaurant in Denver—“It’s only right to meet me half-way,” Sarah had said. “I’m a busy lady”—he had been surprised by Jim’s mother. She was tall for a human female, a few centimeters taller than her son, and thin with bony shoulders and sharp elbows. She had a way of speaking definitively on all subjects. Spock had expected more softness, perhaps lured into the expectation by his captain—his former captain. He had assumed Jim’s mother would be beautiful but she was not, as her features were too sharp for such a classification. Perhaps, also, he had been misled by Jim’s understanding mind and generous heart and by the glint of humor so often to be seen in his eyes. On first evaluation, Sarah Kirk seemed quite different.

“Yes, indeed.”

“Yes, indeed,” she said archly. “Jim told me he was sure you’d be here, but I’m surprised that you’d make the time for something as frivolous as the Federation Day celebration. Wouldn’t Vulcans consider such an event illogical?”

“On the contrary, Ms. Kirk, my people value tradition, nor would I miss the opportunity to honor my former commander. Captain Kirk was…is an exceptional commanding officer.”

“Yes, so I’m told. Well, I’m sure Jim will be happy to see you. But happy isn’t in the Vulcan vocabulary, is it? It doesn’t matter, we’ll just let Jim be happy. Does he know you’re here?”

There was a temptation to snap out “negative” to the question, but Spock restrained himself. “I have just arrived. It was my intention to locate the captain and make my presence known to him.”

“He’s been holding court by the bay window in the corner, but he won’t be a captain for much longer,” she said with obvious satisfaction. “The youngest captain of a starship ever, and now the youngest man ever promoted to the rank of commodore. He’s going to go far, my Jim.”

So Spock had thought from within one month of serving with James Kirk; at least he and Jim’s mother agreed on this point. “Yes, it is appropriate that Starfleet is honoring him with this promotion.”

“And will again. He’ll make admiral sooner than his jump from captain to commodore, if the stuffed shirts at ‘fleet know how to recognize talent. Well, that’s all in the future. It’s important to enjoy the here and now. I imagine almost everybody has had a chance to shake Jim’s hand, so maybe we’ll actually be able to get you close enough to speak. Come along, this way.”

Although her peremptory tone was somewhat displeasing, Spock was relieved to be on his way.
The memory of the Markov phasers propelled him.

As they walked, Spock noticed the location of all five exits, and he watched for plainclothes security personnel as well. Although he and Sarah Kirk passed council members, ambassadors and their aides, officially registered lobbyists, several high ranking Starfleet officers, anyone for whom it was an advantage socially and politically to be seen at this event, no security measures were obvious. Would there be built-in sensors in the ceiling fixtures, Spock wondered, or would the privacy laws, as well as the political uses to which this hall was typically put, make that unlikely? It was possible that he was guilty of the unacceptable emotion of anxiety. He recalled a prayer he had heard one week before when he had attended the official Starfleet service to honor the fallen members of the Enterprise crew. “Deliver us,” the being officiating at the ceremony had said, presumably to the deity, “from all useless anxiety.” It was a statement those following the ways of Surak could approve.

Nevertheless, if Spock had observed Commander Giotto again, he would have interrupted their progress to ask him questions.

Sarah squeezed by an obese man in a tight red jacket, then spoke over her shoulder. “Jim said that you’d be joining us for dinner tonight.” She made it a question.

Spock maneuvered his way around the man and then past a stick-thin Vegan of the third sex discussing flx’l yields with the undersecretary of agriculture for sector two. The human woman had shimmering starburst tattoos on her cheeks and wore a dress with a transparent bodice that artfully revealed her no-doubt-artificially-enhanced breasts. Styles had changed since he had last been on Earth, although Spock saw no beauty in the female form thus displayed.

“Yes, that will be possible. If it is acceptable to you.” He took advantage of a break in the crowd to lengthen his stride and come even with her, still alertly aware of faces and actions, snatches of conversation.

“Yes, that will be possible. If it is acceptable to you.” He took advantage of a break in the crowd to lengthen his stride and come even with her, still alertly aware of faces and actions, snatches of conversation.

“It will be agreeable to share yours and the commodore’s company for a meal.”

She graced him with a quizzical look, but he remained silent. Sarah Kirk was an intelligent woman. If she did not guess now why her son and his Vulcan friend wished to speak to her in private, she would know soon enough.

It was past time to acknowledge the truth of their relationship, and Spock felt satisfaction that he would be honest with this woman in a few hours. After that, it would be time to engage a subspace comm link between San Francisco and Sarek and Amanda’s home in Shikahr. And then… The thought of sharing living space with Kirk again, the way they had on the ship, of retiring in the evening and waking in the morning to the presence of the one with whom he wished to share his days caused a most gratifying reaction to occur in Spock’s chest, a warmth that spread. He anticipated long hours with Jim again. He anticipated the opportunity to speak and the chance to touch. It was too long since they had truly been together.

He glanced at Sarah Kirk’s determined profile. What would she say when told her only surviving son’s chosen partner was not only not-human, but male? Engaged in a union that would not naturally produce progeny? He was aware of the almost-mythic tales of an older human woman’s desire for grandchildren, although it was difficult for him to put Sarah Kirk in that role. She was too hard-edged, too focused to admit the sentimental.
An echo of Sarek’s voice answered his wonderings. *Speculation is illogical, my son, and a waste of energy as well.* Indeed. What would be, would be. *Cor yhr mar.*

The ensemble providing music for the reception began a rendition of *Sleepers Awake* by Bach, Spock’s favorite human composer because of the obviously mathematical basis of most of his work, and to its complex rhythms he and Sarah Kirk continued in their quest for the guest of honor. There were eighteen point two five minutes before twenty-one hundred hours, although he did not depend upon the reception ending in a timely manner. Humans did not share Vulcans’ attitude toward promptness.

They were still several meters from the windowed alcove when Spock noticed a familiar tall figure engaged in conversation with a petite woman. Spock had respect for this man and his information-gathering capabilities; if anyone knew of the reason for the heavily-armed guards, he would. A detour was indicated.

“One moment, Ms. Kirk,” he said. “There is a reporter with whom I wish to speak.”

“A reporter?”

“Yes. Ralph Randolph from The Galactic News. I am acquainted with him.”

Her sharp eyes accused him of betrayal. “You are? So am I. I don’t trust him.”

Spock blinked. He did not need telepathic abilities to detect her irritation. “He has proven trustworthy in the past, both with me and with Captain Kirk.”

Sarah shrugged an angled shoulder. “Maybe with you because you’re one of his sources. But with a fellow journalist…. He doesn’t stop at much to get a story. Years ago I was trying to buy up a few other media outlets in the American Southwest, and I got caught in the crossfire between him and the owners; I probably lost five million credits because of it.”

Whatever it was that simmered between Sarah Kirk and Randolph, Spock could not help but suspect that they were too similar in temperament to be friends. He could not sustain a negative opinion of the man. In their infrequent meetings over the last few years, Randolph had been friendly and reliable. He was not one of those tabloid reporters for whom the Vulcan felt nothing but scorn; Randolph was professional, and the articles published under his by-line that dealt with the Enterprise or its crew had not been objectionable. Spock liked him, although he was also aware that he was perhaps unreasonably disposed toward him because the only holo-picture of his captain and himself that he possessed had been taken by the man at the very beginning of Spock’s journey toward Kirk as an intimate partner. There was an element of grateful emotion present between them that was not entirely logical. Nor was it logical to assume an affinity with another being simply because their sexuality was similar, but nevertheless, that also colored Spock’s view of Randolph.

“And another thing,” Sarah continued, “he’s homosexual, did you know that?”

Spock would not lie easily, but he had perfected the art of misdirection. “I have had little occasion to inquire into Mister Randolph’s personal life, Ms. Kirk.”

“You wouldn’t want to. He lives with another man when he’s on Earth, and they keep quiet about it. They’re breaking no laws, so why the secrecy?”

Spock chose his words carefully. “Human social convention is not completely accepting of same-sex relationships. There may be career-related repercussions—”

“Maybe, but as high up on the ladder as Randolph has climbed? He’s their top man. What bothers
me is the dishonesty. Look at him,” she gestured to Randolph’s broad shoulders and his craggy, unmistakably masculine features framed by chin length blonde hair, “looking like every woman’s dream, and yet not having the courage to marry his lover and be open about what he is. He’s not an honest person.”

And what would she say of his and her son’s honesty when she heard it? “I believe I must evaluate Mister Randolph on the basis of my own experience. There is a reason why I wish to converse with him at this time.

“Do what you want to. I’ll tell Jim that you’re here, in case you don’t get a chance.”

With firm hands on either side of her skirt, she left him.

Randolph greeted Spock with wryly quirked lips and a precisely upraised hand. “Commander Spock, live long and prosper. It’s good to see you again. I don’t suppose you’re about to offer me an exclusive interview? The perils of starship service as related by one who knows?”

“It is also a pleasure to see you, sir. You are correct, I would prefer not to be quoted at this time. However, I do have a question for you. Can you inform me of the reason for the security measures tonight?”

“Sure. Nothing to worry about, I don’t think, or I wouldn’t be here. But first, let me introduce someone to you. Commander, I’d like you to meet Fahtima Gabon.” He took the elbow of the woman Spock had noticed before. “My colleague in training. She’s a rising star and aiming for my job. But a darn good writer, and of all the bigwigs in this room, she particularly said she wanted to meet you.”

Another human who wished proximity to his unwelcome notoriety. “How do you do, Ms. Gabon.” Spock paused, prepared to extend his hand in the traditional human greeting if she was unaware of the Vulcan preference not to touch.

But the woman who stood before him made no effort to reach out. With eyes downcast and arms folded at the waist of her unusually plain, apricot-colored gown, she bobbed by bending her knees. “Commander Spock. Your accomplishments are many, and you are to be honored.”

Spock had heard such platitudes too many times over the last few months, and truth be told he was bored with the human need to emphasize his success over and over again. “I am sure you will learn much from Mr. Randolph.”

“Yes. Randy is an excellent mentor.”

She fingered the edges of the sheer scarf that covered her hair and met his gaze, not boldly as so many humans did who were thrilled by his differences, not hungrily as some who wished to partake in his fame, but surely and quietly. Although Gabon was no beauty, her eyes, Spock noted, were darkly liquid and wide, what most humans would find attractive. Her lips seemed unusually red in the frame of her brown lustrous skin and jet black hair, a primary color palette that was not complimented by her unfortunate choice of a pale dress color.

“However,” she continued, “Randy has never served on a starship, as you have for many years. So few realize their dreams in such a way.”

“See what I mean about a rising star?” Randolph asked. “She’s angling for an interview. That’s my line, Tima, and Commander Spock is my source, not yours.”

“You mistake my motivation, Randy,” she said with dignity but without noticeable emotion. Her
restraint could not help but be pleasing to a Vulcan. “I am not asking for an interview, as I understand that would be unseemly. It is merely that I have never been off-planet. I have always wished to visit other worlds, to know what is different from myself.”

Spock had lived among humans for long enough to recognize the pang of an unrequited dream in her words, and he felt a corresponding emotional response within himself. He, too, wished for something that was apparently impossible….

Randolph was saying, “Just keep doing the excellent job you’ve been doing for The News and you’ll be able to pick your assignments. You’ll be off-planet before you know it.”

“I am already thirty-seven, Randy. I started late in my chosen career, and so I will never have the opportunity to see all that Commander Spock has seen or know all that he has experienced. Commander, I have read all the unclassified material from your mission, and I am most interested in the wide range of beings you encountered. All so different. Allow me to ask at least one question before you go. Will you allow it?”

Randolph made an exasperated sound, but Spock, for some reason not displeased by her intensity, gravely nodded.

“What proportion of beings would you estimate have telepathic abilities?”

Spock suspected fear and a narrow perspective behind her words, and he was disappointed. “Why do you ask?”

She shrugged gracefully. “There is an irrational fear among humans of those who can read minds. So the subject has caught my interest.”

Non-committal enough, and he did not read the fires of fanaticism in her eyes. Quite the contrary; Gabon did not flicker like a flame as did the energetic, raw-boned Randolph or his own ever-restless mate. She was muted in her actions, her dress, her speech, in everything except for this odd little question.

“The official estimate is that there are four percent true telepaths in the Federation.”

“But you have seen more than explored space. I ask for your estimate.”

“My own observations would place it at a lower level. Perhaps two percent.”

“So few.” She addressed the floor.

“I do not include Vulcans in that number,” he added, although there was no real need for elaboration. “My people are primarily touch telepaths.”

“Yes, I know that.”

Randolph redirected the conversation by saying, “Commander, you were asking about the unusual security?”

Spock lifted his eyes from a scrutiny of this interesting woman. “Affirmative.”

“It’s unofficial, of course, but there have been reports that a group of extremists are occupying the Federation enclave on Leonis IV.”

“The Eternists?” It was not difficult to guess. Leonis was a human-populated outer colony, where
life was difficult and attitudes tended toward the traditional, even the reactionary. The Eternists had their broadest base of support among the colonies furthest from the densely populated and cosmopolitan inner worlds at the geographic core of the Federation.

“The same. They’re upset—”

“About everything,” Gabon put in quietly.

Randolph threw her a look. “—about the procedural vote a few days ago that put the reapportionment bill forward in the Council. There could be a vote on the substance by spring. Anyway, they’ve taken hostages, mainly people who were on some sort of holy pilgrimage to the capital. Among them there happens to be one of the Federation district envoys and her son. The terrorists are threatening to kill them all.”

Spock allowed his disquiet to show in a small frown. “I had not realized that the Eternist movement would engage in violence.”

“Nor had anybody else,” Randolph wryly agreed. “It’s anybody’s guess if this is just a blip on the scanners or a permanent radicalization. Maybe the rumblings about a secession are about to come true. Or maybe it’s only a group of dissatisfied kelp farmers who’ll be convinced to give up the hostages and fade back into obscurity. I think the security here tonight is an indication of the hard-line stand the Federation intends to take.”

“Then you know of no specific threat to the proceedings?”

“None. I think that Captain Kirk,” he nodded toward the windows, “will become Commodore Kirk without a hitch. And after that…I was wondering if you two would like to join me for dinner and drinks sometime? Strictly off the record. Just friends gathering for the evening. I’d like you to meet Juan. And he’d be pleased to meet you.”

Spock redirected his attention from the disturbing political news to the personal; humans exhibited this social flexibility constantly. The invitation was an unexpected one, but from the warmth in Randolph’s voice, sincere. Nevertheless, Spock wondered at the wisdom of establishing a closer relationship with a reporter of such influence.

“Perhaps that can be arranged at a future date.”

“Perhaps,” Randolph echoed with a wry grin. “That’s exactly what Jim—Captain Kirk—said when I suggested the same thing earlier tonight during our interview. Well, you two talk about it and see what you want to do. We’ll let you go, Commander, I know you’re not here to talk with us. Come on, Fahtima, we’ve got pictures to take and people to talk to.”

“Good-bye, Commander,” the woman said tranquilly.

As they left, Spock noticed that Gabon carried a compact holo-camera in the palm of one hand. Apparently she and Randolph were a team assigned to cover the event for their news organization. He evaluated the clues he’d gleaned of Gabon’s character and concluded it was correct to feel confident that no surreptitious holos had been taken of him.

And now the pathway to the guest of honor was clear. A few meters away James Kirk stood talking with the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Nogura. Spock hesitated before inserting himself into that conversation. Jim, trim and fit in his green dress tunic, beribboned and bedecked with medals and commendations, was speaking intently to the admiral, who was clad in dress whites. Nogura nodded and smiled a thin smile that sat uncomfortably on his swarthy face. Then he looked
Spock nodded politely, but Nogura simply regarded him for a long moment. Spock’s contact with the commanding admiral had been superficial over the years, and if he were not the son of Sarek, he doubted that Nogura would know he existed. There were literally thousands of commanders in Starfleet and only one CinC. But now that Jim was to be a commodore, the higher echelons of Starfleet were to be more in their lives. Spock wondered if the admiral expected him to erase the distance between them and speak.

Abruptly Nogura caught Kirk’s arm and pulled him deeper into the embrace of the bay window, where conversation would presumably be more private. Spock turned his back on the scene to allow that illusion and set himself to guard this important dialogue. Perhaps the admiral was finally confirming Kirk’s appointment to the Operations staff.

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“…as much information as the news outlets have, sir. When do you intend to assign me permanently? Eventually even public relations will be done with me.”

Kirk noted that Nogura’s carefully controlled smile showed his teeth. Everything about Nogura physically was small: his gestures, his body, the quarter-inch brush of his black-black hair, his voice. He barely came up to Kirk’s chin. His features were delicate, and his thin hands seemed suited to fine, artisan’s work. But Kirk was not fooled. He had not had occasion to speak much with the commanding admiral of Starfleet—the first time they’d met face to face was the day Kirk had received his commission as captain, and since then their contact had been limited to three meetings over the ship’s main viewscreen and notice of his promotion to commodore—but he understood that the power the man wielded was both wide-ranging and deep. The Federation Council had confirmed and reconfirmed his appointment as CinC six times; no other admiral had guided the ‘fleet for so long a period of time. The term “politically astute” didn’t come close to describing Nogura’s expertise in his office.

And this was the man, Kirk was sure, who had withheld final confirmation of the permanent assignments for the two senior officers of the Enterprise. At first the delay had seemed circumstantial, but as the long weeks after making orbit had passed, Kirk realized there was something unknown involved: infighting at headquarters, some political agenda being pushed, perhaps resentment on a personal level. His own appointment to Operations had been rumored for weeks and seemed obvious; an even more perfect fit was a slot for Spock as the transwarp project coordinator. But instead they had labored for Andersen’s Public Relations campaign and attended interminable debriefing sessions, and Kirk was restless for more meaningful work.

Nogura’s feigned amusement died quickly. “You’re not on the frontier facing Klingons now, Kirk. The frontal approach is not always the best.”

“Nor is it a strategy to be discarded without examination,” Kirk smoothly responded.

“I told you before that I was thinking of you for Operations. Can you do it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’d be fourth in line after Nkapa, Carello and Lee. But I think I need you there. There’s a distinct way of thinking in Ops that doesn’t always agree with what I’m after. With what the Council’s going to be after. Do you understand me?”

Kirk frowned. “I won’t be anybody’s spy.”
A snort of amusement. “No, you’re a hard-headed idealist with a streak of pragmatism a kilometer wide. And nobody can teach the experience you’ve gained the last five years. Strategy and tactics, suited to the current environment, ideas that can be executed and not merely debated, that’s what I need.”

“I can supply that, sir,” Kirk said promptly, “within the limits of the position. Admiral Nkapa—”

“Won’t choke you or your abilities, he’s too savvy for that. If I actually decide to send you to him, he’ll know you’re there for a reason. I’m tired of having to veto so-called solutions from Operations with no alternatives offered. You’d be there to give me the alternatives.”

Kirk considered. “It sounds like I’d be the guy on the outside.”

“If you can’t stand the pressure, I’ll find someone else. But you know how to play the game, Kirk, so if I give you the chance, play it. If I listened to what Admiral Komack says, it seems that half the time you make up your own rules anyway.”

Was that a comment about his repeated bending of the Prime Directive? Interesting that he had been a topic of conversation between the CinC and Komack. What action had Komack been pushing? He examined the older man carefully, but Nogura’s bland, unlined face was unreadable. “I wasn’t aware, sir, that such behavior would recommend me to you.”

“Just so far, Kirk. Just so far. Now….” The admiral tilted his head to the left, toward the crowded room and one straight-backed figure clad in dress blues. “I see that your former second-in-command is in attendance.”

Kirk didn’t care for the change of subject. Of course he’d seen Spock, and he’d known that Spock would make it from San Francisco barring a galactic emergency. Somewhat impatiently, he said, “Yes, sir. Commander Spock.”

“A very fine officer. Fortunate that he’s half-Vulcan, isn’t it?”

“Fortunate, sir?” Kirk’s brow furrowed.

“If you’d had a human first officer, the two of you wouldn’t be nearly so useful to Starfleet in presenting a vision of multi-species cooperation that is necessary in these trying times. It would be better if he were fully Vulcan.”

Kirk’s mouth twisted. Over the noise of the crowd came the distant rumble of thunder overhead. “From a certain point of view.”

“Of course. You know him more, ah, personally, don’t you?”

The admiral looked at him levelly, with meaning, and unease tingled across Kirk’s shoulders. For months he’d told Spock that their relationship would not interfere with their careers; Starfleet would not argue with success. It seemed that his words were about to be tested at the highest level. Nogura allowed the moment to lengthen, then his lips pursed and he was off in a different direction. “Speaking to someone who may be about to join Operations and should therefore be aware of certain political realities, you must know that the vocal presence of the Eternist party in the Federation chambers has been of some concern lately. Not that Starfleet can be involved in politics, of course.”

“Of course,” Kirk agreed with irony. Starfleet Command was nothing if not a political organization, and it was no secret that its purposes would not be served by enacting human-
preferred policies. Three feints in different directions from Nogura so far: the old man was building up to something.

“At any rate, you and Commander Spock are a successful symbol of interspecies cooperation that stands in direct opposition to what certain parties espouse.”

“It’s difficult to withstand the publicity train powered by Commodore Andersen, sir.”

“Yes. The popular imagination of some, although not all,” Nogura nodded in the general direction of the crowd that seethed beyond their window-embraced island of calm, “seems to have been captured by the friendship between you and Commander Spock. The article last week in The Sirian Chronicle. Most, ah, entertaining. It has occurred to me that the two of you might continue to contribute to our…shall we call it image-making? After you’ve assumed your new assignments, whatever they might be. Contribute in a more personal way.”

And now the point was made. “Sir?”

“I am told, Kirk, that your relationship with the commander is somewhat closer than what is usually found between captain and first officer.”

Kirk brought his shoulders back even straighter. He hadn’t expected to confront this issue on the night of his promotion, but he’d made plans and counterplans. He was prepared. “We’ve made no secret of it, Admiral.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Just over two years, sir.”

“Serious?”

“Yes, sir.”

Nogura actually lifted a finger to his chin. The gesture seemed staged. Possibly Nogura planned as he had planned. Probably.

“It seems…unusual.”

“In what way, sir? My involvement with a Vulcan or with another male?” Kirk was still relying on a direct attack to counter the admiral’s subtleties.

“Both,” Nogura said mildly. “But I was referring to the fact that there is some question of the advisability of such a relationship between two serving officers so close in rank.”

Kirk was firm. “I offer my record to anyone for examination. My relationship with my first officer did not ever harm my ship or my crew and did not affect the decisions I made.”

Nogura waved an age-splotched hand. “Of course, Kirk. You’re immune to such small considerations of the heart, are you not? Like a Vulcan. Quite the perfect captain you were.”

“Sir…” Kirk began, but then he subsided. So effectively the admiral had pierced his assured self-defense. And yet, nowhere could Kirk point to any one instance where he felt his duty to the Federation had been compromised.

“I see you take my point. Appearances of impropriety can be as damaging to morale as impropriety itself. It is fortunate that you’re just starting the mandatory two years during which you’re not
posted to active shipboard duty.”

“Fortunate?”

“Because I am not faced with the decision of whether to remove one of you from the Enterprise.”

Silence lay heavy between them; Kirk weighed how serious Nogura’s words might be. Threats were not action, and Nogura was angling for something. Perhaps personal loyalty in Operations because of favors received? The idea rankled and didn’t seem like the CinC’s style. And the old man couldn’t possibly know that Kirk had every intention of seeking command again at the first opportunity, with Spock as his first officer, and that was when the question of their relationship might prove a stumbling block. Starfleet had no specific rules against inappropriate fraternization—the numbers of non-human species with non-human needs and attitudes had made that impossible. But ’fleet zealously guarded the line of command, and Kirk was well aware he was a tool to be used at the convenience and will of the organization to which he had sworn an oath.

Which he would swear again, willingly, because he believed in the stated ideals of Starfleet. But he also believed he and Spock, together, were no threat to those ideals.

He decided to continue with the blunt approach. “Sir, the Vulcan treaty with the Federation specifically states that partners be given mandatory dependency—”

“Ah, yes, our friends the Vulcans. The Vulcans have their demands, it is true, based on their peculiar needs, but there are some elements on the right side of the Council chamber that will not accept your relationship with the commander for any number of reasons. Sexual, racial, professional. It doesn’t matter if any are valid because validity isn’t the question when innuendo is the tool and public opinion is being sculpted. You could become a political liability no matter where I post you because of that.”

Nogura paused, as if providing a space for protestation, but Kirk had himself firmly in control. The old man had offered the Ops posting as the carrot. Here came the stick.

The admiral nodded as if satisfied. He continued, “I presume that you would agree with me that the best way to deal with a liability is to turn it into an asset. If you are intent on maintaining a relationship with Commander Spock during your mandatory downtime, we can use it to our advantage. Are you?”

“I am.”

“Then marry him.”

Kirk stared at the determined face of the CinC and attempted not to display his shock. Marry Spock? His eyes lifted over Nogura’s shoulder to where the subject of the conversation stood not twenty paces away in conversation with Doctor McCoy.

A formal declaration had been much on his mind more than a year ago: bonding and a marriage. Caught up in the first emotional glow of love, they’d talked about both and decided that the time wasn’t yet right. Then those aspirations had faded when the bond had died, and societal conventions, whether human or Vulcan, had seemed so unimportant and not related to what he and Spock shared.

He turned back to the quiet, composed, powerful Nogura. “Are you ordering me, Admiral?”

“And if I did, Captain, would you not resist such an intrusion into your personal life?”
Nogura had that right. Kirk resented this conversation mightily, perhaps more than he had resented Versin’s declaration that he and Spock engaged in sex without any true ties to bind them.

The admiral went on smoothly. “I offer the thought for your consideration, Captain. The Eternists will discover your relationship with the commander if they haven’t already, and they will make an issue of it. Be certain of that. On the grounds of racial purity and sexual aberration, as they are intolerant of any activity that deviates from the human norm. You provide ammunition they will use eventually, picking the worst possible time for us. Within the confines of Starfleet, damage control is possible. In the greater world in which we all must live, I have no such power.”

“So you suggest a preemptive strike?”

“Come now, Kirk, you make your personal life into a battleground. You said you were serious. Most serious couples contemplate marriage sooner or later, even, I believe, ones in such an atypical relationship as yours. A one year contract won’t bind you to much, and it will allow us to present your liaison as another example of how beings of different species within the Federation can cooperate. We’ll start by putting a positive spin on it.”

Kirk managed, “Another PR campaign.” The thought of it tightened his hands into fists. “Admiral, I have sworn an oath to Starfleet. But my personal life—”

“And the posting to Operations, sir?”

“Is on my desk and ready to be confirmed in a few days. About the time the news of your nuptials is announced, I imagine. And Commander Spock….” Nogura turned fully around to regard him across the hall, then swung back to Kirk. “He will do well with the transwarp project.”

“We’ll both do well with those assignments, Admiral.”

“Yes,” Nogura said distantly. “I imagine you will. And if the service that commands our allegiance benefits, all the better.” He extended his hand. “Congratulations on your promotion, Kirk. It is well deserved. Time to focus on different, less obvious battles. I will see you on the stage.”

The older man’s hand was cold and sinewy, and Kirk watched him walk away with some bemusement. The last thing he had expected was such a discussion at such a time and place. Although he’d learned the benefit of the unexpected attack long ago, the lesson had just been reinforced by a master.

With a self-deprecating twitch of his lips, Kirk saw Nogura stride past Spock and McCoy. All three nodded: Nogura perfunctorily, McCoy abruptly, Spock with a certain restrained grace. Right at that moment, the last thing in the galaxy Kirk wanted to do was marry the scrawny, logic-spouting, indispensable half of his being, but he knew that was only a reaction to the CinC’s arm-twisting. Pride over common sense, indeed. He fully intended to spend the rest of his life with Spock, therefore…. He’d have to think about this.

“Is the guest of honor available to talk to an old friend at last?”

Commodore Bob Wesley’s face creased into a genuine smile.

Kirk caught his big hand and shook it with pleasure. “Bob! I’d heard you were off-world.”

“I was, but I got back yesterday. Spent some time with Jeanine, then decided I couldn’t miss this
spectacle. Let me tell you, I didn’t get anything like this shindig when I was promoted.”

A rueful grimace. “I know. It’s embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry. We all understand what’s behind it. Anything for the good of the service.”

Kirk cocked an eye and wondered: anything? But even his edgy distress over the conversation with Nogura couldn’t diminish his pleasure in Wesley’s honestly-offered friendship.

He’d known Wesley for years, since he’d been an ambitious student and Wesley a temporary instructor at the Academy. They’d been casual acquaintances while Kirk quickly climbed the ranks, then discovered an unexpected affinity when he’d been given command. When the commanders of the other starships had offered barely veiled resentment to the youngest man ever to be named captain, Wesley had extended genuine comradeship, despite their age difference of fifteen years.

“So,” Kirk offered. “How’s life in Strategic Procurement and Design?” Wesley had been removed from command of the Lexington and assigned to headquarters in San Francisco shortly after his marriage to his third shift navigator and almost a year before Kirk had turned his ship toward Earth orbit. From what Kirk had been able to see in his limited contact with his old friend the past three months, Wesley had entered wholeheartedly into the political maneuverings and ambitions of headquarters.

“Good, going good,” the commodore said with apparent enthusiasm. “The big project is the transwarp, and that should be ready for more extensive testing in less than a year. If the primary prototype works, it will revolutionize our starships.”

“I know, barely in time for us to have a chance of getting it installed on the Enterprise at the tail end of her refit.”

Wesley raised a doubting brow. “The Enterprise, eh?”

Kirk lifted his chin. “Why not?”

“Dream on, Jim. Once the great maw of headquarters swallows you, you never find a way out.”

“There’s always a first time. Or a second. Look at Maltby, he did it.”

“Fifteen years ago. You always were an ambitious son of a bitch.”

“I do what I can,” Kirk said lightly. “You mentioned the primary prototype. Did you know that Commander Spock has questions about its fundamental design? Something about the assumptions concerning the structure of the space-time continuum.”

“I don’t care how much of a genius your exec is, Spock doesn’t have access to all the data,” the commodore said confidently. “It’ll work.”

“If you say so, Bob.”

“I’m just the ’fleet administrator, but we’ve got good people on this project, and that’s what they tell me. Though we still need to have somebody appointed to head it up now that Commander Shanahan’s retired. I don’t know why there’s been a delay. For a while the scuttlebutt was that Spock would be offered the position, but I haven’t heard much about that lately.”

“So in the meantime you do double duty.”
“I can handle it, no problem. My staff is excellent. What about you? Any word yet on your assignment?”

Kirk pursed his lips. “Nothing official. We’ll see.” He’d never had illusions about headquarters, and he’d returned to Earth fully prepared to enter into the political fray—and manipulate it if he needed to in order to serve to the best of his ability. But to be used as a pawn in some agenda, even an agenda with which he agreed….

Wesley twisted to peer over his shoulder toward the crowd, and Kirk gladly took the opportunity to divert his thoughts.

“Looking for Jeanine?” he asked. “I haven’t met your wife yet.”

Wesley shook his head. “No, she’s not here. I’m hoping to see Commander Ciani. Wanted to introduce her to you. Lori’s my right-hand man—or woman. Don’t know what I’d do without her. A steel trap mind, an unbelievable talent for organization…and she’s easy on the eyes, too.”

Kirk looked his question.

“No, no, nothing between us. I’m an old married man; I’ve given up chasing the skirts. It’s just that Jeanine’s not too crazy about ‘fleet social events. I guess she’s a little shy. So I’m going stag. Actually,” a perplexed expression crossed the commodore’s face and he scratched the back of his neck. “I’ve been going stag a lot lately. Marriage isn’t quite what I expected.”

Kirk didn’t know what to say, so he remained silent. His interest in Wesley’s marital affairs was tepid at best. Marrying a fresh-out-of-the-Academy lieutenant twenty-five years his junior, as Wesley had done, passed the bounds of Kirk’s understanding. He’d never been attracted to women of that type; his tastes had always run toward the older, more experienced, and sophisticated woman.

The chamber orchestra started a new tune, something jazzy-sounding and undoubtedly a prelude to motivating the crowd to move into Friendship Hall. Kirk glanced toward where Andersen was talking in an animated manner to a woman with a recorder and managed to catch his eye. The commodore held up five fingers.

“So,” Wesley said into the silence between them, “been to any hockey games since you’ve been grounded?” They’d both developed a taste for the sport during Kirk’s cadet days, and that more than anything had initially drawn student and instructor together.

“We’ll have to try to catch a few before the season’s over. The Sharks have a new goalie who’s terrific. Before then, though, you’ve got to come out to the house for dinner.”

“Fine, Bob, whenever I can find the time.”

“Good, we’ll work out details later. I’ll invite Lori, too.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“No trouble, she and Jeanine are friends. I know your type, Jim, you’ll like her. I’ve been thinking for a while the two of you would make a good couple.”

“No,” Kirk said firmly. “I’m not available.”
Wesley slapped him on the back, hard enough for Kirk to really feel it. “Son of a gun. I remember what you hinted at about a year ago, that you were shacked up with somebody on the ship. Same woman? Is she here?”

Kirk sighed. There was no time like the present, though it rankled that his love life would be featured so prominently on the day he assumed well-earned commodore’s stripes. He took his friend’s elbow and turned him. “See the Vulcan in dress blues over there?”

Wesley shot him a look that said he’d lost his reason. “That’s Commander Spock, your exec.”

“Right. He wouldn’t be pleased with your efforts to set me up with anybody.”

Puzzlement became astonishment. “Either the dynamics of your command team exceed anything the regs ever contemplated,” Wesley said as carefully as if he were handling an activated photon grenade, “or you’ve changed a whole lot in the last few years.”

“Right on both counts,” Kirk wryly admitted.

Wesley gestured toward where Spock stood unusually straight. Possibly his sensitive hearing had detected their use of his name. “I always thought you liked women.”

“I do,” Kirk said promptly.

“Men who like women don’t imply what you’ve just implied.”

“There’s no implication about it,” Kirk said with a touch of irritation. “I’m with Spock now.”

“But you just said…. Then why…. I’ll shut up. It’s none of my business.”

“Damn right,” Kirk said amiably.

“So you, uh, aren’t interested in Commander Ciani? I mean, I don’t want to push, but we do socialize and Jeanine’s already told her all about you. Say the word and I’ll put a stop to the matchmaking.”

“The word is said, Bob.”

“Okay.

Wesley stood awkwardly for a few moments. Before either of them could inject life back into their conversation, Kirk saw something over the commodore’s shoulder.

“Oh, damn.”

“What?”

“Just the person…. Hello, Ted. I didn’t think you’d make the trip here.”

Admiral Theodore Komack, his thick eyebrows blazing a hard, uncompromising line of disapproval across his dour face, nodded briefly. “Bob. Kirk. I’m smart enough to attend the Federation Day celebration, Kirk, no matter how busy I am with Nogura’s staff work. And no matter how inappropriate I think it is to be combining this event with your promotion. What a circus. You’re only a commodore, for Christ’s sake, who the hell cares?”

The conversation went downhill from there.
An usher in the blue and white of the Federation escorted Spock and Leonard McCoy to their seats in the thirteenth row on the left side of Friendship Hall. As they walked along the crowded center aisle, Spock observed the room with interest, for although he had seen it on newscaps many times, he had never been there. Friendship Hall suffered from an unfortunately eclectic mix of Terran, Andorian, Tellarite, and Vulcan styles that resulted in a hideous presentation sure to please no one except the diplomats who had attempted to make a point through architecture and decoration. The most interesting aspect was the juxtapositioning of creation myths from the four founding planets along the shallowly arched ceiling and the upper walls, along with various other myths from the earliest days of each culture. The Sistine Chapel’s presentation of the energizing of Adam from the hand of the deity contrasted especially poorly with the Andorian First Sundering, featuring energetic, blue-skinned gods, goddesses, and wild beasts engaged in the excesses of the ancient warrior spirits. Spock doubted that Michelangelo would have approved.

“Would you look at that,” McCoy murmured when they settled into their seats, his head tilted back as he surveyed the chaos overhead. “Hard to believe anybody ever worshiped those creatures.” He waved upwards, although Spock was not sure whether toward the Tellarite Great One, clothed in sunlight and dark brown fur and towering over the lush landscape of ancient Tellar, or toward the constellation of Greek gods and goddesses next to the portrait. “Did you know there’s a Roman god called Vulcan?”

Spock nodded. “Hephaistos in the Greek rendition.”

McCoy was still craning his neck. “Any idea who those three women together up there are? Don’t quite look like goddesses. Young, middle-aged, old….”

Spock was resigned to McCoy’s inadequate knowledge of his own planet’s mythology. “The three Fates,” he said shortly. “Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. In turn, they spin the thread of life, measure it out, and then cut it. They are sometimes portrayed as ugly old women.”

“Really? Greeks worshiped beauty, didn’t they?”

“But not all beings need to be measured according to their outward appearance, McCoy. And you must remember, we have met Apollo. What may or may not be true about the Greek gods and goddesses is in some question.”

McCoy returned only a snort at that. Spock removed his gaze from his own planet’s most popular creation tale—his ancestors disgorged from the mouth of a giant bird, about to be taken up by the daughters of light and darkness—and assessed his and McCoy’s position. They were not as poorly placed as they might have been, considering their lack of influence in a crowd assembled primarily not to honor James Kirk but for all the many reasons associated with Federation Day. Starfleet admirals and commodores filled the rows in front of them, while elected representatives and administrative officials sat on the right side. Influence waned the further back the rows marched; most of the Enterprise crew were far back in the hall that seated, he estimated, almost five thousand under its somewhat narrow barrel vault.

Those who had not been fortunate enough to be invited to the pre-ceremony reception had been admitted through another entrance and already filled most of the auditorium. He had seen Lieutenants Sulu and Uhura sitting with the only married couple from the ship, Lieutenants Irina Hunyady and Brian Dawson, along with many other familiar faces. The talented and efficient Hunyady had smiled at him, as she often had during the time they had worked together in the ship’s science labs, and Spock had gravely nodded back to her. Spock had participated in her marriage to Dawson by escorting her down the ship’s short chapel aisle; after that, the auburn-
haired science officer had been almost maternal in her attitude to him.

“Do you see Scotty anywhere?” McCoy asked, glancing behind them. “Oh, there he is. Wonder why we weren’t seated together.”

As Spock had no knowledge of the seating arrangements, he did not answer. McCoy knew him well and would not expect a response to frivolous conversation.

He had, however, queried Spock closely during the reception on the results of the visit to Sluman and T’Braggia. Although McCoy was no longer Spock’s personal physician, he had rights due to long professional interest and friendship. Where Spock would have told none other about the test results before he had had an opportunity to tell Jim, he relayed them to McCoy. The physician had not been able to quell an anxious wrinkling of his brow; McCoy was so open with his emotional responses.

But “we should have expected the linkage problem” was all he’d said before they’d been ushered to their seats. Spock was sure that more would come later, but even McCoy could recognize that now was not the time.

Spock turned his attention to the fine paper program he’d been given by the usher. Nogura would speak first, then Jim would be officially acknowledged and promoted, then Federation President Dubois would address the crowd. A major policy speech on the new trade proposal was expected, with no mention of the highly controversial reapportionment bill. Spock was not uninterested, as he knew that the results of exploration were colonization and trade. Nevertheless, it struck him once again how unsuitable it was to graft the promotion of a military man to the political purposes of Federation Day. He and Jim had grown more and more uneasy with the public relations campaign they had at first willingly participated in; he hoped that this day represented its culmination and there would be no more displays, no more speeches, and no more manipulations, subtle or otherwise.

Spock looked up from the paper in his hand, willing to distract himself from such thoughts. McCoy murmured, “There’s Jim’s mom. You’re going to have to tell me what you think of her.”

Then, amid growing applause, several of the most prominent elected politicians emerged from the wings to take their places on the stage. Although they were unannounced by name, most were easy to recognize for anyone who followed the newsvids. There was Gwoin O’Malley, for instance, whom he had met during a difficult luncheon with Admiral Komack. O’Malley represented Earth’s billions, was a friend to Starfleet, and headed the political moderates in the Council. While Spock did not approve of all that O’Malley espoused, at least he had learned the man could be reasoned with.

Behind O’Malley strode Douglas Johnson, spokesperson for the Eternists and their equally conservative political partners, those who would transform the Federation, and with it Starfleet, if their views were ever universally enacted. Spock wondered what Johnson knew of the insurrection and violent threats on Leonis IV and whether the people who had been on an innocent pilgrimage were still hostages. If they still lived.

But whatever Spock thought of the man and his policies, he held power, as indicated by his inclusion with the others on the stage. Power alone was neither good nor evil, the ancient philosophers taught; intention was all. There was a considerable accumulation of power on the stage of Friendship Hall.

After the men and women had settled themselves on the chairs arranged in rows on the stage, the master of ceremonies stepped to the podium and announced, “Please rise for the president of the
The applause began again, music played, bodies rose, and onto the stage came the representative from Mars Colony One who had three more years left in his six year term as president. Behind him, appearing even smaller after Dubois’s six foot four inch, three hundred pound bulk, came Admiral Heihachiro Nogura, followed by Captain—soon to be Commodore—James T. Kirk.

Reporters and photographers surged to the front of the auditorium, and among them Spock noted Ralph Randolph gesturing to his aide to find the best vantage point. Apparently the miniature holo camera Gabon had employed before was insufficient, for she carried a much larger device that she efficiently aimed at the three men standing at the front center of the stage. She had taken the time to put on an oversized red jacket with large pockets that did not blend well with her dress but certainly marked her as a professional who cared more for her work than her appearance. For a few seconds the various mechanisms whirled as images were recorded and transmitted to publication centers.

Eventually the representatives of the media retreated to their places, Nogura took the podium, and, after another wash of applause acknowledged the man and his powerful service to the Federation, the audience sat.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, to begin this celebration of Federation Day, it is most appropriate that we….”

Both Kirk and the president remained standing at the center of the stage while Nogura reminded them all of Kirk’s achievements over the previous five years, but Spock gave little notice to the words declaimed in the admiral’s flat tones. He did not need to be reminded of the exemplary, unprecedented record of the Enterprise under the command of the man who stood at attention, staring straight ahead in best military style, looking every inch the successful commander that he was. In intimate detail Spock knew about the firstcontacts, the significant discoveries, the life-saving, even world-saving actions that Nogura praised and the masses exalted. He could have recited the coordinates of every one of the new worlds the ship had orbited; he could have listed the names of every crew member who had lost his or her life in the name of the Federation, in the service of Starfleet, and whom James Kirk mourned.

To Spock, far more important than impersonal facts was his knowledge of the man behind the achievements. Kirk, as fine a specimen of humanity as he might be, was still merely a human being, with all of humanity’s frailties. He had witnessed Kirk’s mistakes: the captain would never forgive himself for not finding a better solution than Lazarus’s eternal exile, or for how easily the Kelvans had lured them into a trap and taken over the ship. He had witnessed Kirk’s losses. Edith Keeler. Sam.

If Kirk had indeed been the almost-perfect commander Starfleet had been touting the last three months, then in Spock’s opinion there would have been less to admire. The difficulties of Kirk’s decisions, not how easy they were, made him what he was, which in Spock’s opinion was an excellent commander: the best under whom he had served. He anticipated serving with none better.

Spock stared down at his clasped hands. After more than two years as James Kirk’s lover, still it was difficult, sometimes, to admit and fully realize the emotional elements of his new life.

He was so proud of Jim.

He reveled in the sensation. Emotion need not be restrained in the intimacy of body and spirit that he shared with his chosen mate. Jim had given him everything: every gram of devotion, every iota of loyalty, every precious expression of passion that there could be. And the two of them had
created a space that lived between them, compounded of time and trust and that peculiar empathy that had sparked between them from the start, so that Spock had given to Kirk everything in turn: his fierce commitment, his unquestioning support, and every emotion that sprang from the passionate Vulcan soul Spock had shown to no one else.

No, it was not inappropriate to experience this pride and this bounding love. Spock lifted his head and allowed his gaze to rest on his captain again. Kirk looked, to Spock’s eyes, more handsome, appealing, and worthy than he ever had.

“And now it is with considerable pleasure that I present to James Tiberius Kirk this acknowledgment—”

As Nogura stepped from behind the podium carrying with him the braid he would press to Kirk’s sleeves, most eyes in the auditorium followed the movement of the CinC. But Spock would not take his gaze from the sight of his lover. And so it was that he perceived what few others did: a change in the quality of the air itself, and then a distorting waviness only a few meters in front of where Kirk stood. Almost, but not quite, as if a transporter were functioning, which was impossible in this protected space, where shields of the most sophisticated sort prevented unauthorized transportation.

Spock saw Kirk’s eyes widen; his captain had noticed the same phenomena and interpreted it from the store of experience they both had gained on the Enterprise. Of course. And now the sound. He heard another object’s molecules forming….

Randolph had been mistaken. They were not safe.

Spock rocketed to his feet just as Kirk launched himself against President Dubois, pushing and skidding the most important symbol of the Federation across the width of the stage. A second later the bomb—for inevitably the object was an explosive device, any schoolchild would recognize its danger—was fully present, and for another moment, almost enough time to draw a deep breath to shout, it hung suspended in mid-air. Spock opened his mouth to cry Danger, but before he managed to voice the first syllable, the device abruptly jetted to the right, toward the great Andorian Column of Life that flanked the stage.

Too late.

Detonation.

A great wind lifted him and threw him so far and so fast that it seemed he out-raced even sound. In deathly silence he tumbled until he slammed against a wall—destruction to the creation myths of the four founding worlds—and fell into darkness.
Chaos

Spock traveled serenely for what felt like a long time within a white cloud shot through with veins of velvet black. He passed the first human, Adam, half of himself, and heard himself call “Greetings, cousin.” Adam, however, did not respond, as he had not yet been energized by God and did not know who he was. Spock shrugged and moved on. Knowledge was, after all, a dangerous thing. Perhaps he would come to regret all that he knew. Then it would be better to retreat to the blank slate, with his past excised like an unhealthy growth, and begin again.

But would he truly wish to start anew? Where to begin? On the sands of Vulcan or the rolling waves of Terran ocean? It was the eternal question of his universe, asked so often. *Art thee Vulcan or art thee human?* T’Pau had wanted to know the answer. Versin had despised him for the answer he saw. Jim…. Jim had always known the truth.

*Spock!*

The call came from very far away. It seemed to emerge from the mornatz, the net of consciousness, but that was impossible because he didn’t live there anymore.

*Spock….*

The summons was fainter now and easy to ignore. Back to a contemplation of the dangers of knowledge. He drifted for a long time.

Gradually he realized that the humidity was becoming too great for his comfort. The cloud in which he drifted was heavy with rain, and he could hear the far off rumble of thunder. He drew in a breath with some difficulty. If the atmospheric trend continued, he would soon be inhaling water. But how did one stop breathing? Another watery breath flowed down his throat and into his heaving lungs, and he choked. A moment of panic. He was not a fish, Mister Spock. Nor was he an eel-bird….

Salvation came in an unlikely form: the giant avian of Vulcan creation legend. The bird took shape from the very grayness around him, and he could do nothing to stop it from darting forward and consuming his feet, his legs, his torso…. He was being unmade by the creator of all-Vulcan. He was forced down a maw lined with flame. He struggled, resisting with arms and legs, but inexorably the contractions of the bird’s gullet closed around his body, squeezing him, crushing his muscles and bones, and forcing him closer and closer to the cauterizing furnace. It…hurt….

He gasped as the first liter of water was pulled from his mouth to evaporate before his eyes. Then another, and he doubled over with a groan, because he needed that moisture from the salty oceans of his mother’s world. His mouth clamped shut as he tried to prevent his utter desiccation. There, protection of the innermost core of himself, he could do it, he could stop all that was most essential from flowing away under this attack.

But he could not stop the fire from searing his turtled-up form. The flames roasted his outer skin and toughened it, while leaving the inner, delicate tissue of his private self tender and hidden.

*This is the endless torment of the ancients: Hell, Roshkernil, Sut, Aili. To lose identity. To not be known. To know what it is to share essence— and be denied.*

Abruptly Eve appeared over his head, barefoot and draped in a crimson sheet sliding from her shoulders. He blinked, and still she was there, crying pallid tears as three imperious women
expelled her from Olympus. *I didn’t want to do it,* Eve wailed. But the Fates shook their heads in unison. Clotho spun the thread of her life, Lachesis measured the length of it—he couldn’t see how long—and the oldest of the three, Atropos, the inexorable one, cut the thread with a deliberate smile. The snowy threads and Eve fell down, down, toward him. Cupid glanced at the commotion and sent an arrow after her. It pierced her flailing body and sent fissures all through it as she fell, screaming…. Then sudden silence as she hit the floor of Friendship Hall….

…which had been attacked by an explosive device, and where he now painfully lay, regaining consciousness.

His eyes flew open, but he could not see through the gray fog that literally drifted all around him. *Jim!* He felt his lips frantically form the name even as, instinctively, he spiraled down into himself, desperately searching for the link that connected him with life and salvation, as any male Vulcan would do. Had he not perceived his bondmate’s thoughts in his delirium? But he found nothing. Bitter remembrance of his condition returned with a painful wrench to his solar plexus. He would not find Jim that way.

Up! Up! Move!

Spock wildly turned his head from side to side as he pushed himself to a sitting position. He tried to pierce the fog that scraped down his throat. It was the aftermath of the explosion, a particle-mist that must consist of pulverized gypsum, fiberglass, dust…and he dared not speculate further. He could not see more than three or four meters in any direction, but what he did see caused his heart to thump in a sudden adrenalin rush.

Bodies lay in obscenely lax positions, mixed with bits of the chairs on which they had been sitting, plaster from the walls, the ceiling, metal that might have been interior structural supports…. As he watched, one blue clad arm not two meters away rose into the air, then fell limply.

There were survivors. He must take hope from that. Perhaps the damage was localized near where he had been seated. Perhaps the stage area had not been affected.

Spock struggled to stand by pushing against the surface on which he sat, but he jerked his hands away as if he had been burned when he realized he had been resting on another being. Saliva flooded his mouth as he twisted around to look down into the face of the unmistakably dead woman. Blood had gushed lavishly from the lips of this Starfleet commander. He glanced up at the wall that was the only solid object within his vision. He remembered now being flung through the air and hitting something that was soft and yielding and also very hard, hard enough to stop his momentum in an instant.

His eyes closed in silent misery. He had killed this women with the crushing force of his own body. Perhaps she had saved his life by cushioning the impact.

He would make the sacrifice mean something by preserving other life.

A second attempt to stand he abandoned as useless when he realized the rubble prevented him from striding across the floor, and when his left knee buckled in sudden, painful rebellion. It was only as he gasped and fell against a twisted remnant of a red chair that he noticed he was deaf. He had not heard his own exclamation of pain.

He drew his lips sharply against his teeth. It was no matter. The concussive effects of the explosion would dissipate, as they often did shortly after such an event, or they would not. Emotion would not help him.
Spock wiped blood from his chin with the back of his hand, got down on his hands and knees, and began to crawl. Soon he was breathing heavily because of the pain in his knee, although he could not hear his pantings. He must have torn ligaments—he suspected anterior cruciate damage. Once he had been able to control pain and function beyond it. Now, he must simply ignore the stabbing and burning.

He avoided grasping a metal spike six inches long and razor sharp—shards were everywhere—and clamped down hard on an emotional image of Jim impaled…. Or of the many others who must be dead, dying, or injured. Of utmost importance were the conditions of the president of the Federation and the commander-in-chief of Starfleet. They had been on the stage with Jim, and his focused search would enable him to determine their status as well.

A black uniformed leg stopped his laborious progress within thirty seconds. With a heave of Vulcan strength he uncovered a thin man wearing dress blues, just beginning to stir, the man who had raised his hand in supplication. His heart lightened—this must be McCoy—but then Spock recognized a commodore who’d been sitting a few rows in front of him. The force of the blast had thrown both of them a distance to the side. McCoy could be anywhere. Though he aimed for the stage as a starting point for his search, Spock acknowledged to himself that Jim could have been propelled far by the blast. Or he could have been….

Spock drew a desolate breath. He knew there was no order in the world.

He could do nothing more for the commodore, who was still dazed. Spock attempted to communicate in signs where he was going and that he would send help if he could, and then he crawled on.

Within five meters he was able to stand and limp several steps before he was forced down again. The debris rose and fell like waves in an unearthly ocean, and he followed the fault lines of destruction to the left and to the right, crawling or standing as he could. Everywhere he encountered beings, some slowly regaining consciousness, some with only an arm or a leg showing from under the wreckage, some lying lifelessly. He stopped always to help. It was impossible not to. Within ten minutes he’d grimly come upon four victims, encountered body parts of a human and a Canopan, and uncovered many who were still unconscious. More individuals were hurt or dazed than were dead, but he was sure that many were also buried by the erratic, alternating hills of wreckage.

The acrid air made his eyes burn, and tears flowed freely. They were prompted not by emotion but by the atmospheric conditions, although even a Vulcan could be forgiven an emotional reaction to the devastation all about him.

Within the disaster, there was hope and the spirit of cooperation that had forged the Federation in its earliest days. As he moved on, he was able to free four relatively uninjured men and two women. They fanned out behind him, stopping to assist while he crawled on in the eerie silence, forced to proceed with excruciating slowness when he wanted to run.

What had caused this destruction? A bomb had materialized when the safeguards of the hall should have made that impossible. Whoever was responsible possessed a high level of technology and hate…. The hands of the Klingons should be tied by the Organians, the Romulans were preoccupied by internal strife, the Tholians ferociously protected their own territory but were not aggressive outside their boundaries.

This speculation, Spock told himself fiercely, was useless. He applied himself to moving forward, one half-meter at a time.
A sound brought his head up sharply a minute later. A…shout? A sudden noisy buzzing in his left ear caused him to wince and roll his head sharply down on his shoulder, but within a minute the background buzz receded to nothing with a final audible pop. Noise came from somewhere to his left, perhaps plaster falling.

A short way further on and Spock stood with a sigh he made no effort to restrain, straightening his back with an effort. This less-congested area might have been the central aisle, and although he had not deliberately been aiming toward it, it made sense to use this erratic pathway to the front of the hall.

Within a few meters, though, Spock heard a voice, his first.

“Bring her right over here! I’ll take care of you, honey. Put your hand here and press hard. That’s right. Help will be here soon, you just hold on.”

He closed his eyes in relief. McCoy.

The physician had set up a hasty triage center in the pockets of clear space. Several beings were sitting or lying on the floor, and two women were walking into the mist in an apparent search for more victims who could be helped. McCoy, clad in black undershirt and torn pants that fluttered about his knees, was kneeling next to a pale woman who was holding her arm. Spock hastily wiped his streaming eyes on the sleeve of his uniform, hobbled up behind the doctor, tapped him on the shoulder, and waited.

McCoy glanced up, did a classic double take, and then was on his feet reaching for a hug.

Spock did not retreat or recoil; he allowed himself to be the recipient of McCoy’s emotions. The warm solidity of the doctor’s body was reassuring. Not all his world had been destroyed with the explosion.

“Spock!” the doctor choked.

“McCoy,” Spock returned after a moment, then he gently pushed the physician to arm’s length. Tears sparked in the bright blue eyes, and bruises were beginning to mottle his honest face, but that was to be expected. At least McCoy was not a body in the rubble. “I am pleased that you are unharmed.”

“It’s a miracle anybody survived this,” McCoy said bleakly, and his fingers tightened on Spock’s arms. “Are you okay?”

“I am well. Have you located Jim?”

The doctor shook his head and stepped back. “Since I came to, I’ve just been trying to take care of anybody around. You can help. There are people trapped everywh—”

“Negative. I must find the cap—the commodore. Have you come across any others from the front of the hall?” he asked, begrudging every minute he delayed, even with McCoy.

“Spock…. No. Look up there. That’s definitely the worst of the blast. Nobody’s come from there.”

“Nevertheless, I—”

“I don’t think any…. He might not have made it this time.”

Spock said as calmly as he could, “But I must ascertain that, one way or the other, must I not?”
Spock could read the despair on McCoy’s face. He would not succumb to it. When random factors
could not be computed with certainty, outcomes could not be predicted. In human terms, as Jim
would have put it, there was always hope.

“I must go to Jim. Do you understand?” His voice was rough, not only the result of inhaling ash
and smoke.

McCoy wiped his face angrily with the back of his hand. “God damn it! Nogura! Dubois! Maybe
Jim too! Who the hell did this? How could this have happened? I thought all your fancy technology
prevented terrorist acts like this!”

He understood the transformation of fearful emotions into anger, as he had witnessed the paradox
many times with humans who had survived or were in the midst of danger. He could not condemn
McCoy for doing the same. But he had no time.

Abruptly, he responded, “I do not know. But I must go.”

McCoy bit his lip, then nodded. “We’re bound to get help soon. There were sirens a while ago.
How’s your hearing?”

“Adequate. I will bring him to you, McCoy, if he requires treatment.”

“Don’t move him if it looks like there’re serious injuries,” the doctor said sharply. “And I’m not
treating anybody right now, I’m just holding hands because I don’t have any equipment!” He
sounded desperate. “Not even my med kit. Who could know I needed it? God damn whoever did
this. God damn them!”

With the remnants of the deities all about them, Spock grimly thought that the damnation had
already occurred.

He turned to go, but suddenly an Andorian staggered out of the haze from the direction of the
stage. His brown tunic proclaimed he was not Starfleet, and the side of his neck was scraped blue-
raw in what must have been a painful injury. But his concern was for the human woman in his
arms.

“Help her!” he gasped. “Sssomebody told me there’sss a doctor here. Ssshe’sss bleeding to death!”

“Put her here,” McCoy pointed toward his feet.

The Andorian deposited the woman on the floor and then sat a few feet away from her. He moaned
and held a hand to his head. The woman was mostly naked from the waist down; the blast must
have literally blown the clothing from her body, and there were burn marks along her left thigh
where a few pieces of light-colored cloth remained along with charred flesh. She wore a tattered
red jacket, and a crimson pool stained the floor beneath her lower body after only a few short
seconds. But what startled Spock was that he recognized her.

“Ms. Gabon,” he said quietly as he knelt next to McCoy across from her.

The doctor didn’t hear; he was frantically searching for the source of the bleeding. After only a few
seconds he spread her legs, not gently, and keened in dismay. “Oh, my God, what a mess.”

Spock could see the absence of normal structures and the vicious scarlet wounds causing the
bleeding. He glanced at the woman’s face. To his dismay, she was conscious as she suffered. Her
doe-like eyes were half-closed and her mouth was pinched with pain at the edges, sagging open as
she heaved for breath. There was none of the grace and calm she had exhibited before. She had
wanted to travel and meet those who were different among the stars; now she would know fear, disfigurement, and humiliation.

“Give me your shirt, damn it! I need bandages.” McCoy was pressing with his already-bloodstained hands against the edges of the flesh.

Spock took off his tunic and ripped it in three pieces. He relinquished them to the doctor and turned back to Gabon. Most humans, he knew, would wish to offer comfort in some way through physical contact, but he could not do that. He wanted to leave, but he could not abandon those distressed eyes.

“McCoy is a doctor,” he explained awkwardly. “He will help you.”

She swallowed heavily and looked at him with what he could only call despair. “I do not think…I can be helped.”

Nor was Spock capable of mouthing lies for reassurance, but McCoy lifted his head from where he was working with the stiff blue of the tunic between her spread legs. “You won’t die,” he said gruffly. “I’ll see to that. Lie still. Be quiet.”

She winced and her whole body became rigid as he pushed hard against her, then she started to cry. “Do not touch me,” she moaned. “Please do not touch me. Don’t look!” She jack-knifed to a sitting position and tried to push McCoy away.

There was no choice; Spock gently forced her back. She was weaker than a child and it took little strength to do so, but once on the floor she continued to try to get up. He exerted pressure against both shoulders to keep her still as she thrashed about.

“Do not fear. The doctor is helping you.”

She tried to hit him, but because he was too gentle in resisting her, she succeeded in scratching him instead. He grabbed her hands and pressed them against her shoulders, and her body went still.

“That’s better,” McCoy opined. “I can’t do much if my patients want to run away from me.” He patted one knee awkwardly. “You’ll be all right. We’re going to get this bleeding stopped. Just another few minutes…. Don’t move at all, though. Spock, make sure she doesn’t.”

Gabon’s tears slowed, then ceased. Slowly her eyes opened. Pain was there, and something more that he could not completely interpret: some ardency, some conflicted, imperfect amalgam of sorrow and anger that blazed in her wounded body. She deserved her emotions, but the intensity of her gaze made him uncomfortable. He was surprised when she spoke.

“I am sorry,” she said in her low, cultured voice, a voice that was at odds with the turbulence in her eyes. “I should not have done that. You can release me now, as I will follow the doctor’s directions.”

Spock waited a few moments to ensure that she meant what she said, and then he gratefully removed his hands from contact with her.

But before moving away, he asked, “Have you seen my captain? Have you seen Commodore Kirk?”

She gazed over his shoulder into the distance and murmured, “I am grateful for your assistance. You are kind.”
He did not want her gratitude or whatever emotion propelled her words; he required only an answer to his question so he could leave. “I render aid when I can,” he said, although he doubted most humans would believe he said the words kindly. “Have you seen Commodore Kirk?”

“No,” she whispered. “Although I am sure you will find him.”

He had not truly expected a positive response, but logic dictated that he use every asset he could in his search.

Spock rose quickly before Gabon’s expressive eyes could speak again, and he told McCoy, “I will bring him to you if I can.” Then he queried the Andorian, who had seen no one he recognized, and resolutely limped into the mist.

The closer he got to the front of the hall, the worse conditions became. Something was burning close by. He started coughing less than five meters along.

Spock heard the sirens McCoy had mentioned and frantic voices calling from far away. They seemed to emanate from the back of the hall, and for the first time Spock thought of Sulu and Uhura, Hunyady and Dawson and all the other members of the Enterprise crew. A few days earlier Irina had shyly told him she and her husband, Commander Scott’s former chief assistant in the engine room, were expecting a baby, so there was unborn life to consider as well. Hopefully, his former crewmates had escaped the worst effects of the bombing, assuming that the structural integrity of the hall had held further away from the center of the blast. If so, they were probably united in a desperate rescue effort. Perhaps they would reach McCoy and his little medical ward soon. But Jim would not be found as easily. No one would search specifically for him. Only Spock would.

The space provided by the central aisle proved to be an anomaly; it soon disappeared into chaos again. He crawled more than he walked and spent time moving debris not only from on top of trapped beings, but also so he could make passage forward. He passed one of the women who was aiding McCoy by locating those who most desperately needed his help. She told him that she had not advanced any further toward the stage than she was now, and she had seen no commodores.

Soon the cloud grew so thick that he could barely see his outstretched arm. It wrapped around him like a cloak. Frustration, sulfur, and fibers from silica-rich fiberglass thickened his throat. Surely he would be released in another meter. Or another…. A more imaginative man might have given in to the fear that he was lost, perhaps one of the lost souls caught between the living and the non-living worlds, never to be found and given peace…. In this impenetrable miasma, should he attempt to go in this direction…or this direction?

He chose poorly. A minute after turning to the right, he abruptly came upon the body of a broad-shouldered man in dress greens with light brown hair whose head had been smashed in. The man lay across the debris field on his back with arms outstretched and legs splayed, and for one lightning instant Spock’s heart thumped wildly. Jim…. No, it was not Jim….

He blinked as he tried to focus on the man’s face, to make absolutely sure. But he couldn’t quite perceive the human’s features…. A strange, grating sensation erupted—in his mind, obscuring his vision even more—like two metal plates imperfectly sliding against each other, shrieking in metallic revolt that he could taste, too, seeking some perfect alignment that eluded them. Spock put one hand to his head as he reeled like a drunken man, trying to stand upright, trying to escape the disorientation of sparking mental connections and a looming despair. He knew what was happening, this must be what he had been warned of, but not now, please not now while he was still searching…. 
His throbbing knee abruptly buckled and his arms flailed in an ungainly windmill—*I must not fall on the body*.

He regained consciousness to a throat tight with emotion and a hammering heart. He was curled on his right side, and his leg screamed to be straightened.

So. Already. Versin, he thought bleakly, might have been correct.

Stubbornly he forced himself to his feet and stood. He would not allow any circumstance to stop him. It did not matter that Versin’s prejudices called him a fool to believe he could somehow forge a life for himself by combining what his heart needed and what his intellect demanded—or that the healer’s dire prediction had already come true. There were many people to uncover and help, and Jim to find.

A few tentative steps within the wreckage confirmed that he was mobile again, although additional swelling told him there might be bleeding inside the knee joint. But his vision was clear and the dizzying disorientation did not reoccur. Perhaps it never would. One seizure could easily be an aberration caused by these extraordinary events. He did not allow himself to glance at the dead man who resembled Jim, and he climbed over a twisted mass of metal.

*A splat* of water fell upon his hand. He raised his head from his relentless stumbling over debris and saw a fine mist of moisture falling. The sprinkler system that was imbedded among the murals of creation and ancient deities had finally responded to the smoke. The gods were weeping.

The sprinklers were not consistent. They turned on and off, and soon stopped altogether. Which was good, for the water had made his handholds slippery. And bad, because the burning smell was still sharp, and somewhere the rain was needed. He wiped moisture from his brow and dried his hands on his still-only-damp black undershirt.

He needed a tricorder to help him locate Kirk, and later all the other victims who could be helped and were yet unseen. A few feet after he crawled under a twisted metal arch, he could stand, and he put hands to his mouth to enhance the sound of his call.

“Commodore Kirk!” The words were muffled by the particle-laden air, and they seemed to fall flat and dead at his feet. He persisted because he surely could not be far from the stage now. If deafness had worn off, Kirk might be able to hear him and respond. “Commodore Kirk!”

Another voice answered him. Not Jim’s, but a male voice, deep and commanding. “Over here! Come this way! Over here!”

Walking was truly impossible now; the floor wasn’t visible, and passage through the debris was slow and painful. Spock crept forward, carefully placing hands and knees and suffering the consequences when there was nowhere to put them except on an unstable mass that shifted or on sharp-edged objects that cut. The scratches he’d suffered from Gabon were quickly obscured by others far deeper.

He fell painfully onto his elbow when a chair collapsed, just as another call came from his unseen guide, closer now, and he recognized the voice.

Life, as Jim often said, was filled with irony.

He shifted a man-sized piece of insulating material, and when he looked up again there was
Admiral Ted Komack, his craggy face gray with dust, his uniform torn, his eyes as hard as diamonds.

Komack wasted no time addressing him. “Good. I thought it was you. Only a Vulcan would be able to get through this mess. You’re looking for Commodore Kirk, aren’t you? I’ve always thought Vulcans form unhealthy attachments to their commanding officers, and you’re one more proof. Well, I’m after the president and Nogura, and I order you to join forces with me.”

Spock had never liked Komack even before the battle lines between the admiral and Kirk had been drawn, but he had never doubted that the man was an efficient and loyal Starfleet officer. Apparently Komack had been tackling a huge line of debris that stood in the way of any effort to get close to the stage. If people from the front of the hall were still alive, they’d be on the other side.

As for the insults contained within the order: Spock was accustomed to that. Komack had always led not by example and encouragement, as Kirk did, but through hard words, an inflexible understanding of the rules, and intimidation. And those tactics worked, as he was clearly one of the most successful commanders in the ’fleet.

Spock said, “I am attempting to reach the stage, yes.”

Komack chopped a battered hand toward the wall of debris. “Use some of that strength I know you Vulcans have and help me.”

Spock saw the point of the admiral’s attack against the barrier. He had actually made considerable progress, but at the expense of his battered hands, which were raw and bleeding.

Komack saw Spock noticing his injuries and grunted, but then he turned wordlessly toward the barricade. Soon they were working side by side and making steady progress through a three dimensional jigsaw puzzle that could come toppling down on them if they released a crucial support. If Spock had encountered the barrier alone, he did not think he would have been able to go beyond it, and Komack had shown considerable persistence—and optimistic stubbornness—in tackling what a Vulcan with muscles formed on a different world would not have been able to accomplish. It was a two-being job.

Five minutes later Komack was kneeling and pointing. “See that there? I knew something like this would stop me before you came along. If we can somehow shift this beam, the rest of that stack should come down, and we’ll almost be through. Or at least we can try walking over it.”

Spock, who was next to him on hands and his aching knees, eyed it doubtfully. “I am unable to determine in which direction the pile will release. It may bury both of us.”

“Not if you lift this strut right here, and I crawl under it to move what it’s resting on. Then when you let go of the beam, it’ll redistribute the whole load outward toward the stage. Don’t you remember your structural mechanics? This is the key to everything.”

The position would put the admiral directly under what had to be at least a nine hundred pound weight, but Spock saw no other solution. As to whether the load would fall outwards toward the stage or inwards toward the two of them, there did not seem to be sufficient evidence to conclude either way. He doubted that Komack had a finer grasp of the equations involved than he did, but he could draw no conclusions.

“And what of any individuals who might be trapped in this wreckage?” he asked.
“Commander, let’s be reasonable. There isn’t anybody alive here. If they’re under this, they’re dead.”

“Nevertheless, you will alert me if you find anyone when you have better access, if I am able to lift the beam.”

“That’s the real question. Can you do it?” Komack pulled back and slapped the protruding end of the resisting metal with one hand. “I couldn’t lift this, but I think you might be able to. What happened to you last year wrecked your mind, right? Not your body. I never served on active duty with a Vulcan, but from Kirk’s log reports you were strong as an ox. Let’s see if you still are.”

Spock knew that elevating the weight and holding it up would test the very limits of his ability, but he must try. He stood, wiped his hands on his pants, and bent to grasp the beam when a rough hand stopped him.

“Wait a minute. The blood on your palms will make your grip slippery, and I sure as hell don’t want to be under all that if you drop it. You can’t stop the bleeding anymore, can you?”

Spock looked at him mutely. Komack knew his condition quite well. There had been a memorable luncheon during which the admiral had taunted him for the mental castration that had led to his inability to control his body. He’d even used the word: castration. Jim had been so angry....

“Let us proceed,” Spock said. “We have taken too long, and I will not allow you to be injured.”

Komack snorted. “Right. Here, take my tunic and rip it up. We’ll wrap it around your hands and that will take care of the problem.”

The admiral shrugged out of his dress greens with some difficulty—he undoubtedly had as many hidden injuries as Spock suffered—and handed the tunic over with no further comment. Spock’s first attempt at ripping off the sleeves failed when he lost his grip. Komack swore and grabbed the wrist end.

“I’ll hold onto this. Pull!”

A minute later and Spock was trying to wrap the material around his fingers and palms. He awkwardly and somewhat painfully attempted to devise knots with one hand.

“That’s no good,” Komack declared. “Here, let me. I know you Vulcans don’t like to be touched, but it’s in a good cause, right?”

The touch was competent and, unexpectedly, not rough.

“My wife would know how to do this better than I do,” the admiral muttered. “Thank God she didn’t come tonight. I’d have gone crazy with worry. There, that should do it. Ready?”

The knots were adequate and did not apply more than the necessary pressure on his abused hands. Spock nodded and bent again to wrap his fingers around the strut. He told himself that the mind controlled the body, that his mind knew he could hold this weight, and he lifted. The hard, square angles bit into his flesh despite the cushioning cloth, and Spock knew that Komack had been right: he might have dropped it without the bandages. From long habit he suppressed the instinct to wince.

“Not high enough. Higher!” came a voice at his feet. All he could see were Komack’s boots as the rest of him disappeared into the tunnel newly created.
As he straightened his knees to lift the solid beam of metal further, a mass of cascading plaster fell to either side. It created a gray cloud of dust that swirled and then settled on him. He resisted the impulse to sneeze and held….

“That’s it,” came Komack’s muffled voice. “A little higher. I can’t get a grip. Damn it. Move it to your left. Left!”

He didn’t know if he could. But he must, or they would be trapped behind the barricade and useless to whoever needed them. The strain of the weight on his arms burned all the way from fingers to shoulders; his legs trembled and his back gave an audible crack. But he was able to shuffle a few centimeters to the side. Sudden weakness told him that his knee, which he had ignored with so much determination, would not hold out for much longer. He stiffened his legs and held….

“Not enough! We’ll never get to Dubois this way. Or your pretty boy commodore. More to the left!”

A flash of irritation, almost anger, shot through Spock at the insult. He breathed deeply to dissipate the strong emotion. He tightened his grip and held….

“I thought you Vulcans were strong. If you can’t do it, say so! Or just drop the stupid thing and make an end of it.”

He could not estimate the weight that he was holding with any precision. Greater than nine hundred pounds, surely. No matter the exact number; if he were to drop the beam it would indeed be the end of Komack. People tonight had died under less weight than this; Jim might now be buried under less weight than this and gasping for air. Jim and all the other people in this hall, important and not important in the affairs of billions, all of them wanting to live, deserving to live, but too many of them dying.

Komack had been one of the lucky ones, but he might be unlucky in this rescue attempt if Spock did not have the strength to hold the weight or withstand his insults. He drew back his lips against his teeth and heaved up and to the left…and held….

The admiral’s legs wriggled and then disappeared completely. “Got it! Now just a minute. Another minute.”

His legs shuddered like trees blown by hurricane winds, the tendons and ligaments of his knee compressed, burned, but he could continue…. What was a minute? Nothing. Sixty small seconds, ninety-three Vulcan dranaths, seventy beats of a human heart, time enough to review Surak’s precise and logical precepts (I have not shown undue emotion, father of my father, except in my bondmate’s mind and in his arms), time enough to review the one hundred and eighty elements of the periodic table (the electrical impulses traveling to my brain from my knee are physical manifestations that need not be acknowledged. The perception of pain is a thing of the mind and can be controlled even without all that I have lost), time enough to allow, for a split second, a vision of Komack’s crushed body eventually being pulled from the rubble (I will not succumb to such unworthy thoughts, they are the detritus of an undisciplined mind), time enough to construct an image of a dusty, bruised but intact Kirk with a cocky grin asking him “what kept you so long?” (Imagination is a tool of my will and can be used logically. Jim, you have always been the luckiest human I have ever known, although I do not believe in luck.)

And he held….

Sweat accumulated on his brow. His knee screamed to collapse, but he would not let it.
And held….

The vertebrae of his lower back felt like they were slowly and agonizingly being jammed into each other, crunched into a jumble of bone and spinal jelly. Knives split his hands.

And held….

“That does it,” came the muffled voice from beneath the beam. “I’m coming out now.”

Komack kicked Spock as he wriggled his way out, but by that time Spock was stone maintained by granite will, and not even the sudden jolt against his ankle moved him. Although if it had been the other, weaker leg, he did not know what would have happened.

From the corner of his eye Spock saw Komack get to his feet in a series of uncoordinated jerks and then visibly straighten his shoulders. “You can let go now, Commander,” the admiral said in his characteristically certain voice, and then he clambered away.

But Spock had no strength left for a slow and careful lowering of the beam, and his fingers, held inflexibly in the one position for so long, could not possibly uncurl in any controlled manner.

Jim would undoubtedly say he had “the tiger by the tail.” Indeed. There was no way to abandon this task easily or safely. “Prepare for evasive action,” he croaked, and with an effort he pulled his hands apart as he attempted to jump back, away from whatever tidal wave the collapsing pile of debris might create.

But his legs, stressed for so long, refused to budge, and instead he toppled backwards, like a giant oak felled in one piece, his toes still clinging perilously to where they had been. He tried to move but barely could; his feet scrabbled ineffectually. He lay and looked up at the rubble stack heaving as the beam shifted to claim space demanded by its weight. For a long, dangerous moment there was a question that gravity had not decided yet, whether the stack would fall toward the stage or backwards. He heard Komack hiss, “Commander! Get out of the way!” and the sounds of someone moving quickly. With a snap that hurt his eardrums, the debris abruptly careened toward him, all groans and angry crunching of metal, and Spock thought, I am going to die.

But before he was crushed, as so many others had been killed that day, strong hands grabbed under his armpits and, with brute strength and desperation, pulled him up and literally threw him away from the avalanche of wreckage.

He landed on his back, on something very sharp that dug into the muscles of his shoulder. He rolled over to escape the pain.

“Spock! Are you all right?”

That was not Komack’s voice…. He levered himself up on one arm and twisted to look over his shoulder. Commodore James Kirk, disheveled, with an oozing scratch across his broad forehead and dusted so much with white from head to toe that he resembled more an angel that had taken wing from the murals than a Starfleet officer, awkwardly sprawled across some twisted chairs not two meters away.

“Jim,” Spock said to test his conviction that Kirk was truly there, for he could scarcely believe the coincidence that had brought the two of them together in this way in the jumbled confusion of Friendship Hall. Spock surrendered to the overwhelming emotion that was rushing out from the place where he had caged his worry. Relief. It was sharp and almost painful, hard to endure, like an orgasm delayed too long.
Kirk scrambled across the distance that separated them. They reached for each other’s hands at the same time; Spock clasped hard with the fingers sticking out from the wrapping made from an admiral’s tunic.

“That was a damn stupid stunt to try, my Vulcan idiot. Who’d you think you were, Atlas?” The fingers pressing urgently against his own took the sting from the words.

It was hard for Spock to find the right response without an unseemly outward display. He hungrily took in Jim’s dirty features and said, “A logical attempt to surmount the barrier. Jim, are you all right?”

The grip on his hand tightened convulsively. “Now I’m all right.”

Yes. Spock knew exactly what he meant.

“I suppose I can assume that you two are happy to see each other,” announced Komack’s acerbic tones. “Kirk, glad to see you’re alive. That was some trick, getting your former first officer out of the way.”

Dignity demanded that they not jerk apart, but their hands separated in mutual decision. Kirk, hunched over next to Spock, twisted toward the admiral with narrowed eyes.

“I got here just after you crawled under that mess. I didn’t want to say a word to disrupt Spock’s concentration, but I couldn’t believe how much weight he was holding and for how long. Damn stupid thing to ask him to do, Admiral. You could have gotten yourself killed. Him, too. You almost did get him killed.”

“But we were all fortunate that you were close enough to effect a rescue, eh, Kirk? I was too far away.”

“I saw that,” Kirk snapped. He turned back to Spock. “Can you get up now? I left Dubois and several council members on the other side,” he waved over the debris field that in the immediate area was considerably flattened because of Komack’s and Spock’s efforts, “and some of them need help badly.”

“Nogura?” Komack asked.

Kirk hauled himself to his feet. “I haven’t seen him.”

Spock found that his legs were functional again, and he stood, unsteadily, in a small space that would accommodate his booted feet. Everything hurt, but that did not matter. “I suggest that I return to McCoy’s triage and—”

“McCoy?” Joyfully.

Spock nodded. “Indeed, the good doctor has escaped serious injury. When I left him some minutes ago, there was hope that a rescue effort would arrive soon. I could lead medical personnel in this direction. How did you reach this point?”

“You really mean how did we survive, don’t you? I’m not sure. In front of the stage seems to be the worst of it, but everybody who managed to get to the far right of the stage is more or less intact. Must have been some protection built into the side walls, I don’t know. Or we were just lucky.” Kirk pointed. “I came through a weakness in the wreckage about fourteen meters down that way, but part of the wall collapsed right after I got over it, and I think it’s impassable now. It’s a good thing you two managed to get this passageway open.”
“And where’s Dubois?” Komack asked impatiently.

“The president and the others are camped out to the far right side of what’s left of the stage. Up against the wall.”

“I will remember where they are. Jim, please take care of yourself.”

The grin that aggravated, distracted, and pleased him appeared. “I always do. Don’t you go lifting anything again.”

“Only when necessary,” Spock replied with dignity.

Komack regarded them with arms folded. “If you two are finished…. Come on, Kirk, the two of us are after Nogura. Let’s go.”

Without another word the admiral began to pick his way forward. Kirk followed him with a final glance at Spock that he read perfectly—Kirk was thinking dark, sarcastic thoughts of Komack in his thoroughly human way. Spock took the first few steps that would lead him back to McCoy.

At least they had found each other.
Twenty-one days after Paris, Kirk startled awake to a hand on his shoulder. His eyes flew open to a claustrophobic, shadow-strewn basement room in the Operations Center bunker, where he had gratefully taken six hours of sleep on a cot after serving yet another eighteen hour shift. Admiral Nkapa’s jowly face stared down at him.

“Get out of here, Kirk,” the admiral said gruffly. “Your turn for leave. I don’t want to see you for forty-eight hours.”

Kirk rolled to a seated position and picked up his tunic. “Sounds good,” he said through the velour as he tugged it over his head. He’d achieved a good working relationship with the stolid veteran almost as soon as he’d been called back to help staff the undermanned Ops Center. Nkapa had wasted no time once he’d learned that both Carello and Lee were injured casualties and, formal orders or not, he’d demanded Kirk’s presence. The newly minted commodore wasn’t sorry to leave the damage control and reek of the disaster site to beam to San Francisco. He’d wanted proactive and not reactive work, work that he knew he would be good at and would help him dispel the guilt he felt over the disaster that had occurred on his promotion day.

He smoothed his hair without thinking. “I’ll need to update the log. And brief you on the Nolaran situation. A lot has happened there since you took off on Tuesday.”

“I knew it would. Not to worry about a briefing, once the log’s complete I’ll be fine.”

“It will be.”

“Take care of that, then off you go. I’m sure you’ve got better things to do than hang around headquarters.”

Kirk nodded. Indeed he did. When the admiral had announced the leave rotation with the intention of taking the first days himself, Kirk had made his plans.

Before Nkapa was out the door Kirk’s communicator was in his hand. The planet-based communications system was different from what they’d used on the Enterprise, but after a delay that Uhura would have found unconscionable, the signal bounced off a satellite and eventually made its way across the ocean. A familiar voice answered.

“Spock here.”

“Hello, stranger. Would you believe I’ve got forty-seven hours and an odd number of minutes on my hands? Any thoughts on what I can do with them?”

A short pause, and Kirk wished he hadn’t been so flip, in case he’d embarrassed Spock; somebody in the makeshift labs responsible for analyzing evidence from the blast zone might be listening. But he was damn happy to be emerging at least for a short while from long days of duty and no time for anything else. On more than one occasion he recalled McCoy saying All work and no play makes you crazy as the CMO shooed his stressed-out captain off the ship. Kirk’s tight shoulder muscles and the dull throb at the base of his skull agreed with McCoy. He needed a break.

“Indeed,” Spock returned in a perfectly level voice that nevertheless opened all the possibilities that Kirk desired. “It is likely that I will be able to assist you in filling your time.”

Ah. His Vulcan was alone after all. “I bet you can. I’ve got plenty of ideas. Did you get
“Authorization for time off?”

“There is no problem. I will notify Commodore Beldon, complete a few essential tasks, and meet you in approximately ninety minutes.”

“Fine. I should be at the house by then.”

“Should you tell the realtor and the moving company to proceed or shall I?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Very well.” There was the sound of a door opening and then a voice asking about an ash analysis. “Commodore, I must go. However, I anticipate seeing you soon. Spock out.”

Kirk growled happily and stood, stretching his hands overhead. Forty-eight hours with plenty of things to do, but shared with Spock. That sounded good to him.

In thirty minutes he was outside and striding through the campus of fleet headquarters. He could have beamed directly to his penthouse apartment, but he needed the short walk to get the kinks out of his legs. And to reorient himself to a world that didn’t consist of hard decisions, a siege mentality, and the big question that no one had answered yet: who was responsible for the bombing on Federation Day?

The days in the hot seat at Ops Center had been good, though. Reaffirming. Not that he had ever doubted himself. He’d reclaimed his command persona with ease and relished it. Operations decisions weren’t too different from the ones he had made as captain of a starship, just on a different scale. He’d easily made the adjustments that included implementing established policy, and he’d always known how to cut through the extraneous to find the substance of every issue. After too many long weeks away from his life on the ship’s bridge, creeping on the ground, it had almost felt like he was flying again.

The just-after-dawn air was brisk as it filled his lungs, and the sky glowed a peculiarly intense blue. A determined wind that whistled around the concrete and glass buildings ruffled his hair and propelled a few scudding clouds overhead. This was a mid-November morning in San Francisco as he remembered it from his Academy days: cool enough to invigorate but not so cold as to require a jacket, at least not for someone raised in occasionally chilly Iowa. He’d always tolerated the cold well. His spirits lifted as the breeze caught him and pushed him along.

In a few minutes he reached the sheltered overhang of the transporter station on the outskirts of headquarters, where civilian and military traffic mingled. The operator obviously recognized him, as did a few of the others in the short line, but nobody spoke and that was how he wanted it. Celebrity status had never been his goal. He had only one more public event officially scheduled in a few days—the long awaited announcement from the Ethical Standards Committee over his alleged violations of the Prime Directive.

He materialized in the lavish apartment that Starfleet had assigned him. He’d appreciated the amenities but had spent so little time there that he’d never gotten comfortable. It was the work of less than half an hour to get himself ready to move. After arranging to have his luggage transported, with a self-conscious grin he slipped into a pair of gray sweatpants and a flannel sleeveless top that he’d occasionally worn to work out on the ship. Deep in a meld one night more than a year and a half earlier, Kirk had caught the wisp of an image, like someone quickly disappearing down a hall, and he’d curiously followed. Spock had been a bit abashed, but by that time they were both so comfortable in each other’s minds that he hadn’t prevented the image from returning and taking shape: Spock’s captain dressed informally in his workout clothes, his
muscular upper arms glistening with sweat and the fabric molding to his body below the waist exactly. Then he’d shown Kirk his own very sexual reaction.

This outfit was practical, Kirk told himself, if he was going to be moving furniture and unpacking boxes half the day. Anything more than that was a bonus. He loved bonuses.

A pair of well-worn athletic shoes and a sweatband completed his transformation from respectable member of Starfleet, responsible for ‘fleet disposition of more than five hundred ships, to a scruffy individual whom no one, except Spock, would look at twice. That’s exactly how he wanted it.

He beamed to the neighborhood transporter station close to the house on Fortuna Street, the same station that he and Spock would be using regularly after today. Swinging his arms to fight off the chill, he started to walk briskly up the hill. The house was a few residential blocks away. After Paris, he’d worked quickly to secure the place for the two of them, knowing that his actions provided some certainty in an off-balance world and understanding his own motivations perfectly. As little time as he’d had, still he had managed to beam over and take a quick look around, sacrificing sleep on the cot in the basement room to supplement the audiovisual tour the realtor had sent him via computer.

He lifted his face to the rising sun and felt some of the tension in his neck slip away. A thin, dark-skinned man dressed in red shorts and a black t-shirt jogged in the opposite direction with a quiet “Hello,” one of his neighbors out for morning exercise. Kirk nodded and went on, noticing that the low hum of aircar traffic overhead was muted in this part of town. The primary lanes were to the east, and there was very little ground traffic here.

This section of San Francisco was, the realtor had told him, much sought after by professionals without children, although generally military personnel from Starfleet favored a neighborhood further south. The brick residences along the narrow, tree-dotted streets were not overly large, but inside, he’d been assured, they were modern chic and filled with the latest in amenities. Each had a few steps up to the front door and small side and back yards. The entire area had been razed almost fifty years ago and rebuilt in an urban, inner city colonial style that Benjamin Franklin might have recognized, and they’d been updated regularly by residents since then.

Kirk glanced both ways before crossing a deserted intersection. If he went south four blocks, he’d find Sluman and T’Braggia’s office.

He slowed as he saw the moving truck parked up ahead. For a moment wild ambivalence struck him. He was a person who lived in small cabins on starships, hotel rooms, embassy suites designated for representatives from the distant Federation, an occasional primitive hut on a backwards planet, and temporary quarters assigned by Starfleet. This two story building with a box labeled “Kirk, James T., #12” being carried inside, this wasn’t anything he was accustomed to. The quiet side street was so far from the life he wanted to lead, so far from his quarters on the Enterprise, the challenge and independence of a captain leading his crew…. And he’d had no choice in the matter. Starfleet had grounded him. What the hell was he doing moving into a house, for God’s sake?

Moving into a house with a lover, no less. He’d lived with various women, but nothing had been truly serious and nothing had ever lasted for longer than a few months. Hell, he and Spock had signed a two year lease with the option to renew or even, inconceivable as it might seem, to purchase. His name was on a contract with the man.

A vision of how Spock must have looked—so solemn—as he bent over the document and signed it, then affixed his thumbprint, suddenly calmed Kirk’s racing thoughts. This, he told himself as he strode forward smartly again, was exactly the way he wanted it. This was an adventure, too, a
journey into the unknown. Different, something he hadn’t ever done before, but good.

The two movers were skinny men, both with big black mustaches and green overalls, and as Kirk came up to them they were wrestling with antigravs and a packing crate they were removing from the truck. The realtor, LaToya Unifalawa, round-faced and rotund, waved at him from the front doorway.

“Oh, Commodore Kirk, I didn’t recognize you dressed like that. I’ve seen you so often on the newsvids in uniform, I just assumed….” she tittered, obviously excited by meeting him in person. “I guess you’re one of the locals now, aren’t you, so you might as well be comfortable. Come on in and I’ll show you what we’ve done so far.”

His foot on the bottom step, he asked, “Is Commander Spock here yet?”

“No yet. No, sir,” she added with a sweet smile.

Most of the furniture that he’d commissioned her to buy was in place already, according to the floor plan she’d devised and which he had authorized in a thirty-second call, sight unseen. Unifalawa was a full-service relocation expert who had come highly recommended and charged accordingly. A quick survey of the living area proved that his trust in her had not been misplaced. The furniture she’d chosen had spare and masculine lines, light woods, and blue and brown colors with accents of garnet that went well with the contemporary, airy feel of the space. Spock wouldn’t object to this, surely. And, since Kirk really didn’t want to spend any time at all organizing silverware in the kitchen and stocking the toilet paper dispenser in the bathroom, he’d paid Unifalawa and her firm to take care of such mundane details for them as well; he wanted to start living here with Spock, not waste his time getting domestic.

She was showing him the back room that would be his office, already fitted with oak furniture, a desk fully stocked with the necessities, not to mention three or four unpacked boxes, when voices at the door brought him to the long Great Room that covered most of the first floor. Spock, dressed in trim black trousers and a heavy black sweater with a collared shirt showing under it, was removing his jacket in the front entranceway.

Kirk took the two steps up from the blonde parquet floor to the entry hall. “Good morning, Commander,” he said affectionately. They’d never been demonstrative in public, and a kiss of greeting in front of these strangers was an action he wouldn’t consider. Kirk contented himself with a smile and a searching examination of his lover’s face. Spock seemed a little paler than usual but the tip of his nose was flushed red. The trip from the transporter station that had energized Kirk had chilled his Vulcan.

Spock was subjecting him to a similar scrutiny. A small smile drifted across his face; when Spock smiled, his eyes danced much more than his lips curved.

“Good morning, Commodore. I see that you are dressed appropriately for our labors,” he noted dryly.

Kirk looked down at himself, having honestly forgotten his double-duty choice. He threw his lover a provocative glance from under his eyelashes. “Something that’s easy on, easy off.” A meaningful pause. “For when we have to change later to go to the rehab center to get my mom.”

“I see,” Spock murmured.

“Coming through,” came a voice from outside.
They stepped into the living room to allow the two laborers to bring in some unusually-shaped containers that probably cradled artwork; both of them had collected a few choice items as they’d winged across the galaxy. The realtor was waiting for them by the large navy blue couch.

“Ms. Unifalawa, I don’t believe you’ve met Commander Spock, my….”

Kirk trailed off, but neither Spock nor the woman seemed to notice. He’d been about to say “second-in-command,” a term he should have been accustomed by now to not using, but nothing had been established to take its place. Unifalawa extended her hand and Spock smoothly took it.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Commander. I’m so pleased that you weren’t hurt in the explosion a few weeks ago. What a terrible day that was.” The woman was carefully not looking at Spock’s ears.

“Yes,” Spock agreed, and he retrieved his hand. “It was.”

“So many people injured and killed. My neighbor one floor up has a cousin who was killed. I’ve been wondering how the two of you managed to escape being hurt. Were you further away from the explosion?”

Kirk fielded that one. “We were lucky.”

“I do not believe in luck,” Spock objected.

“How about fate?” Unifalawa asked.

“Random elements favored us,” Kirk added.

“Forty-two percent of those in the hall at the time emerged with no or minor injuries,” Spock said quietly. “We are not so unusual.”

“Well. That’s good, then.” Kirk could see more questions forming on her lips, but professionalism took over and they were spared being quizzed further. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you where we’ve put things. Don and Warren are almost finished unloading the truck, so if you want any of the boxes brought to a different room, you’ll have to let them know before they leave. We’ve already unpacked everything generic for the house; all that’s left are your personal items.”

“Has the computer equipment arrived?”

“Some of it’s upstairs in the third bedroom and some is downstairs in the office. All according to the plans. Let’s start upstairs, Commander, so you can assure yourself that what you need is there.”

She led the way up the open, wrought-iron staircase that divided the great room between living and dining areas. As they ascended the steps, Kirk immediately noticed that Spock was not moving as easily as he usually did. There was a stiffness to his gait and a hesitation….

He’s wearing a knee brace, he realized. He could see the outline through the pants as Spock’s leg flexed while climbing in front of him.

They reached the second floor and he threw Spock an inquiring glance that his lover ignored. Spock had told him he was fine and “relatively uninjured.” There hadn’t been any mention of a problem serious enough to impair his mobility.

Unifalawa took them through all three bedrooms, displaying some pride in having created a domicile for two famous men and not showing any hesitation because it was obvious they would be sharing a bed. The master bedroom was dominated by a low, large bed with a simple bookcase
headboard and nightstands on either side. A comforter with a bold black and white geometric print covered it, and Kirk guessed that there were a few thermal blankets underneath. He’d asked for them, anyway, because after lovemaking Spock seldom bothered to get back into his nightshirt, and…. He glanced at Spock to find that his lover was glancing at him; they looked quickly away. They both had carnal thoughts on their minds, and it was embarrassing in front of this woman. He wished she would just go away so they could tumble into bed….

“And here’s the master bath,” she chattered, showing a room that was strictly utilitarian: no Jacuzzi or oversized tub, but the expected amenities, including a typical shower with both sonic and water settings and a narrow tub. The toilet paper, he noted with satisfaction, was in place. He’d have to remember to get a recommendation for an excellent household technician. Weekly should work.

They ended the upstairs tour with the bedroom that Spock would be using as an office. Three crates that presumably held his computers and peripherals stood in the middle of the room. Spock wasted no time in bending over the nearest one to check. Kirk noticed that he didn’t go down to his knees, though that would have been the best position to gain access. So he went over to the other two boxes and unsealed the fasteners. He held the flaps open while Spock peered inside. His lover was close enough to kiss, a fact that, from the look they exchanged, was not lost on either of them. The realtor seemed to remain oblivious.

“Is everything there?” Unifalawa asked anxiously. “I hope so. I once moved a data information specialist who was coming from Fiji to teach at Stanford. He had some special equipment, too.”

It was on the tip of Kirk’s tongue to say something utterly outrageous like *Believe me, Spock’s equipment is even more special than that.* He cast his gaze to the floor to regain some composure, then raised innocent eyes. Spock threw him a look that clearly said *Behave yourself.* It had never required a meld, a bond, or telepathy for them to know what the other was thinking.

“Assuming that the commodore’s computer is in his office, it appears that all has been delivered as ordered.”

“There’s enough stuff here to run the *Enterprise,*” Kirk joked, having managed to come up with an acceptable remark. He got to his feet and pushed the sweatband further up on his forehead. He watched Spock watching him do it.

“So, what do you think?” Unifalawa asked brightly.

Spock assured her smoothly, “You appear to have done an exemplary job. I am sure we will be most comfortable.”

Kirk started towards the stairs. “I assume the comm terminal is working?” At her quick nod, he said, “Then we’ll direct payment to your firm, and you’ll be finished here.”

It wasn’t as simple as that, but thirty minutes later Don, Warren, and Ms. Unifalawa were gone, after the realtor had blithely told them to “have a nice day.” Kirk was left standing in the entrance hallway, one small box labeled “Hall Closet” at his elbow on a long, narrow table.

He didn’t turn around. He knew Spock would come to him. He faced the bright morning sunshine that poured through the window in the door, his bare arms at his sides.

There was movement behind him as Spock walked across the room, his heels clicking softly and then loudly as he came first to the area rug and then to the wooden floor.
Arms slipped around his waist. Kirk leaned back against the body of the lover he had missed, and who he needed, and he sighed.

“Hi,” he said softly and rubbed the side of his face against Spock’s sweater-clad shoulder. Silver threads gleamed among the black; suddenly Kirk recognized it. Spock had worn it that day more than two years ago when it had become clear they were courting each other. “You’re dressed for the occasion, too,” he murmured. “I remember this. You wore it on Starbase Eleven, didn’t you?”

“You are correct. We are starting something new today, as we did that day.”

He turned within Spock’s arms, about to say And this will work, too, but their faces were too close, and Spock’s lips were slightly parted and delectable, and there was no way he was not going to lean into a kiss.

He resisted the temptation to deepen their contact. They had time. “Now it’s a good morning.”

“A very good morning. How are you, Jim?”

“A lot better than you, apparently.” He pulled back within their embrace. “You didn’t tell me about your knee.” He nudged gently. He could feel the brace, hard and unyielding.

Spock exhaled quietly. “There was no need to inform you, especially once I learned you were called for duty in Operations. And there was nothing that you could have done about the situation. I had a grade three tear of my anterior cruciate ligament, am exercising diligently to strengthen the muscle, and will wear the support for the next few weeks.”

Kirk read between the lines. “Who did the surgery?” he asked sharply.

“In their wisdom and foresight,” Spock’s lips quirked, “Starfleet authorized McCoy. Or rather, given the confusion of the last few weeks, no one intervened when McCoy announced that he was taking over my case. Really, Jim, surgery is too strong a word for a twenty minute procedure. I returned to duty in two hours. What would have been gained by telling you? Our communications were infrequent enough as it was.”

Kirk frowned, hard put to come up with a reasonable answer but feeling that it was important to express what he thought. “We should tell each other about those things, even when we can’t change them.”

“Perhaps you are correct,” Spock said lightly. “The next time I sustain a leg injury, you can be sure I will keep you completely informed.”

“You’d better,” Kirk mock-growled. He found Spock’s hand and led him over to the couch. “Sit down and let me have a look.”

“You are manufacturing an excuse to lay your hands upon my body.”

“Damn right I am. And since when do I need an excuse? Come on, off with the pants.”

Instead, Spock sat on the very edge of the cushion, bent over, and easily rolled the stretch fabric of his trousers up over his knee.

Kirk let out a bark of laughter and glanced at the leg that Spock had stretched out straight, undoubtedly because that was the most comfortable position for it. He could see only a small, centimeters-long scar that blazed turquoise peeking from under the edge of the brace. Then he knelt before his lover, insinuating himself between Spock’s long legs.
“You,” he said, “are playing hard to get.” He stopped short of connecting their lips and instead stared into his lover’s eyes. They were bright, sparkling, full of life. God, he loved Spock this way. Happy.

“That,” Spock murmured, “would be highly illogical. I believe our goals at this moment are compatible.”

“I’d say we’re compatible.” So compatible that their bodies, from the beginning and despite their mutual lack of experience with other men, had fit together with almost no awkwardness. “Are you going to keep talking or kiss me?”

“Not until you,” Spock ran a fingertip along the edge of the sweatband, “remove this ridiculous object. We are not in the gym.”

And not on the ship and not anywhere they had ever made love before. Today they would begin to define the way they would live in this house. Here was privacy, and safety, and a small cocoon of togetherness they could shape any way they wanted. Hell, they could walk around naked if they wanted to. They could make love on the living room floor. Spock could shout when he reached orgasm as loudly as he wanted to.

“You take it off,” Kirk said huskily, and then he pressed a hand to his lover’s groin, boldly, with assurance, because he had the right as well as the desire. He felt the long bulk of Spock’s penis hardening as he defined its shape through the black pants. A tingle of excitement coursed through him because he touched the proof of this man’s desire for him—and the evidence of his own power.

“Commander,” he said with great affection, because he liked calling Spock that, and he licked up along the length of his lover’s ear, ending at the tip and making sure that moisture glistened at the point.

“You,” Spock said thickly, and Kirk could feel those strong, yearning hands tighten on his shoulders, felt the fingers rub restlessly against his bare skin, “are the most desirable human I have ever encountered. It is disgraceful how you have ensnared me.”

“That’s me. Komack will tell you that ‘disgraceful’ is my middle name.”

“Tiberius,” Spock fondly teased. He ran a fingertip along the sweatband again. “Emperor. I could wax poetic and make a reference to your reign over my emotional life, but I will refrain from doing so, as you are well aware that Vulcans are not sentimental.”

They were so close, and Kirk loved staring into Spock’s eyes like this, witness to the beauty inside revealed. His gaze darted from the brown irises, to the short line of eyelashes, up to the slanted brows that tempted him, then returned to the shining eyes that shouted with emotion. Of course, he was aware that Vulcans were not sentimental.

“Nor do they have emotional lives,” he softly said. He delicately bestowed a kiss on the side of Spock’s nose.

He had missed this so damn much. He’d taken their sex life on board the ship for granted; it was only when they’d had to put it on hold that he’d appreciated it for what it had been: ease and comfort, profound affection, desire for each other that had grown naturally. Freedom to express the feelings in their hearts through the actions of their bodies.

And now, at last, they were preparing to love in their own time and their own unique way.
“Most sentimental Vulcans I know,” Kirk murmured, “aren’t this easily sidetracked. We do have a lot to get accomplished this morning. Maybe we should—”

Spock put the tip of one finger against the point of his chin and wordlessly applied pressure. With a sigh that ended in a small catch of breath, because he craved what they were about to do, Kirk turned his head to give him access. His reward was a series of wispy kisses along the jawline, each caress definite and fully applied with a beginning—first touch so delicate—and then a middle—softening of the rich inner lips, the application of moisture and the flick of a tongue upon him—and then an end—a gradual sliding suction that slowly diminished until the lips left his face so they could land a few centimeters further on, on a space not yet worshiped by Spock’s mouth. God, it was hell being loved by someone as thorough as his Vulcan. Just hell. Kirk tilted his head further.

“I thought you said,” he managed while enduring the sweet assault, “that you weren’t going to kiss me until the sweatband came off.”

And then the lips laved the sensitive area of his ear. Kirk allowed a full groan to issue from his mouth, because it was useless to pretend he wasn’t feeling anything. His ears were as sensitive as he had once fantasized Spock’s would be. Kirk closed his eyes while Spock sucked gently on his earlobe.

Each quiet, understated tug produced shivers of sensations. Kirk lived in the moment. It wasn’t only the wonderful feeling of flesh against flesh and the arousal now pulsing through his body, but the permission: turning his head to give Spock exactly what he wanted, which was the best angle to provide pleasure to his captain. His ex-captain. And the sharing, because he would take from Spock’s body everything he was giving.

Finally Spock released his ear with a flick of his tongue that left Kirk tingling. “I have not kissed you yet.”

Kirk blinked, because he’d forgotten the question. Oh, right. Well, he wasn’t playing by those rules.

“You mean like this?”

He straightened on his knees in sudden, aggressive resolution. He’d show Spock a kiss. He connected their mouths and immediately pushed his tongue inside, where he assertively claimed what he’d lacked for too long. *Give me your hidden depths, your secret places, your strong stroking tongue and your yielding soft flesh. Oh, God, you taste good.* Spock’s arms slid around his back to pull him closer, and Kirk wrapped one arm around the strength that had always been at his disposal. Holding and being held again. The other hand he kept where it had found a home, intimately fondling his former second-in-command. Being this close—their tongues together wetly even when breathing—being this close was inflaming. The hell with having plenty of time.

As their mouths moved hungrily against each other again, Kirk worked his hand under the rising erection to cup the small testicles there. He could feel their softness give against his gentle force. He wouldn’t press too hard, wouldn’t harm this man in his grasp, wouldn’t ever hurt when he only wanted to give pleasure. But he would touch there, possessively.

Spock shifted just a little, up and then down, aiding Kirk’s ministrations on his body, aiding in his own sensual enjoyment. A small gasp escaped their joined lips. Kirk ran his thumb up and over the hard column that strained against the fabric of the black pants as it attempted to align in the best angle for penetration.

The image was suddenly too real. Kirk broke the joining of their mouths, but before he could do
anything more—he had a strong desire to tear open the fly to his lover’s trousers and feast on the hard flesh inside, either that or climb on top and fuck until both their brains were fried—Spock grabbed him around the waist and effortlessly heaved him up until they were both reclining full length on the couch. They settled facing each other on their sides—head to toe.

“Oh, lover,” Kirk whispered to the distended pants fabric that tickled his lips, “I like the way you think.” He blessed Unifalawa, who had picked out a generously sized piece of furniture that allowed them to suck each other off while on the comfort of their own couch. He also sent distracted thanks to the planetary conditions that had created Vulcan strength; with Spock’s arm wrapped firmly around his hips, there was no way he would overbalance and fall.

He started to unfasten the pants and expose Spock’s penis as he felt similar actions being performed on him. Cool air hit his own aroused organ first, and he had to stop what he was doing because warm fingers were on his aching flesh, providing a maddening contrast that made him inhale sharply. Pressure along the length of him, dancing fingertips, a skimming across his flared corona, then sudden moist sucking that made his entire body tense.

It was the sound of what Spock was doing to him as well as everything else that got to him. Kirk fought the temptation to just roll over and let it happen. It wouldn’t be fair. Would it? Even though this was his favorite thing. Next to favorite thing. Well, one of his favorite things with Spock, to watch his cock in his decorous Vulcan’s mouth. God, he loved it. That had been one of the first things they’d done with each other in bed, and the act always carried a hint of a first-time thrill for him.

Later, Kirk firmly decided, though Spock was an expert at licking and sucking, and Kirk could hear each suction, each slurp that was his little kink, that sent extra pleasure racing through his whole damn body. Spock was making his heart pound…. But later. They had plenty of time, and now that they would be living together again, they could make love as often as they wanted, and in as many different ways as their imaginations provided. Soon, he would sit and watch while Spock sucked him, but for now he would return the favor. He loved hearing Spock moan….

Not content to expose his lover through his underwear, Kirk tried to maneuver the pants and briefs down around Spock’s thighs. Spock hummed in new arousal, and the feel of that vibrating mouth around his shaft froze Kirk’s fingers again and forced a groan from his throat. “God, Spock” he gasped, “that feels….”

Suddenly all the warmth and stimulation disappeared, and Kirk groaned again in disappointment. But Spock was saying to him, “Lie back, Jim. Allow me to do this for you.”

Ah. In the time before, his Vulcan had seen into the depths of him, and he knew exactly what all Kirk’s little turn-ons and turn-offs were. Well, damned if he was going to be catered to.

“No,” he insisted. “Lift up for a second. I need to get to…..”

Obligingly, Spock lifted up, Kirk pulled down, and all of Spock’s genital area was free: his out-thrusting organ, delicately tinted the lightest shade of green, the dark bush of pubic hair, and the neat testicles. He delicately licked along half the arc of the double ridges and sighed as Spock’s own unique flavor burst upon his tongue.

But then he snaked a hand around to the small of his lover’s back, to the chenesi. The secondary testicular system wasn’t nearly as sensitive as it had been during the one brief, out-of-season pon farr that they had managed to survive together, but it was still an area that Spock loved to have stroked.
“Now this,” he mumbled around the bulk that he was slowly easing further into his mouth, “is more like it.” He rubbed the side of his thumb around and around the small depression of the chenesi, and Spock literally bucked within his grasp, bumping up against the roof of Kirk’s mouth. But Kirk didn’t mind and he’d been waiting for it. Spock out of control. The best.

“Jim,” his lover gasped, and he lost all pretense of returning his attention to Kirk. “Yes. Please.”

The most important organ in sex, Kirk had heard many times, was the brain, and Kirk’s brain was mightily stimulated by the desperation in his lover’s words. “You bet,” he promised and moved a little further down on the couch so he could lash with his tongue vigorously. He was rewarded with the little series of grunts that often accompanied Spock’s escalating excitement: he knew what Spock liked most of all, too. He applied himself to the twin tasks of feasting on Spock and commanding a response with his fingers from the chenesi that were flaring into life. He could feel the slight wrinkling of the skin that proved the unique organs were streaking pleasure to his lover’s overheated body.

And suddenly he remembered why they didn’t often indulge in sixty-nining: Spock was as stubborn as he was. His lover fell upon him again, and within a minute Kirk was totally distracted. He wanted to give Spock physical delight, and he enjoyed tasting the heavy bulk with its flared double ridges, but it was impossible to ignore what Spock was doing to him. Especially since he was going to come, soon. Nothing he could do about it, they’d been apart from each other too long, and the inevitable tightening of his balls was happening so much sooner than he wanted it to. Well, he would come first, because he wanted to be able to give Spock full concentration afterwards. So he allowed himself to ride the heavy tide of arousal that was about to peak….

“Yes,” he said, and then he dragged air into his lungs. “That’s it. Oh, yes. Right there! Right….”

Damn. Oh, damn. He loved shooting into Spock’s mouth…. He lunged forward in the only thrust he allowed himself, straightened and surrendered to sensation….

It was always over way too quickly. Somebody, Kirk thought dazedly as his heart pounded in the aftermath, should find a way to make it last longer.

He felt Spock swallow one last time and then carefully release him. Spock’s body was absolutely tense within his upside-down embrace. So now it was his turn.

It didn’t take long. Kirk sucked hard, stuck his tongue between the ridges, and slapped the flat of his hand against the small of his lover’s back. That was all it took.

Spock stiffened and shouted at the top of his lungs, “Jim! Jim! Vardal ne!” If Kirk hadn’t been so busy swallowing the emission—Spock’s come always tasted sweet and fresh, never bitter—he would have smiled. At last, his lover could indulge in his penchant for uninhibited verbal exclamations while they made love. This was going to be a good house.

They rested just the way they were for long minutes, and Kirk actually drowsed for a while. It was Spock who stirred, causing Kirk’s eyes to fly open when he neatly reversed position so they were face to face again. Their naked groins bumped gently, then Kirk shifted so there was no space between them at all. They were comfortably skin to skin where they were exposed outside their clothing, cock next to cock. It felt good, even in the aftermath of arousal.

Spock draped one leg over his to snug their fit even better, then smiled at him from close range, that small secret smile that never failed to remind him of how special their relationship really was,
and how far Spock had traveled to be with him here like this, sated and sweaty.

“Now that,” Kirk declared with a small stretch, “was terrific.”

“I will not dispute you. However, I do think it is time this came off.” Spock swept the headband away and followed with a vigorous kiss.

“It keeps the hair out of my eyes,” Kirk protested.

“A haircut would accomplish the same purpose. And I shudder to think of the impression you made on Ms. Unifalawa and our neighbors in this…outfit.”

Kirk ran a finger along the length of the long nose. “Not everybody gets turned on like a certain Vulcan I know.”

“That is not precisely what I mea—”

“I know.”

They were quiet for a time. Somewhere a clock was ticking in the silence, though Kirk couldn’t remember seeing where one had been placed. Spock shifted within his arms.

“How’s your leg?” he asked quietly. “Did we strain it?”

“I will admit that there is some slight soreness that was not present fifteen minutes ago. However, during the act itself I did not spare any thought to my knee.”

“That’s always the way it is, anything for a good fuck. You wanton Vulcan, you.”

“Technically speaking, I do not believe that the word ‘fuck’ is entirely accurate. However, your use of sexual colloquialisms indicates that you are in exceptionally high spirits.”

“And why not? Trust me, technical or not, that was a good fuck. I am also,” Kirk declared, “dying of thirst.” He neatly rolled over and up to a sitting position. “I’m getting some water. Want some?”

Without waiting for an answer he set out for the kitchen, tucking himself back into the sweatpants as he went. He cupped his hands and drank straight from the flowing faucet, then found glasses in the cupboard above the sink and filled two. Gulping thirstily as he went, he brought them to the couch where Spock was now decorously sitting. No one would guess that the immaculate Vulcan had been writhing on the cushions ten minutes before.

He handed a glass to Spock and plopped down, close enough so their thighs rubbed against one another, then straightened his legs in front of him.

“This is the life,” he proclaimed. Kirk felt energized and capable of just about anything. Good sex with Spock either left him that way or so drained he couldn’t keep his eyes open. “I think we need a table here, though. I want to put my feet up.”

His lover emptied his glass, took Kirk’s, and placed them both on the floor before replying, “Easily accomplished.” Spock wrapped his arm around Kirk’s shoulders, an embrace into which he settled happily.

“We should get started unpacking and organizing things,” Kirk noted, though he made no move to get up. He hadn’t been this comfortable and content since… “It’s been four months since our leave on Riddle’s.”
“Sixteen weeks and five days.”

“I’m glad we did that, right before the end of the mission.”

“I am also,” Spock replied quietly and squeezed his shoulder. “I recall that you especially enjoyed the lavish bathing facilities.”

Kirk snorted. “You didn’t seem to mind the Jacuzzi either. I don’t think we’ll be indulging in quite the same way in the bathroom upstairs. Not much room in that bathtub.” He waved towards the stairway to their left.

“Many things are possible,” Spock intoned.

He had managed to impress the younger officers by sounding like a pseudo-mystic with such drivel, but he didn’t fool Kirk. He poked Spock satisfactorily in the side, heard the over-dramatized oomph, then patted the hand on his shoulder. “Hey, you’re ice cold. I thought what we just did would warm you up.”

“Momentarily. However, I seem to have returned to my somewhat chilled state.”

Kirk sat up straight and Spock’s embrace fell away. His lover’s nose was still red. As he watched, Spock gave a little sniff. An idea occurred to him that appealed to his happy mood.

“Anything is possible, eh? Want to try something with me? Something that might get you warmed up?”

Spock eyed him with misgiving. “What outrageous plan have you devised? Will it violate my common sense and dignity?”

Kirk leered. “Sex is never dignified and you seem to enjoy that just fine. Here’s a hint. We’ll get to take our clothes off.”

“The hours are slipping away. It is already—”

Kirk hand shot out to cover his lover’s mouth. “If I want to know what time it is,” he said amiably, “I’ll check the clock. I’m on shore leave. Or leave. Whatever. This time is for us, too, you know.”

Spock tilted his head and Kirk let him speak. “In that case, I agree to participate in this mysterious activity.”

Not too long later, Kirk was happily shoe-horned in the small bathtub that was now their very own for at least two years under the terms of their lease, and Spock was sitting between his spread knees, with the two of them barely fitting into the restricted space. Thank goodness for skinny Vulcans. Kirk didn’t mind the way Spock was pushing back against his genitals, either. He wasn’t quite ready to make love again yet, but this uninhibited intimacy and their low simmering arousal was almost as fulfilling in its way. He was having a wonderful time, and the smile hadn’t left Spock’s eyes yet.

Spock ran his hands slowly and sensuously down the length of Kirk’s legs, stopping to tug on the pale hair that grew on his calves, then he reached to tickle the very ends of Kirk’s toes.

“Hey.” Kirk tired to pull away and sent the hot water slooshing.

“There is no yeoman here to remove the water from the floor,” Spock pointed out severely. “If we make a mess, we clean it. Remain still.”
“Not if you’re going to tickle me.”

“No. I simply wish to…” Spock trailed off, and Kirk grabbed the side of the tub, prepared to endure whatever his kinky Vulcan came up with. One finger made its way between his big toe and the toe next to it and moved back and forth, firmly if gently. What the heck…. Did Spock think he needed roto-rootering between the toes? Then the finger went on to the next space and the next. Well, if Spock wanted to play with his toes, who was he to complain? He was game. Kirk relaxed against the back of the tub. It didn’t feel so bad, once he got used to it. Actually, pretty good. He felt very pampered. His eyes slowly closed.

When Spock ceased his ministrations and leaned back against Kirk’s chest, Kirk kept his eyes closed but opened his arms and gathered his lover in with a sigh. He shifted so that he could rest his cheek against Spock’s baby-fine hair and inhale the familiar, desired scent of the wind blowing off the Sashashar plains, of an oasis in the desert near Shikahr. He remembered the scent of excitement and belonging, that fascinating mix when his mind rested within Spock’s in a meld.

Spock shifted, too, so his arms overlapped Kirk’s across his chest before he also subsided within their embrace in total relaxation. Ah. The last vestiges of the tightness at the base of Kirk’s neck disappeared. The contact skin to skin felt sinfully sensuous. They settled as one body into quiet ease.

The room was warm and steamy with the hot water they’d programmed into the tub. The only sound was their breathing and the occasional swish of water against porcelain. He knew that Spock, resting against him, was comfortably warm. So was he, just this side of being overheated, but okay. There was enough water so that he could perceive the buoyancy moving against him. Floating. Hmmmm. Ops Center, Paris, the Enterprise in dry dock so far away from him and the life he wanted to lead, Versin and all that they had lost, it all drifted far away….

He must have dozed off, because he awakened to the sudden hum of the recirculation jets keeping the water temperature at the setting they’d picked. He wasn’t surprised at his lethargy; there hadn’t been enough sleeping hours in his life lately.

“Are you comfortable?” Spock asked. Kirk could feel the words rumble through Spock’s chest and then his own arms.


“Please cease to inquire about my physical state,” Spock said lazily. His words had no bite. “I will tell you if there is need for concern.”

That roused him from his lassitude. “Oh, yeah? You will? Like you told me about it in the first place? I don’t think I can trust you, you faker.”

Kirk straightened and twisted over to the corner of the tub, then grabbed Spock with a slosh of hot water and pushed the side of his lover’s head down against his left shoulder. Spock, who could have resisted easily, slid willingly where Kirk’s mock-force directed him to go, and further into the water he went, though his hand did come up and arch back to the vicinity of Kirk’s pressure point. The implication was clear that a neck pinch would be used in self-defense as needed.

Kirk snorted in amusement. As if Spock would ever inflict that on him in anything other than the most dire necessity. He caught a glimpse of the deceptively submissive smile that hovered on his lover’s lips.

“I think I need to clean out those ears of yours, because they’d better hear me this time.”
He ran a forefinger around the edge of the always-intriguing Vulcan curves, then he blew directly into his lover’s ear. “I’m in this for good,” he found himself whispering, surprised that his sudden playfulness yielded words of this intensity. “I care about what happens to you and you’d damn well better tell me whenever something is going on. Okay?” He tweaked the pointed tip in threat. “Okay?”

Spock inhaled heavily: his substitute for laughter, Kirk had learned long ago. “And what will you do if I do not agree?”

“Rip it off,” Kirk said promptly.

“My ear or some other prominent part?”

“If I did that, we’d both be sorry.” He released his grip on the tip and smoothed his fingers over it gently.

Spock tilted his head up so that their lips were close. “Then don’t make either of us suffer.” He claimed a kiss.

Kirk slid his arms around Spock’s shoulders to align them for better contact. This felt really good, and his cock began to stir. His Vulcan’s lips would rejuvenate anybody. He was beginning to consider a really serious kissing session—leading to a lot more—when they jerked apart to the sound of a distinctly feminine voice.

“There is a visitor at the front door.”

For a moment Kirk had no idea who was speaking or even what had been said—the sensuous sliding of Spock’s body as it adjusted against his in the water was mightily distracting—but then he realized.

“The house computer,” Spock said for him.

“Let’s ignore it,” Kirk suggested. “Probably the neighbors with a cake to welcome us.”

Spock threw him a look that claimed no knowledge of such an esoteric and unlikely Terran custom, so he sat up straight and directed his question to the air. “Computer, who is present at the front door?”

“I have not yet been programmed with information for the new occupants of the house. I have no data to answer.”

“What I would have been doing if you had not so shamelessly compelled me to indulge in sexual behavior,” Spock murmured.

“As if you haven’t loved every minute. Computer, is the intercom operational?”

“Affirmative.”

“Computer, activate intercom.”

“Working.”

“Visitor, please identify yourself,” he said as evenly as he could, though he couldn’t do anything about the echoes his voice in the bathroom produced.

“Jim, is that you?” came a very familiar tone. “It’s McCoy.”
“Bones, what are you doing here?”

“Come to visit, and I also come bearing gifts.”

Kirk addressed his housemate’s back. “I guess the door isn’t programmed to unlock through our voice command yet?”

“No, it is not,” Spock said in an infinitely patient, put-upon tone.

“Is that Spock there, too? Good, I was hoping I’d catch both of you.”

“Good morning, Doctor McCoy.”

“It won’t be good very much longer if you keep me standing out here. What the heck are you waiting for? Let me in.”

“Oh, Bones, give us a minute, we’ll be right there.” Spock was already sloshing out of the tub and reaching for a towel.

“Okay. You’re gonna have to get this voice box fixed, it’s echoing like crazy.”

“There is no malfunction,” Spock said as he finished drying off his neat backside and pulling on his briefs. “What you are hearing is perfectly natural from an environment that is moisture laden and consists of hard surfaces.”

“Moisture laden and consists…. Where the hell are you two? You got a steam room in there?”

“Merely the bathroom, Doctor. We have been taking a bath.”

A longish pause, long enough for Kirk to finish drying off while he restrained his amusement.

“Oh.”

“I’ve gotta keep him clean, Bones, don’t I? We’ll be right there. Intercom out.”

Kirk slapped the towel at his fully-clothed lover. There wasn’t another soul in the universe with whom they could both be so fully at ease as they were with McCoy, but Kirk was surprised at Spock’s equanimity in allowing this glimpse into their very personal life. He liked such confidence a lot.

Spock wrested the towel from his grasp and arranged it on the rack. But before he could leave, Kirk caught the black sweater and tugged. His lover turned to him with a raised brow, inquiring.

Kirk felt awkward, which was ridiculous. “Before Bones barges in…. I wanted to say thanks. For…” he gestured around, “agreeing to all this. The house. The bath.”

Spock drew close. “It is my pleasure,” he said in his most serious voice. Then he erased the rest of the distance between them and joined his lips to Kirk’s.

More intimate than when they had been on the couch together, pouring their orgasms into each other’s mouths. Conveying as much emotion as “I love you,” which neither had said yet today. Not a casual kiss.

He pulled away slowly, knowing that he had made the right decision in entering this house and mingling his possessions with Spock’s.
Kirk cleared his throat. “Go on then. Bones is waiting.”

*****

The gifts that Bones was bearing were two pizzas, and though it was just past mid-morning Kirk declared a break, pushed aside a few boxes that were on top of the elegant glass and chrome dining room table, and pulled out three chairs. “I didn’t have breakfast,” he proclaimed, and he grabbed a slice of pepperoni and mushroom.

Spock made a comment about time passing, but he didn’t reject the pepper and olive pizza McCoy had brought for him from the local pizzeria.

“Spock told me at his last check-up a few days ago that you were probably moving in today, and I figured you wouldn’t have time to fill up the replicator. This pizza joint’s just down the block from you and over two.”

Spock got up and went into the kitchen. He bent and disappeared beneath the countertops, there was a low hum, and then he popped back up into sight. “The replicator,” he said as he returned to the table with paper napkins in his hands, “is fully stocked and functional. May we offer you anything else to eat, McCoy?”

McCoy loudly disdained anything replicated when he had authentic Italian cuisine in hand.

After a period during which all three of them devoted most of their attention to chewing, McCoy swallowed and asked, “So. How’s the research in Paris going? Do we have any leads?”

Spock blotted a smear of tomato sauce from his upper lip before answering. “While there is preliminary information being gathered from the site, regrettably few conclusions can be drawn as of yet.”

Kirk hitched forward in his seat, food forgotten. “We need to start with those who might have a motive.”

“The list of beings who hate the Federation?” McCoy grunted. “Which is what I presume this is all about. It’s a mile long.”

Kirk ticked off on his fingers. “The Klingons, the Romulans, the Tholians. Then there are dissident groups on all four of the founding planets. The Foursquare Fathers here on Earth, the Ganas on Andoria—”

McCoy took up the recitation. “The Tuletin Fan on Tellar, the Eternists if you want to include them, the—”

“Why not include the Eternists, they make no secret of their views. They’d split up the Federation next week if they could.”

“Because they’re a valid political movement. This action we’re dealing with is extremist, the frustrated action of somebody who isn’t being heard. The way things used to be on Earth before a decent standard of living became available to everybody.”

“Bones, I hate to tell you, but valid political movements also have extremist elements. Not everybody lives in Utopia…or wants to.”

“The events on Leonis IV would support that conclusion,” Spock said quietly. “Hostages are still being held and there is no doubt that the leaders are espousing the Eternist point of view.”
“I still don’t think they’re the ones we’re looking for,” McCoy argued. “What about that fringe group, what are they called, the Shantung Tao?”

Spock nodded. “It is true that they are one of the groups that has officially claimed responsibility for the actions in Paris…as have two hundred and seventeen other organizations or individuals.”

Kirk winced. “It will take years to investigate all of them. There’s got to be another approach. For instance, how the security shields were breached.”

“It appears that they were not. At no time were the shields disturbed.”

McCoy’s brow wrinkled. “But then how did the bomb get beamed in? Several people witnessed it.”

“As did I. So far as we are able to determine, it was not beamed in.”

“A new technology?” Kirk speculated. “Something like transporting but…not?”

“That is one possibility. However, we are somewhat conversant with the technology of the beings arrayed against the Federation and likely to perpetrate such a deed, and there is little or no evidence that any of them has developed radical new technology of this sort.”

Kirk reached for the last piece of veggie pizza. “You mind?” When Spock shook his head, he picked it up but held it before his mouth without biting into it. “So we should consider something else. A small group of individuals. Or an enemy of the Federation that we don’t know about yet.”

McCoy chimed in, “Somebody with a grudge. There was a lot of hate built up in that bombing.”

“Such speculation is helpful but neglects the physical evidence, which we cannot explain.” True frustration entered Spock’s voice. “We do not know how the bombing itself was accomplished. The device was low-level and conventional. A far more destructive device could have been used but was not.”

“Well, that might be a good clue. Somebody who hates but just a little?”

Kirk turned to the physician. “Now even I can say that’s not logical.”

McCoy shook his head. “Nobody ever said humans were logical. If it’s humans involved in this thing, motivations can be complex and contradictory.”

“Most of Commodore Beldon’s team,” Spock intoned, “are working on the assumption that non-humans are involved. Some group from outside the Federation.”

“And they might be right,” Kirk said thoughtfully.

“Possibly. Perhaps when I return to the site the day after tomorrow, more evidence will be available that will provide clues. Commander Giotto is heading up a portion of the site investigation, and he has been most efficient to date.”

“Is Sam on duty again?” Kirk quizzed. “I didn’t know that. It would be good to see him again.”

“I am sure he feels the same, as he inquired about you several days ago. He is grateful for the actions you took that saved his life.”

“Not me. You.”
"Indeed not. It was your—"

"You two are getting ridiculous," McCoy interjected. "Besides, I’m the one who saved his life on the operating table." He closed both pizza boxes. "I don’t want to wear out my welcome, so why don’t you give me a quick tour and I’ll be on my way. Come on, Jim-boy, eat up and let’s get moving. While we’re waiting for you," he pulled a compact medical tricorder from his belt, then got up and walked around to the other side of the table, "I’ll check over Spock’s leg. Stand still."

Dutifully Spock rose and remained motionless while McCoy consulted the machine.

"Got your range of motion back?"

"Approximately seventy-five percent."

"Good. It’ll get better. Do you have much pain?"

"It is minimal."

"Fine." McCoy went down on one knee to examine the injured area with his hands. First he rolled up the pants leg and removed the brace. "Good," he murmured as he poked, "good. Is it still tender here?"

"Somewhat," Spock admitted.

"Not surprising. Give it time." He reapplied the brace, then hoisted himself up to his feet. "You’ll do. Keep exercising."

"I will. Now, if you will excuse me from the tour, I must begin work on programming the house computer. At the least we must have the security program modified for our needs before we leave this afternoon. McCoy, thank you for the food. You are welcome in our home."

Kirk watched him go with a small smile. Spock was always courteous. He’d been shocked the first few times he’d been thanked in bed after an especially vigorous session, but now he had come to expect the openly expressed gratitude. He glanced up at McCoy, who was definitely grinning at him. "And what are you laughing at?"

"You. And Spock. And the bath."

Kirk chuckled. "Well, it seemed logical at the time. We haven’t seen each other in forever, you know. Come on, let’s go for the tour deluxe."

McCoy approved of the house and was shown the spare bedroom especially. "If you need someplace to hide, Bones, we’ve got it."

"Okay, I’ll remember that."

It was only as they were going back down to the living area that he offered, "I, uh, don’t think I’ll need the refuge. Patty Bronson and I are thinking of moving in together."

"One of your nurses?" Kirk’s hand sketched about five foot one. "Short brown hair and a little over recommended Starfleet weight?" At Bones’ quick nod, he asked, "How long has this been going on? On the ship?" He led the way over to the couch and sprawled on it. McCoy settled next to him.

"Nope, we went out the first time about six weeks ago. It’s funny how I never really thought seriously about her before, didn’t look at her twice, but once on Earth…. Well, perspectives
change. I ran into her at headquarters. We started talking and all of a sudden it occurred to me that I would be an idiot not to pursue the pleasure of her company. She, uh, claims the same thing happened to her. It was sudden for both of us.”

“You rascal,” Kirk said with feeling. “A Don Juan in our midst all that time and I never knew it.”

McCoy snorted. “I’ll leave that title to you, thank you.”

Kirk made a little seated bow. “Thank you, I think. Former Don Juan now. Aren’t we talking about Casanova, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Which one of them wears one of these?” McCoy dug into the cushions and came up with one dirty-white sweatband. He smirked. “I’m not gonna ask how this got here. Seems like you two really have been working hard.” He tossed the headband into Kirk’s lap and got to his feet.

Kirk followed him to the door. “Thanks for stopping by, Bones. You were mainly checking on Spock, weren’t you?”

McCoy nodded. “It’s hell when a doctor has to go chasing after his patients. You’d think I had bad breath or something. That was one bad tear, Jim. Take care of him, okay?”

“As much as he’ll let me.”

“Yeah, I know that’s a problem. Well, do your best.”

Kirk shook his friend’s hand with feeling. Bones was one of a kind, and he was grateful that the friendship that had been forged many years ago and tempered during their time together on the Enterprise was going to continue while they were grounded. Wordlessly McCoy returned the handshake. They understood each other.

The doctor paused in the open doorway. “Did you know there’s a cable car route not too far from here? I think I’ll try it out. I haven’t been on a cable car in years.”

“It’s not one of the originals, I’m pretty sure. I think it was put in about the time this neighborhood was reconstructed.”

“Doesn’t matter. Jim, you stay out of trouble now, hear?” He shook his head. “One pointy-eared Vulcan with a computer for a heart and one larger-than-life commodore who doesn’t know when to say quit. Good luck to both of you.” He clattered down the steps and turned to wave once before walking away.

Kirk closed the door, walked over to the couch, and picked up the discarded, much-maligned sweatband. Well, it did keep the hair out of his eyes and he had boxes of books to unpack. He put it on and went to create some order in this house he was going to share with Spock.
Kirk maintained his mellow mood as they left the house, transported to San Francisco Central, and then went on to Toronto. He’d never been to the Canadian city before, but it was the site of St. David’s Rehabilitation Center, where his mother had been resident the past few weeks. She had made it clear that she was ready to leave, though her therapists and doctors had not completely agreed. That had not deterred Sarah Kirk, and she’d wrangled a promise of discharge papers based on certified home health care and the assurance that transportation to Iowa would be provided that would not further aggravate her injuries.

Which was why, Kirk thought wryly and a little fondly, he and Spock were now driving through the Toronto controlled traffic lanes in a lumbering aircar that would provide as much room as his mother needed during the trip home. She could stretch out her legs, she could fall asleep and take a nap…although Kirk doubted that possibility. He’d never seen his mother napping.

Spock drove the ’car they’d rented while Kirk used the comm unit to send proof of the rental to St. David’s. The case worker in the admin department had demanded details and wouldn’t release the discharge papers until satisfied.

“Is all in order?” Spock asked above the noise of the city traffic.

“All set and ready to get this show on the road,” Kirk replied as Spock sent the car into a curve. In a few minutes they’d be there: another meeting between his strong-willed mother and his equally strong-willed but quiet lover. Only this one would be more significant than the lunch they’d shared in Denver. The little talk they’d planned for the restaurant along the Seine would be postponed no longer.

He glanced over at Spock, who was intent on changing lanes so they’d be in a position to land shortly. He looked fine in his black on black outfit, though Kirk had taken the time to change into slacks and a button-down green shirt more presentable than his sweats.

He wasn’t quite sure what Spock thought of his mother. He’d been awfully quiet on the subject, which perhaps spoke more than he wanted it to. Well, not that it mattered that much. He had every confidence in his lover’s ability to forge an adequate relationship with Sarah Kirk, given time, just as Kirk believed that he would be able to face Sarek and Amanda as the intimate partner of their son, once they got around to letting Spock’s parents know exactly how things stood between them.

They parked on the roof of the rehab unit. “Into the fray we go,” Kirk said lightly, and he unbuckled the safety harness.

Spock powered down the motor. “How very flattering an opinion you have of your mother, Jim.”

“Oh, I have no illusions. She can be a little difficult to get along with at times. But we’ll manage.”

“After negotiating with the Organians, surviving the Tholians, and adroitly maintaining our diplomatic distance from the Klingons, I think it is perhaps reasonable of us to have little fear in spending several hours in your mother’s company, no matter what information we have to convey to her.”

“It’s true,” Kirk agreed as the wingdoors opened with a hiss. “Starfleet training prepares you to face just about anything.”

An elevator took them to the eighth floor. The rehab center looked like a typical hospital, which
surprised Kirk. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting, maybe something that didn’t have that “sickbay” odor to it. Literally. He sniffed. Yep, the same. The locator screen on the wall responded to his request for “Sarah Kirk” with a display that lit up showing them the way to her room.

Kirk started down the corridor. His normally brisk pace was slowed when he had to detour around the various residents and the medical personnel helping them. Like most healthy men in a dangerous profession, he felt vaguely uneasy in hospital settings. When members of his crew were hurt, their presence on a biobed represented his own failure to protect his people. His philosophy had always been to approach medical facilities with confidence and to get out of them as quickly as possible.

His mother should be ready for them. He led the way past sleeping and therapy rooms until he realized he no longer had a companion. Spock’s voice came from behind him.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Gabon.”

“Hello, Commander Spock,” came well-modulated, feminine tones. “It is a pleasure to see you again.”

Kirk turned around to see Spock in conversation in the middle of the hall with a petite, dark-skinned human woman. She wore a pale yellow terrycloth robe that brought out an unattractive, grayish undertone to her skin color and made her appear sickly. He waited for a sign from Spock as to whether he was to be included in their talk or if he should move on alone.

“Commodore Kirk, I do not believe you have met Fahtima Gabon. She is a reporter for The Galactic News and a colleague of Ralph Randolph’s.”

“Commodore, how do you do?” Gabon bobbed in a small half-bow of greeting as he came up to join them and then, almost as an afterthought, she extended her hand.

Kirk took it. “I was happy to hear that Randolph escaped with minor injuries.” He was careful not to press too hard on the small fingers within his grasp; he didn’t know how badly this woman who had struck up an acquaintance with Spock had been hurt. Being in the rehab unit for as long as his mother indicated the harm done her was far from superficial.

“Yes, Randy was most fortunate. He is currently in Johannesburg, on an assignment that I had hoped to accompany him on. My cousin and I had been assigned as his assistants. But it was not to be.”

“There will be other opportunities,” Spock contributed. “Randolph indicated that you were most talented.”

Gabon lowered her eyes in a modest display that on another woman would have seemed counterfeit but that somehow, on her, seemed genuine. Kirk looked again at her plain, unassuming appearance, assessing.

“I’m sorry to see that you did not escape without injuries,” he said.

“It is not so bad. I will be released later today. I am looking forward to going home.”

“I am pleased to hear that,” Spock said. “If you do not mind my asking, where is ‘home’?”

“I live in San Francisco with my cousin. The News has a regional center in Phoenix, so our location provides a reasonable commute when it is necessary for me to report in.”
“I see.”

“And you?” She spoke exclusively to Spock.

“We also reside in San Francisco. It is convenient to our work with Starfleet.”

“That is an interesting coincidence.”

Kirk added, “Spock doesn’t believe in coincidences. I’m not sure I do either.”

She eyed him seriously. “But surely, in a random universe, anything can happen. I am sure it has.”

There was the sort of short, awkward silence that would usually lead to the end of the conversation. But Fahtima did not allow that to occur. She addressed Spock somewhat hurriedly. “Before you go, I must thank you for your forbearance on that terrible day. I am afraid that I was…not myself. Not acting the way I would wish to act before a stranger.”

Spock tilted his head and aimed the full force of his scrutiny upon her. “The circumstances were extraordinary. You need not be concerned. And I do not believe that I am a stranger any longer, am I? We have now met three times.”

“That is correct. I do not know if we will ever meet again, however, so I will leave you with my best wishes.” She turned slowly, as if still mindful of whatever wounds she had, then just as slowly turned back to nod in Kirk’s direction. “Good-bye, Commodore.” They were left watching her make her careful way along the hall, with one hand lightly on the handrail.

Kirk threw his lover a quizzical glance as they proceeded towards his mother’s room. He didn’t quite know what to make of the mysterious Ms. Gabon and her association with Spock.

“Randolph invited us out to dinner and drinks with him and his partner,” he offered instead.

“I know, I received the same invitation at the reception.”

“What do you think, should we?”

“He is an interesting man.”

“With an interesting colleague.”

“I do not believe the invitation included his assistant. Ms. Gabon was functioning as his photographer that night, which is where I met her, although I believe she is also a writer. The name of Randolph’s partner is Juan Camarillo. He is a chemist.”

“That’s right, another scientist,” Kirk said. “Somebody who isn’t Starfleet. But we’ll have to strike a delicate balance, having a friendship with a powerful media figure. Can we trust him?”

“I believe we can.”

“I think so too. Okay, let’s give it a try sometime.” Kirk rounded a corner and kept talking. “Kind of a coincidence, isn’t it, meeting her here? Somebody else you know besides my mom.”

“Most individuals from North America requiring rehabilitation services after Paris were sent to three different facilities: here in Toronto, one in Jacksonville, and one in Guadalajara. Not so great a coincidence as it might initially appear to be.”
That ended that subject, because Room 843 was before them with the door closed. Kirk tapped on it lightly, then waited until he heard a firmly voiced “Come in.”

His mother was sitting on a chair by the bed. She was ready to go, dressed in a long, boldly-patterned casual skirt and a dark purple blouse. A suitcase waited by her side.

“Mom. How are you?” He bent to kiss her cheek. Her already thin face seemed a little thinner than usual to him.

“Well enough to go home,” she asserted. “You’re right on time, Commodore Kirk, good job. How are you doing, Jim?”

“I’m fine, Mom. I barely had a scratch, you know.”

“You always were luckier than any other boy in town, which is one reason why Starfleet wanted you so badly.”

Kirk chuckled and eased himself onto the edge of the bed. “I don’t think ’fleet saw it quite the same way. How are your legs?” His mother had suffered a ruptured spleen and compound fractures of both her tibia; laser surgery had set her right, but only careful rehab and electronic stimulation would enable her to walk without limping in the future.

“Much better.” She lifted her skirt halfway to her knees to reveal two support-bandages wrapped around her legs. “I can get around with only a cane now. And perhaps a little help from the most handsome, hard-working commodore on Earth.”

He swallowed his objection to her comment, because he had always suspected she said such things just to hear him protest. Instead he offered, “I wish I had been able to find the time to come and see you. I really have been working double shifts, though.”

“That’s not a problem, honey. When the Federation needs you, you go. But are you sure you’ve got the time to take me home now? If you don’t, I can always hire a driver.”

“No, this is fine.” He gestured towards Spock, who had been standing by the door. “We’ve both got leave today.” It was about time they recognized the other, so-far silent figure in the room. He wondered if his mother would have acknowledged Spock’s presence if he hadn’t first.

“Good, I knew you wouldn’t leave the Operations Center unstaffed for me.” Then she turned towards Spock. “Commander. I was surprised when Jim told me you’d be coming along with him on this trip, but I am pleased to see you well.”

“Thank you, Ms. Kirk,” Spock said as he stood, hands behind back. “I hope to be of some assistance and not an imposition. You are looking well today.”

Her lips twisted in sardonic disagreement. “And here I’ve heard that Vulcans were invariably truthful.” She rose by laboriously pushing on the arms of the chair and picked up a cane. “Jim, I’d rather not stay here any longer than I need to. If you’re ready, let’s continue this conversation in the air.”

Spock took her bag and Kirk offered her his arm, and after punching her medical card in the wall slot to confirm they were leaving, they started the journey to the roof.

Their trip was slow not only because of his mother’s disability, but also because she was greeted by so many people along the way. Kirk’s mouth twitched as he remembered many other occasions when it had seemed his mother knew everybody and everything. She’d always been a journalist in
her heart, taking delight in gathering information and analyzing it, and sometimes telling him, “You never know when you’ll need a source for information.” The group of media outlets that she’d assembled in the American Midwest was not as small as it had been when he’d left for Starfleet Academy, and he knew she had ambitions to acquire more and spread her influence further.

The ’car had a ramp and so he didn’t have to ask for Spock’s help in getting his mother settled. He moved to sit in the front when his mother forestalled him. “Oh, no, Jim, sit here with me.” She patted the seat next to her.

“Don’t you want the room to stretch out?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t want you craning your neck to talk to me, and I’m sure your friend is perfectly capable of locating Riverside without your help.”

Yes, his friend certainly was, so Kirk sat beside his mother. He wasn’t really irritated by her attitude and wondered if Spock was as amused by her maneuvering as he was.

She leaned back with a sigh as the ’car gained altitude, obviously tired out by the effort of leaving, but by the time they were in the long-distance flying lane that would take them to Chicago before they headed for southeastern Iowa, she was sitting upright and demanding the comm unit.

“Who do you need to call?” Kirk asked in some confusion.

“My office,” she said irritably. “It doesn’t run on its own, you know, and I haven’t checked in with them yet today.”

It was clear from her subsequent conversation with an efficient-sounding man named Dave that the rehab unit must have restricted her communication time, because she demanded a report of recent events from him, and he started on a long recital of newsroom decisions that showed no sign of ending soon.

Kirk looked out the window, bored, not wanting to listen to what was going on in the offices of Kirk Communications, headquartered in Des Moines, or in the much smaller home office his mother maintained. Spock had them in the 10,000 meter lane, and they were flying above a thick bank of cumulus. The westering sun illuminated all the caves, valleys and peaks of the environment that, a few minutes after they’d passed, would alter to a different landscape. Nothing was permanent in this world of dust and raindrops bound together, and yet humankind moved through it easily. Kirk remembered the days when, as a boy, he’d been endlessly fascinated by the vistas—above and below—that anyone could see in the air, and he’d wondered how humankind’s world view had changed when they’d achieved air travel. It must have been a viewpoint-altering achievement to see the ground so far below and a new world above that only birds had witnessed before. An exciting time to live.

But not more exciting than the time in which he lived. Or had lived. Much as he had relished the opportunity to get back into action in Operations, it wasn’t what he wanted to do with his life. Until he returned to space, he was adding to his experience, yes, padding that unwritten resume that Starfleet kept on him, but he would really just be marking the passage of time.

Kirk closed his eyes, the better to experience the motion of the ’car. This far up, it mimicked the feel of the shuttlecraft, which at least was symbolically tied to his lady who was in drydock in orbit around the planet. Enterprise. He missed her with a sharp metallic taste that burst upon his tongue. The taste of longing. He remembered how it had been sitting in the center seat, pacing around her corridors…. Living. Now she was being dismantled, taken apart piece by piece and reconstructed with all the latest technology. He wasn’t sure he
wanted to see her like that, in fragments. But when she was whole again, ready to fly, he wanted to fly with her.

Patience, he told himself. He’d only begun supplying what ’fleet demanded of him. Two years of down time, at the least, and…more. Nogura had wanted more from him.

“I don’t care what Sheila says, we’ve contracted for the advertising supplement at ten credits a unit, and we’re going to enforce that contract.” His mother’s raised voice caught Kirk’s attention. Sarah Kirk was definitely a woman who knew how to take advantage of opportunities. Maybe a bit too vigorously. Still, her ambitions had provided him with a life model that he’d emulated: set goals and then do everything you can to put yourself in a situation to achieve them. He was grateful to her for that. And, she was his mom….

He glanced forward and saw Spock regarding him in the rearview mirror, and amusement was subtly written all over his face. Kirk leaned towards his “friend.”

“Hey, how you doing up there?”

“On course, on schedule, sir. ETA twenty minutes.”

Kirk grinned. “Yeah, I’m sure. You know, I’ve been thinking.”

“That is often a productive endeavor. Of what have you been thinking?”

“I want to take you to a hockey game. Bob Wesley tells me there’s still a good minor league team in San Francisco, and there’s a great major league team in San Jose. What do you say?”

An eyebrow predictably rose. “Not air hockey such as we witnessed on Fal-T III?”

“No, no, this is the old sport, played on ice. It has a lot more contact. I used to go watch it when I was a cadet.”

“Jim, I believe I am familiar with this sport. It is played in a frigid environment where the spectators suffer from the cold and the players assault one another with sticks. A disciple of Surak —”

“Should have an open mind about such things. Hockey is raw competition without frills, but there’s strategy in all the action if you know how to look for it. I like the…the basic nature of it. It’s satisfying in a way that’s hard to explain.”

“Do you honestly think that I would enjoy an athletic contest where individuals ram each other into the sides of the rink?”

“Those are called the boards and when players do that, they get a two minute penalty and have to sit on the sideline. There’s justice to the game.”

“How often is the victim injured?”

“No often,” Kirk assured, although he could see he wasn’t going to get anywhere with this proposal. “But I guess that doesn’t make much difference to you.”

“I obviously prefer that beings not sustain injury in their activities. To deliberately place oneself in a position where pain and suffering are likely escapes my understanding.”

“Hockey players are about the toughest competitors around. Sometimes the abuse their bodies
“I think it rather unlikely.”

“Oh, well. Thought I’d give it a try. I guess I’ll go to some games with Bob, then.”

“That would be a more than adequate arrangement, if you do indeed have a desire to attend such illogical exhibitions of mayhem.”

Sarah Kirk’s voice cut into their conversation. Apparently her check-in with the business had finally concluded. “You don’t care for ice hockey, Commander Spock? There’s a great flow to the game and considerable strategy. I guess games such as hockey or soccer or polo never evolved on Vulcan. They’re all really the same type.”

“Indeed not, madam.” Spock politely looked at her in the mirror. “Although physical fitness is pursued on my home world, contests tend to be somewhat more cerebral in nature.”

“What a shame. Don’t worry, Jim, I’m sure you’ll find somebody else you know who will enjoy the games with you. There’s no need to deny yourself the pleasure. So now, tell me how you’ve been doing. As much as you can. I understand that much of what you do is classified.” She spread her skirt around her on the seat and settled back, apparently ready to talk.

He entertained her with what life had been like for him in the months since they’d relinquished the ship to drydock, easily avoiding what was either too personal or too confidential, and before she’d run out of questions Spock interrupted them.

“Where would you prefer me to set down, Ms. Kirk? I am receiving locator data from two pads near your home.”

“Go to the one in front,” she directed. “A72 is the signal. I want to give Jim the red carpet treatment and let him in through the front door.”

It was after four in the afternoon as the ‘car landed. The sun radiated weakly from a pale sky onto the rambling, two story home. The addition that Kirk’s father had made when he’d bought it had provided a gameroom and a computer room for his sons on the west side, and the much larger wing that Kirk’s mother added later for her business was on the east side. That presented an unbalanced, lopsided appearance to the home that Kirk still recalled fondly.

“There it is, Spock,” he called. “The old Kirk homestead.”

“Nonsense,” his mother said. “We’ve lived here for thirty-three years, but you make it sound like an ancestral mansion. Come, Jim, give me your hand so I can get out. I’m sure Commander Spock has seen many other houses like this in his travels. It isn’t much of anything, really.”

A young, competent-looking woman with short black hair stood in the doorway to greet them. “Sarah, how are you? It’s so good to have you home. Everybody in the office has missed you.”

Sarah pecked her on the cheek. “Thank you very much. Please make sure to tell the staff I appreciate their sentiments. Is anyone else here?”

“No, I sent them home for the day. It’s only me.”

“Good. I’m tired and I don’t know how much work I’ll be able to accomplish before deadline anyway, so it’s just as well. Jim, Commander Spock, this is Dolores Gutierrez, my executive
secretary. She’s been holding down the home office while I’ve been laid up.”

They all moved into the front hallway as Kirk shook the woman’s hand, but he regarded his mother with alarm. “Mom, I don’t think the doctor intended you to go right to work. Don’t you want to rest now?”

“Nonsense. I’ll rest tonight the way nature intended us to do.”

“What about your therapy?”

“That’s all arranged,” Gutierrez put in. “As well as a night aide, who will be here at eight this evening. The therapist will be here tomorrow morning at ten. But there’s nothing else scheduled for today, so it’s all right for Ms. Kirk to work.”

He had wanted to have a conversation in the light and warmth of the sunroom, where his mother could get to know Spock a little better, get used to having him around, and then they’d find the right time to tell her about their relationship. But instead of hot tea and the solicitude due to an invalid, his mother demanded the comfortable chair in her office and full access to her computer.

“Dolores will take care of me now, honey. You go show Commander Spock where you grew up, that old barn you always liked to play in and where you used to go stargazing with Sam. We’ll meet for dinner and have a talk then. Okay?”

She stumped with determination down a hall, and Kirk watched her go with a mix of admiration and chagrin. Now that he thought of it, there’d been many evenings in his early teen-aged years, after his father had died, when he’d barely seen her beyond a quick kiss hello and a directive as to where dinner was waiting for him. But she had accomplished her dream and seemed intent on keeping it going.

“May I offer you gentleman something to eat or drink?” It was the young woman being solicitous. “I restocked the kitchen yesterday myself. You’ll have to forgive Ms. Kirk, she’s sometimes a bit single-minded.”

“I heard that!” came an indignant voice from a distance.

Dolores directed her next comment down the hall. “That just means your hearing is intact, Sarah, not that you’ve changed a bit.”

“He’s my son, he knows!” A door opened and then closed.

Dolores turned back to them, a bit shame-faced. “Of course. You are her son. Silly of me to forget, but I was focusing more on the exploits of the famous Captain Kirk and his first officer. You don’t need me to offer you food and drink in your own home.”

Kirk liked her forthright attitude. “It has been a while since I’ve lived here, though. Do you think you can prevent her from exhausting herself?”

“She’s anxious because she’s been gone so long. Once she reassures herself that everything’s in order, she’ll calm down. Don’t worry. I’ll have dinner ready at six.”

“You cook, too?”

“A general factotum, that’s me. I never know what Sarah will ask me to do next. I’ll cook, but you’ll have to clean up, because I have my own family to go home to after that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’d better go to Sarah now.”
It was only after a few moments that Kirk realized he was watching that peculiarly-feminine sway of the hips as Gutierrez left. Noticing a pretty woman was part of who he was, and Spock understood that. He shrugged, and turned to see Spock regarding him expectantly.

“We’d better go outside before we lose the light. C’mon.”

Kirk found a bathroom before anything else; the one he was accustomed to using on the ground floor, where he’d painted the walls with butterscotch pudding a memorable day long ago, was now a linen closet, so it took a bit of investigating to figure out how his mother had rearranged things. Spock, of course, only relieved himself once a day, sometimes not that often, a physiological fact that Kirk had envied on long, tense shifts on the bridge.

That taken care of, Kirk led the way outside. They stopped to retrieve Spock’s jacket and his sweater from the ’car, as it was cool enough even for Kirk to want to add a layer over his shirt. The leaves skittered before them as they walked along the path that meandered across a field with knee-high, yellowing stalks of grass. A thin, misty cloud cover was blowing in from the west, but the sun was still high enough in the sky to escape it. It was one of those yellow-gold, cool afternoons he remembered well.

“Let’s look at the barn first,” Kirk told his silent companion, and they angled left towards the structure in the distance. The wind had eased, the birds had ceased their calling, and the high-above drone of aircar traffic, a ubiquitous intrusion into everyday life on Earth, was barely audible.

He remembered running across this expanse that they’d kept for growing hay when he was only sixteen. A message just delivered from Starfleet Academy had been clutched in his hands, and though he’d known it must be good news—wouldn’t they send a polite “no thank you, we’re not interested in you” a less expensive way?—he had hardly been able to bring himself to believe that his dreams had come true. He hadn’t opened the envelope until he’d been by the back property line, a good two kilometers away. That seemed so long ago. A lifetime ago. The person he’d been then had changed so much.

“Jim?”

He aimed a swift, reassuring smile towards his lover, one of the ways he had changed. Spock had always been quick to pick up on changes of mood. “Nothing. Only…. It’s been a long time since I’ve actually lived here. Twenty-one years. A lot is different.”

“More than merely the location of the bathroom, I think.”

“Some things are the same. My God, this is where…. Come on over here.”

They detoured over to an isolated, sprawling bush under which five-year-old Jimmy Kirk had once resolutely spent most of one night, because Sam had told him to stay put during a twilight game of Indians and Scouts.

“One of the consequences of sibling rivalry,” Spock observed dryly, dutifully examining the plant in question, which had grown considerably from what Kirk recalled.

“Ahh, he was only playing.”

“The way hockey players are just playing when they apply their sticks to the opposition’s helmets?”

“You know kids,” Kirk said lightly. He knew Spock did understand. He hadn’t had any brothers or sisters himself, and the dynamics of a Vulcan family were far different from the way human
children were raised and interacted, but he also had lived among humans and studied them for years. Even more or less sequestered on a starship, Spock had gained a good knowledge of why Kirk could recall his long-ago escapade with Sam with great nostalgia.

“Your cousin,” Kirk remembered out loud as they resumed their trek to the barn. “T’Lin. Your relationship with her is the closest I think you had to my relationship with Sam.”

Spock nodded. “You are correct. I think of her with positive thoughts.”

“How’s she doing? We got her that bonding present on Starbase Eleven.”

“I do not recall that you contributed financially to that transaction. Nevertheless, she is well, and her bonding with T’Shar appears to be a success. Her last communication contained no evidence to the contrary.”

“That’s good.” He remembered how he had grasped at the news that Spock had given him on the starbase, that Vulcans accepted same-sex couples and a bond between them, particularly in women, but in men as well if the mental compatibility was great. Back then, he’d been confused, trying to deal with his genuine attraction to Spock, knowing that there was an emotion between them he’d not felt before….

On impulse, he grabbed Spock’s hand to entwine their fingers. Spock made no effort to pull away and returned the silent squeeze. They walked along for a while, hand in hand.

“I miss Sam,” Kirk suddenly murmured. This visit to his childhood home, coupled with what he needed—wanted—to talk to Spock about tonight, was pulling all sorts of emotions from him. Some weren’t comfortable. His contented mood from the morning had dissipated. “And I miss the ship.”

“I know,” Spock replied quietly.

And the best part of it was, Spock did know. Not because they shared thoughts. But because they shared lives.

It was, Kirk considered as the grass whispered against their legs in the fading sunlight, a satisfying feeling.

Several minutes later they came to the old barn that had once been painted a rusty red, but weather had long since stripped most of the color away, exposing the rough planks of the treated plasticwood. The structure had been falling down when the Kirks had bought the property, and one of his father’s projects when he was home from ’fleet service had been to restore it. Especially when it had been under renovation and he and Sam had been warned from it, the barn had been an irresistible lure. After a while, his father had given up shooing them away and enlisted them in minor chores they’d performed happily.

Kirk pulled open the wide double doors and went inside, where the only light was what filtered in from behind him. There were a lot of memories associated with this dusty place, and he could almost hear his own voice and Sam’s as children, playing here. He could remember running to the embrace of the quiet interior to cry the day after his father’s funeral. He remembered the kisses he had shared with teenaged girls here, and the soft give of their bodies as he moved on them in adolescent, stolen love.

Echoes were everywhere, so much more here than in the house, which had been redesigned and redecorated to his mother’s whim several times since he’d left home. But the barn was pretty much the same as it had been, the repository for all sorts of miscellaneous machinery. He’d kept his
bicycle, his motor bike, and his air scooter here. They were long gone. Instead there were some mowers, a haying machine, something else he couldn’t identify, but all probably used by the people his mother hired to maintain her acreage. He scuffed at the bare floor; it wasn’t a dirt floor but some sort of plastic laid over concrete. It would last another fifty years, probably a hundred years since it was receiving so little use.

What to tell Spock about? What to share? Despite the images brought back so strongly, none of it seemed…important. What did it matter what was in the past? What he wanted was a future.

He went over to a freestanding wall and rested his arms along the chest-high top of it. “In another lifetime this used to be a stall. It’s where we stabled our pony,” he said.

Spock came up beside him and with interest peered over the side. A prosaic lawn mower took up the space now. “I was not aware that you had horses as a youth.”

“Not exactly. Dad got Sam a pony, and Mom insisted he share. Sometimes. We were about, oh, I don’t know. I guess I was maybe seven or eight. Before Dad died, obviously.”

“Did you learn to ride the creature?”

“Oh, yeah. Dixie was a Shetland pony. We had no idea how to really care for her, and of course that was part of the deal, so we kept giving her hay, and she kept eating, and before long she was so fat we could barely get our legs around her. It was almost impossible to get her to run, that’s for sure.”

“Despite her drawbacks, it sounds like you enjoyed owning her.”

“Yes, we did. She was pretty patient with all the games we played around her. Under her, even. But after a year she foundered.”

“I am not familiar with that term.”

“She got sick from overeating. Too much grain too fast,” Kirk explained. “I still cringe inside to think about it. My parents didn’t know much more about caring for a horse than we did, and I guess at that point we weren’t being supervised as closely as we might have been. Seemed like they fought a lot whenever Dad was home, and I guess they were preoccupied with that. Sam had learned about oats being good feed by then, and we practically killed her with kindness. We thought we were doing the right thing by giving her unrestricted access to grain, but we sure weren’t. And that was the end of having a pony.” He straightened and dusted off his sweater. “Not much more to say about this old barn. C’mon, there’s someplace else I want to show you, and we’ll be losing the light soon.”

Kirk led the way out, Spock closed the doors, and they took off down a barely-visible path towards the rear of the property, to where a substantial grove of cottonwoods had provided the perfect place for two adventurous boys to play.

Kirk glanced at his lover as they walked along under the setting sun, but he made no attempt to take his hand again. He was sure Spock knew where they were going, though neither had made any mention of it. It would be visible in another minute….

They crested a small rise and there it was: a stone wall that marched along and in front of the outer edge of the trees. From their position they could only see part of it before it disappeared over a slight rise.

They both stopped at the same time and just looked at it.
That wall had played an important part in their lives. When they had first become lovers, it had been so difficult for Spock to participate fully in the emotional life that Kirk wanted and he could only glimpse. A lifetime of Vulcan control had impeded every attempt he had made to say “I love you” and truly feel, truly understand all the nuances of the emotion.

In the melds they had shared, so full of first time wonder and the newness of what they now were to one another, a towering Vulcan wall had stood, symbol of their frustration and blocking hope of a full, reciprocal relationship. Until one day, Kirk had realized that there were all different kinds of walls, and in the meld he’d transformed the black ibatha stone into a simple, Iowan garden wall, low enough to sit on, accessible. Then Spock had inserted a common wooden gate in the stone through which he could travel, visiting his human emotions and his Vulcan controls as he needed.

It had been the first victory of their new intimate relationship. The wall that had been taken for granted in Kirk’s childhood had lived for a while in their shared mental landscape.

Spock cleared his throat. “Not everything has changed.”

“Let’s go see it closer.”

Kirk started towards it, but his hand was caught by strength he was well familiar with. He found himself held close in Spock’s jacket-clad arms, face to face with his lover.

Not a word, just eyes that were burning, and then lips that took his breath away.

Suddenly speared by delight, he smiled as they eased apart. “What was that for?”

“Do I need an excuse to kiss you?”

Kirk made a show of looking to the left and the right. “Out here in the middle of nowhere, I guess it’s okay. Not on the steps of Starfleet Command, though.”

Spock nuzzled the side of his face. “I have no ambition to be intimate with you in such a public location. Come, let us visit.”

They walked along the length of the stones for a while as the leaves crackled underfoot and the breeze moved through the branches. A big tree limb, a substantial portion of one of the cottonwoods, had dropped to the ground a while ago and now blocked their path. Kirk kicked at it first, then stomped on it to hear the satisfying crunch of wood breaking. Spock shook his head and said, “On Vulcan, even that would be gathered and hoarded for use. Here on Earth you are so profligate with the natural gifts of your planet.”

“Vulcan has its own gifts,” Kirk reminded him. “Different but just as valuable. Something for everybody, so long as we have the eyes to see.”

Spock bent to drag the heavy limb out of their way. It made a scratching sound as it protested moving and left an obvious trail.

They went on in silence, Kirk enjoying the coolness and the slight thud as their feet traveled over the dirt and the remaining patches of grass. And he enjoyed the opportunity to share it all with Spock. When he’d conjured the wall in their melds, it had been with a sense of desperation. He’d never thought they would actually visit here.

A bird caw broke into their reveries, and Kirk located a black shape not far away. “Shoo. Shoo.” If Spock hadn’t been with him, he might have thrown a stick, deliberately inaccurately, but as it was he merely windmilled his arms until it flew away. “A grackle,” he explained. “Like a crow only
smaller. My mother hates them, calls them ‘ugly birds.’ We won’t see any of them in a few weeks, when the winter really starts here.”

“And we could not share this space with the creature?” Spock asked mildly.

“Not if you grew up with my mom. It’s an automatic reflex: see a grackle, then try to get rid of it.”

“Or assert your power over your environment in that way.”

“There’s that, too.”

“If I had not lived among humans for so long, I would say such actions are fascinating.”

Kirk snorted his amusement. “C’mon, let’s keep going.” He was searching for one spot in particular, and a short while later he found it.

“Remember this?” He stopped and patted a slight depression in the top layer of stone. “Here’s where the gate was.” As the months had passed, they’d had no need for artificial constructs to support the emotional freedom with which they lived together, and the image of the wall had faded unless actively recalled. It had only been a memory when Spock had lost his psychic powers.

“I do indeed. It is remarkable how accurate your memory was, Jim. The reconstruction with which we worked two years ago is very similar to the way it is now.”

“Some of the mortar’s cracking, though.” He bent and picked up a small rock that had come loose from the rest of the structure. “It’s the hard Iowa winters. The freezes make most adhesive materials contract and then expand with the thaw.”

Spock took the rock from Kirk’s hand, examined it, and then allowed it to fall to the ground. “Perhaps your mother should consider having it repaired.”

“I don’t think it would occur to her. It was old when we got here, but we never could figure out what its purpose was. Just a kilometer long wall starting over there,” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, “and leading nowhere.”

“I would be sorry to see it fall into disrepair.”

Kirk contemplated the top layer of stone. The sun, close to setting now, cast long shadows and turned the landscape a warm gold. The air was getting cooler, and Spock had zipped up his jacket all the way to his chin back by the barn. “Me, too.”

He hadn’t planned on saying anything now, he had intended to wait until tonight when they were in their house again, but he could feel it, the time was right, here where they had some history already. “Spock?” He leaned back against the wall.

“Yes, Jim?”

“I’ve got something that I’ve been meaning to talk to you about. Something important.”

Spock got that look of concentration that he had seen so many times before. “I am willing to listen to you.”

Kirk glanced down at his feet and marshaled his thoughts. “Have you ever wondered…what we really are to one another?”

Spock went very still. Slowly his hands came out of his pockets to hang, unmoving, at his sides. “I
have not. There is no need to wonder, for I know. Have you had some doubts? If so, we should have discussed them before moving to share a dwelling."

“No, no! That’s not what I mean. I’m not questioning us.”

“It does not sound like that, Jim.”

Kirk ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m not going about this very well. It seems like every time I turn around I’m explaining about our relationship to somebody. It’s wearing and kind of ridiculous. It’s not like we’re the first same-sex couple in the ’fleet, and we’re not the only mixed-species couple, either…. But that’s not really what I mean, either. Okay, let me start at the beginning. Or the end. Whatever.” He stood up straight and caught both of his lover’s frigid hands. Once he realized how cold they felt, he started to chafe them in an attempt to keep them warm. “Maybe we should continue this conversation later. You’re really getting cold.”

“You are being overly-solicitous again. I would prefer that we continue now. Your mother will occupy us for at least a few hours, so we will not have privacy again for some time. Please go on.”

“Okay.” Kirk squared his shoulders, held their hands still, and looked at Spock as sincerely as he could. “Spock, would you consider marrying me?”

They stood facing each other, holding hands, motionless. Kirk discovered after several seconds that he was holding his breath. Spock blinked, quite deliberately, twice, a method Kirk knew he had long employed to reinforce control. He didn’t know whether that was a good sign or a bad one.

Slowly Spock pulled away. He took a few steps in the direction of the unseen house, then stopped.

“We have not discussed the question of a formal commitment between us for some time,” he said with back turned.

“Since that shore leave on Fal-T III.”

Spock nodded. “Yes.” He turned around, and Kirk was relieved to see an open quality on his lover’s face. Well, at least his proposal wasn’t being rejected out of hand.

“Would you tell me why you have chosen this time to bring up the subject again?”

Kirk subsided against the wall, then he hitched up to sit on it, though it felt not-quite-right to be discussing this subject with his lover while they maintained such a distance between them. He felt the impulse to touch, to hold, wished that Spock would come over to him and at least insert himself between Kirk’s knees, but that wasn’t the way it was going to be.

“I’ll tell you. I would have told you even if you haven’t asked because it’s…complicated.” He ran a hand over his chin. “Remember when Nogura talked to me at the reception?” Spock’s mystified nod encouraged him to go on. “He confronted me with our relationship. Said that it was fortunate we weren’t serving together still because he would have had to make a decision about preserving the line of command and removing one of us.”

“I see. A threat. And he subsequently offered…”

“Yeah, I thought you’d get it. Anyway, he said we were too public, that the Eternists would use the unconventional aspects of our relationship against ’fleet and us at the worst possible time politically.”

Spock appeared to consider the words deeply, following his own logical course of reasoning. “He
does have a point. Especially with the political balance of the Federation shifting, and with the Utarf-Pren’felit proposal currently in committee of the General Assembly.”

“Exactly. It’s hard for me to believe that we’d upset the apple cart that much, but we’ve seen rallying points less significant, I suppose.”

“But an official, public union between us would bring to a head what he fears.”

Kirk smiled without humor. “He wants to cut them off at the pass. Be proactive and use our marriage as a positive point in another PR campaign, showing how the different races of the Federation can get along. That would presumably undercut whatever moral outrage those against racial and same-sex mixing might be able to muster.” He registered the distaste evident on his lover’s face. “I hated the idea, too, but you’ve got to give the man credit, he’s thought this through.”

Spock shifted his weight from one side to the other as he stood there in a deep shadow thrown by one of the trees, and for the first time since they’d landed in Iowa, Kirk remembered the injured knee. They’d gone traipsing all over the property and he hadn’t considered it at all. Apologetically, he nodded towards it. “The knee okay?”

“Tolerable.” Spock’s brow furrowed. “Jim, do you wish to do this? To marry on Nogura’s command?”

“Well…. No. And yes.” He’d been wrestling with the concept whenever he’d had the time, which admittedly hadn’t been often. Most of the time the issue had been on low simmer in the back of his brain: resentment trying to balance with practicality and emotion.

“This situation in which he has put us is most distasteful.”

“I’ll be frank with you, Nogura more or less held the positions at Operations and the transwarp project as bait.”

Spock’s eyes widened. “I have long ago lost any idealistic notions I had over how Starfleet Command wields its power, but I will confess that such a blatant attempt at manipulation…disturbs me.”

“Me, too. But we’re more or less caught between a rock and a hard place. He also suggested that I not let my pride get in the way of my common sense.” He slid off the wall. “He’s right, Spock. It’s stupid not to do this. This is something we would have come to ourselves eventually, I think.”

“Would you have?”

“Yes,” Kirk said forthrightly. “I would have. If things had gone the way they should have, we would have been fully bonded by now. We both wanted that. I can’t share that with you, but this…. Marriage is something I can give you. I’m not saying I would have jumped the gun like Nogura is asking us to, but…. Surely you’re not questioning the level of my commitment to you.”

“No, I am not. But I have not considered a union in the way of your people. I have quite illogically harbored the hope that the bonding that had begun between us before my disability would some day be accomplished.”

Kirk advanced and caught his lover’s elbow. “We will be bonded someday,” he said intensely. “We will.”

Spock regarded him with resignation. “So you say. In the meantime, it appears that a human
marriage is the option left to us if we are to formalize our relationship.”

“Would it be so bad, Spock? Just a one year contract to counteract the justifiable concerns he has about us as public figures. I don’t want to be used as a tool against what I believe in.”

“For us to mutually decide on such a course of action is one thing. To be maneuvered into it is quite another.”

“I know. I agree with you. But even without Nogura’s intervention, we’d be having this conversation anyway. In a year or two, maybe sooner. To deny that is to let our emotions run over our intellect.”

“I see your point.” Spock seemed to consider. “Before we make any decision, Jim, there is something that I must tell you.”

Kirk didn’t like what he saw in his lover’s face. The openness, the willingness had disappeared. “What?”

“Your teasing from earlier today about not telling you of the injury to my knee was pertinent. There is something more to relay about the tests I endured at Versin’s command.”

“Right after I left for Paris,” Kirk said stupidly. He released Spock’s elbow. He’d totally forgotten about those tests, hadn’t even asked Spock about them. Events had caught him up. What kind of a partner was he? “What were the results? The new one Versin mentioned?”

Spock nodded. “Yes. It seems that my hippocampus linkages are not only inactive as a result of my injury, they are atrophying. Versin presented a disturbing prognosis. Unless the linkages can be regularly stimulated or permanently reactivated in some way, he believes it is likely that I will experience periods of unconsciousness that will eventually lead to premature death.”

Spock said it so baldly, without inflection, without haste, that for a moment Kirk could not take in what the words actually meant. Lead to death.... He took a step backwards as the meaning sank in, then he surged forward and caught Spock’s arm again. “No! I can’t believe that. You’ve gone for more than a year without symptoms like that.”

But Spock was shaking his head. “Immediately after the bombing, while I was searching for you, I lost consciousness.”

“But you were—”

“No, Jim. There was no reason for it. I told myself that the episode was not linked to what Versin had predicted, but I know that is not true.”

“Have you been back to him? Told him what happened? Maybe there’s a way to—”

“He has already strongly suggested that I go to Golgotharen. He wished me to leave with him that day.”

“Is there a cure there? Something they can do?”

“I believe not. It is merely that Golgotharen specializes in psychic aberrations among Vulcans.”

“Then we shouldn’t wait, you should go.”

“No, Jim. You do not understand. Versin has not faced my problem before and does not have a
Kirk had faced Spock’s resignation ever since the Danarakh had attacked him. Spock had always sought to accept the limitations of his condition; it was his way of coping. But Kirk had railed against it, forced him to visit various medical practitioners of different species and perspectives, and clung stubbornly to the hope that someday Spock would be whole again and they would have what they’d had before: the life within the meld and a spontaneous bond unfurling within them, linking them through the rest of their lives.

Kirk’s throat ached but he offered words of hope. “What’s done can be undone. Gri-Ta said it. She saw you at the beginning and knew that her people had done this to you. I think you should go to Golgotharen.”

“Even if I were to agree to subject myself to Versin’s ministrations, there is insufficient evidence that such a move is necessary now. I have had one episode. Another might not ever occur, or it might not happen for years. No one has suffered my exact disability in the records of my people, and so Versin’s predictions are uncertain.”

“Even though I don’t think much of the fellow, he’s got years of experience, Spock. We need to listen to him.”

“I will listen, but I will not leave Earth at this time.”

“If you’re thinking of me, don’t. I’d rather have you alive on Vulcan than….” He stopped because he couldn’t say the rest of it. “Spock.”

Spock looked at him, and the courage in his eyes to face the inevitable…. This was what he had first perceived in this extraordinary man, the inner being. He’d learned to love Spock’s body, but he’d always loved his soul.

And he wouldn’t lose Spock. He wouldn’t. Kirk lurched towards him, reaching out because he needed to give and receive the comfort of touch. He wrapped his arms around the solid form, buried his face against Spock’s neck, and drew in a shaky breath as he felt Spock’s strong arms come around him.

“Oh, damn,” he murmured. “Damn it.” He squeezed hard, needing to feel the familiar contours within the outer clothing, really needing to feel Spock now.

He stood there holding Spock, being held, for what felt like long minutes. The sun had set and the sky was that after-sunset deep purple. It would turn black with a sprinkling of stars soon. He stared at the darkness all around them, then pressed his eyes shut and saw it there, too.

“I love you,” he whispered, not moving from their embrace. “You’re going to be all right.”

“Beloved,” Spock quietly said. “We cannot count on your optimism. We must be realistic.”

“If you were being realistic, you’d be on the next shuttle to Vulcan.”

“No. I will not change my entire life on the suppositions of one healer who has only examined me once. I am a hybrid, unlike other Vulcans, and that may mitigate these circumstances. I will need far more evidence before I go to Golgotharen.”

Kirk drew back enough to see his lover. “But at least you promise you’ll tell me if any other symptom manifests itself, right?”
“I will. Jim, please believe me, I had planned to tell you this soon, perhaps in a day or two, but I did not wish to mar this day we have had together. Your proposal of marriage hastened my words.”

“If you think that I’m put off,” Kirk said roughly, disguising his fear, “think again, Mister.”

“If we are to accede to Nogura’s manipulations, I thought it only appropriate that you have full disclosure before entering into such a contract.”

“Then…. You’ll do it? Marry me?”

Spock nodded. “I will. Since you seem intent on marrying me.”

“I…. I guess it doesn’t mean to you what it means to me.”

“Our cultural conditioning is quite different. Compared to a bond and the deep melds enjoyed by bonded partners, marriage seems…superficial.”

“It’s the only thing we humans have,” Kirk said soberly. “We don’t have anything like a mind link that connects one person’s essence to another’s. If we did, I’d offer it to you.”

“I understand. However….”

“What?”

“I accept your proposal on the condition that we do our best to minimize our participation in an orchestrated public relations campaign devised by Commodore Andersen.”

“Amen to that. We’ll have to cooperate to a certain extent or there isn’t any point, but let’s give them as little as possible.”

“Agreed. I have another suggestion.”

“Go ahead.”

“Since we have a two year lease on the house, it seems logical to me to enter into a two year marriage term instead of a one year term.” He took Kirk’s chin in his hand and said wryly, “I will endeavor to survive long enough to fulfill all the terms of our contract.”

“See that you do.” Kirk wondered why they were talking about contracts and time limits. It had just been a suggestion of Nogura’s, not something he himself wanted. Couples who weren’t so sure of themselves had timed contracts, so they had an easy method of dissolving the union if things went wrong. Not couples who felt the way he and Spock felt about each other.

But Spock probably thought a two year agreement was logical, considering his medical condition. And the way Spock was looking at him now required a very different response.

Their lips met quietly, impeded by the cold gathering around them, by the sinking sensation that persisted in Kirk’s gut, and by his doubts about what they’d decided. He’d done what Nogura had required of him. But none of it felt right.

*****

By the time they arrived at the house, dinner was on the formal dining room table and Dolores Gutierrez was waiting, somewhat impatiently, so she could relinquish her responsibilities to them. Sarah was sipping from a goblet of red wine at the head of the table.
“Lost your way, Jim?” she asked.

“If you will excuse me,” Spock said quietly, “I believe I need to wash before eating.”

“Me, too,” Kirk said. Their walk back had been accomplished while holding hands again, in silence, and he hadn’t braced himself to deal with his mother at all. He retreated to the new bathroom they’d found while Spock went into the kitchen. When had his comfort level with his mother deteriorated to this point? It made him sad, and he thought about how much easier it was dealing with the eighteen hour shifts in Ops Center than it was coping with the dramatic emotional swings he’d experienced in the last few hours.

He dried his hands on a bright yellow towel and shrugged. This was life, his life, and he wanted to live it fully, no matter the challenges that came his way.

Gutierrez had prepared a Southwestern meal heavily spiced with green chilies. Two platters of enchiladas—half beef and half cheese alone—were accompanied by rice and traditional side dishes. Whether deliberate done or not, the meal was suitable for both humans and their solitary Vulcan guest.

“Ah, guacamole,” Kirk declared with only slightly-forced enthusiasm as he took the seat to his mother’s left. Spock sat across the table from him. “There’s nothing like unreconstituted avocados.”

“I believe Dolores mentioned they were naturally ripened, too, and not chemically forced.” His mother passed the plate.

His mother was in high spirits throughout the meal, briefly bragging about the success of her manager in increasing advertising revenue but then peppering Kirk with questions. Mostly she asked about different incidents that Kirk had written to her about. She wanted to know details with a journalist’s zeal, and since many of the missions had been declassified, Kirk was happy to supply them. He felt better as he ate, as the day had given him a sharp appetite. Spock was strategically quiet, but when he did speak he contributed a few details that were pithy and did not fail to bring a smile to Sarah’s face. Kirk could see method in the approach.

“Captain Kirk established communications with the Gorn commander he had fought the day before on the planet, and they exchanged pleasantries beyond their previous aggression. I believe Senessex called the captain ‘little warrior.’”

“I wanted to call him ‘big lug,’ but I restrained myself.”

“Most wise, Commodore.”

And then, a few minutes later: “The commodore is also well known for the creation of gambling games.”

Kirk sputtered in his wine. “Spock!”

“His quick invention of a game called fizzbin was responsible for our release from an incarceration that could have become most unpleasant.”

His mother laughed, and Kirk relaxed some more.

Their plates were empty and the wine glasses had been drained. Even Spock had agreed to drink a goblet, though Kirk knew alcohol didn’t have nearly the effect on Vulcan metabolism that it did on humans. Nevertheless, it had been a nice gesture of his mother’s to have the wine on the table, as it
wasn’t her normal style. Maybe this was her way of unbending and accepting. Being hospitable. Or maybe it had been her assistant’s idea and he was giving her too much credit.

“And you, Commander,” Sarah asked as she relaxed in her arm chair, “while Jim has finally gotten the posting to Operations that he deserves, what have you been doing since that fateful day in Paris?”

“I have been working on aftermath analysis at the site, Ms. Kirk.”

That produced a gleam in her eye, and she asked, “You have? What have you found?”

“I am afraid that the results are classified.”

“Oh, nonsense. There are briefings every day and reporters on site. The latest I read while at St. David’s was that the analysis of the bomb fragments was promising. This is something the people of the Federation need to know: who is their enemy?”

“I am afraid that I cannot enlighten the people of the Federation at this time, Ms. Kirk.”

“Because you won’t talk or there isn’t anything to say?”

“You are obviously an experienced journalist, but I am aware that a response to such a question would reveal more than I am willing to say at this time.”

“Probably because there’s nothing to say, then,” she concluded. She surveyed the table. “I noticed that the commander is moving somewhat stiffly, Jim. I presume from an injury that he won’t talk about. Suppose he and I retreat to the sunroom and you take care of this mess?”

Kirk was accustomed to being ordered around in this house; he imagined his mother also ruled her employees with an iron fist. He watched Spock politely escort the much more slowly-moving Sarah out of the room, then made quick work of getting the remains of the meal put away. There was another platter of enchiladas in the chiller marked “Lunch, Friday. For the therapist, too.” Gutierrez was nothing if not efficient.

He lifted the bottle of wine from the table and estimated there was enough left for half a glass for each of them. He rummaged through the kitchen for three clean glasses, wondered if the realtor had equipped them with the same back in San Francisco, and went to join his mother and his lover. Spock was straightening up from adjusting the heaters built into the sunroom wall as Kirk came in.

“That’s much better,” Sarah approved. She was sitting on a rattan love seat with floral cushions that faced the wall of windows—letting in the dark, star-splattered night—and she patted the space next to her. “Come sit next to me, honey.”

He placed bottle and glasses on a nearby table, then settled into the cushions and took in the sight of his lover sitting in an overlarge wicker chair with high arms and back. The yellow glow of the two table lamps cast deep shadows on either side of his nose.

His mother lightly rested her hand on his. “It is so good to have you back on Earth, Jim,” she said sincerely. “I don’t think I’ve said that. It’s a relief not to expect to hear the worst at any moment. At least I know while you’re stationed here, you’re safe.”

“You can get hit by a ground car any time, Mom, and aircars crash. Not to mention explosives.”

“I know. But mainly those are more ordinary dangers that all of us face every day. I know that you were involved in….” she shook her head, “probably involved in situations I can’t imagine.
Starships are truly out on the frontier, as well as being our first line of defense. For example, that huge machine you encountered that you were able to destroy by blowing up the Constellation. Who would have thought such a thing existed?"

Kirk exchanged a look with Spock that showed they were in complete agreement. Sarah Kirk need never know how close her son had come to death during the last seconds on Matt Decker’s ship.

“That’s what starships are for, you’re right,” he said easily. “The Enterprise is in drydock now, you know. You might not like to hear me say this, but I intend to be her captain when she’s ready to go out on another mission.”

Sarah observed him indignantly. “You’re right, I don’t like to hear that. But once you settle into your position in Operations, you’ll see things differently. Give yourself time, Jim. You’re still too close to that life you used to live. It’s over, and it’s time for you to move on to bigger and better things.”

Kirk ignored what she’d said and nodded across at Spock. “Spock wants the same posting. We’ll serve together again, if all works according to plan.”

There was a pregnant pause. Kirk shifted to face his mother more directly on the love seat. “Mom, there’s something that we wanted to talk to you about.”

She threw a quick glance at Spock, who was sitting with his elbows on the arms of the chair and his hands joined before him. Then she returned her attention to Kirk. “More than that you want to serve again in space when you don’t have to? It’s an ill-considered notion, Jim. But go ahead, what else do you have to say?”

“You know that Spock and I are good friends. At the—”

“That’s certainly obvious,” she interrupted him acerbically. “Every time I see you, he’s there with you.”

“There’s a reason for that,” he said slowly. “For the past two years, we’ve also been lovers.”

He watched her closely while she assimilated that statement. Her mouth opened as if to say Oh, but then it snapped shut before she made a sound. She slowly settled back, her eyes on the shadows outside. After a good twenty seconds of uncomfortable silence, during which, if he knew his mother, she was thinking furiously, she said, “I didn’t know that your sexuality had changed, Jim.” She sounded completely in control of herself and reasonable and, for the time being, it seemed she was going to ignore the fact that Spock was in the room with them.

“It hasn’t. Let’s just say it expanded. I saw something—somebody—I couldn’t resist.”

“Then you’re still with women, too.”

“I could if I wanted to be, but I’m not.” Then, echoing what he had said to Wesley, “I’m with Spock now. It’s exclusive.”

Sarah said with deep consideration, “I know that the extreme conditions, battle conditions, and the enforced isolation of living on a starship for so long with a fixed community of people must create some…unexpected liaisons.”

“If that’s the way you want to think of it, okay.”

“Then you know what I’m about to say next. Just because the two of you got together on your ship
doesn’t mean that you need to continue your relationship here on Earth.”

Kirk wanted to get up and pace but didn’t. “Mom. That’s not giving either of us much credit. We’re not youngsters experimenting, and we wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of telling you about our relationship if we weren’t serious about it being long-term.”

“Then you haven’t reasoned this thing through,” Sarah said tartly.

Kirk regarded her with genuine confusion. He hadn’t exactly been looking forward to telling his mother, but at the same time he hadn’t expected real opposition. Maybe a general dissatisfaction that there wouldn’t be any more grandchildren. He hadn’t thought she was homophobic, and though he hadn’t had the opportunity to see her interacting with many non-human beings, he hadn’t thought she was xenophobic either. She was too sophisticated for such attitudes. She’d behaved around Spock with dignity and her own aloof way of conducting herself. He didn’t understand this.

But it seemed that Spock did. For the first time in this revelation he spoke. “Ms. Kirk, I believe you have a specific objection to our…liaison, as you put it.”

She nodded emphatically. “I don’t have anything against you personally, Commander. I don’t know you very well, but it cannot be denied that you conducted yourself admirably while on the Enterprise, and if what Jim says is true and not colored by his emotions, you risked your own life to save his many times.”

Spock considered carefully; Kirk could tell he was reluctant to compliment himself, but it seemed almost necessary. “I believe you will find,” Spock finally said, “that Commodore Kirk’s words are seldom the result of hyperbole.”

“I know my own son, thank you!” Sarah snapped. “Jim, I think you’re making a bad career decision if you two stay together.”

“Career decision?” Kirk managed, utterly flummoxed.

“Don’t act so surprised,” she said irritably. “My legs are aching. Go get that hassock in the living room so I can put them up while we talk.”

Both Kirk and Spock stood with her words. “I will retrieve it,” Spock said, but then Kirk added, “I know where it is, I’ll go.” He strode through the room and found the hassock on the other side of the kitchen, then brought it back, while there was silence in the sunroom.

He stood above his mother after she’d settled her legs in front of her. “Do you need a painkiller?”

“No, I need a son who thinks things through sensibly. Sit down and let’s talk about this some more.”

“Mom, this isn’t a discussion that we’re having here, with you having the opportunity to change my mind. I’ve given you the courtesy of letting you know about our relationship. Spock and I have leased a house in San Francisco, so we’ll be living together there for the next two years. And….” They hadn’t discussed telling her more, but Kirk could imagine Spock saying it was only logical.

“…we’re going to get married, too.”

“Oh, great,” she muttered and covered her eyes. “It needed only this.”

“If you can’t accept that, maybe we should leave.”

Quickly she looked up at him, distressed at the notion of abandonment more than at the news
they’d given her. “No, don’t do that. Please, stay. I can see that I’m late in trying to talk you out of this.”

“When you were together with Dad, could anyone have talked you out of the way you felt about him?”

“I wish someone had,” she said wryly. “Oh, do sit down.”

He sat in the other chair in the room, a wooden chair that he brought over close to the love seat.

“So,” she said after subjecting first him to a searching examination and then Spock. “So this is a matter of feelings, is it? I thought that Vulcans—”

“Don’t subscribe to stereotypes,” Kirk said, as irritated as she had been. “It’s beneath you. Can’t you accept the reality of the situation?”

There was a pause during which he heard the swish of the wind through the unseen trees outside. It was a sound that had accompanied his childhood years, and it spoke of ease and acceptance.

His mother finally spoke. “I can. Of course I can accept this if I must. And I will, if that’s what you really decide you want to do, despite my best advice.”

“That’s good, then.”

“But you really haven’t given me a chance to speak. Let me say what I want to say and then, I promise, I’ll treat you like the adult you are and not waste my breath any more. Jim, don’t ever talk of leaving again.” She held out her hand towards him in a rare display that touched him. “I’ve just gotten you back, if only for a few years, and I don’t intend to drive you away no matter what. Even if it means accepting this relationship against my better judgment.”

He took her hand in his. Her skin was warm and smooth. He could feel the bones: fragile and breakable. “You’ll get used to this. I know it’s been a shock.”

“I suspected that time we had lunch, but once the idea occurred to me, I dismissed it. I didn’t really believe it. I know your sexuality, Jim, and I thought it unlikely that you would be with a man when you’d been with so many women. An alien man. I never knew you without a girlfriend when you were younger. So, yes, this is a shock.”

“You said you don’t know Spock. That’s true. But once you do, it will be easier for you to understand why this was the choice I had to make. He’s the choice I wanted to make.”

She squeezed his fingers. Such a small force from such a dynamic woman; she could not have bruised him if she had tried. “Forgive me for asking this, but this seems so unlike you…. I know that Vulcans have mental powers we humans do not. I’m not sure what all of them are and which ones Spock retains. Are you sure this is a completely voluntary choice on your part?”

His budding sympathy for her evaporated, and he pulled away. “You’ve just insulted the finest individual I know, and you’re getting awfully close to pushing me right out of this house.”

“Ms. Kirk, I would not harm Jim in any way.”

“Not in any way? My Jim is one of the most talented individuals in Starfleet, Commander. Any idiot should be able to tell that, and it seems that ’fleet agrees with me, because he was the youngest captain ever given command of a starship, by a long stretch of years, and now he’s the youngest man ever promoted to commodore. If he’s allowed to, he’ll go far, and his talents will do
a lot of good for the Federation. Look at all he’s accomplished so far, all the good he did on the
Enterprise. He’s already in the best possible position for him in Operations Central. Admiral
Nkapa will be retiring in a year or two and who will be ready to step into his shoes?” She drew in
breath. “In a few years, Jim could be one of the most powerful men in Starfleet. He might have the
fleet chair in the Federation Council. He could be sector commander. And he might be the logical
replacement for Admiral Nogura once he retires.”

She turned towards Kirk, her eyes glowing. “You could do it, Jim. You could be the youngest
admiral in Starfleet, too. But not if you put unnecessary obstacles in your path. And, don’t interrupt
me, it’s obvious that any alliance with another man, especially this man, is an obstacle. Of course
homosexuality is legal, it has been for eighty years since we really recovered from the last war. But
accepted? Not truly accepted, and you know it. It takes a lot for us humans to get over our
ingrained prejudices. Homosexuality will never be completely accepted, it will always be a
footnote of oddity on your record.”

“Mom, why the hell should I—”

“Let me finish. Not just a human man, but Spock. And not just going to bed with a non-human that
will produce prurient speculation about sexual practices that I don’t want to even think about, but
the son of the Vulcan ambassador to the Federation. Can you imagine how that will look?”

“I’m not seeking favoritism!”

“Which is exactly the point. You’ll be trying so hard to avoid the appearance of asking for special
treatment, your superiors will be doing the same trying to avoid the appearance of treating you
differently…. It will become impossible to reward you and take you on your own merits. No,” she
subsided, looking tired with pinched skin around her eyes, “this is not a good idea for your career.”

Kirk got up abruptly and took a turn around the room, trying to control his raging reaction by
concentrating on something else, anything else. He wasn’t going to respond to his mother by either
walking out on her or arguing with her. There was no argument…. The sunroom had been an
addition of his middle teenage years right before he’d left, one of the first improvements his mother
had made with her own funds, the fruits of her own efforts. So it was a foreign place to him, a
room that warmed in the daytime and dimmed at night. One of the heaters clicked on, and he felt
the blast of hot air against his legs.

He came to a halt behind the chair where Spock was still sitting. Kirk clutched the high seatback.
“Mom. I don’t know what to say to you. Your fears for my career are exaggerated. You don’t
understand the command structure of Starfleet like I do, you haven’t lived in it, and I tell you that
merit is rewarded. And I don’t even know why I’m talking about this, because I don’t want the
scenario you’ve painted for me. I’m only thirty-seven, and no matter how much power you seem to
want me to accumulate in Starfleet Command, there are years to live before I settle down to that.
Years where I want something different, living the life I’m best suited to right now, which is
commanding a starship.”

“And you think having a male, alien lover will help you get your ship again?”

“I think having Spock for my spouse won’t have anything to do with it.”

She regarded him sourly. “You know you’re wrong, but you won’t admit it. You’re being naïve.”

“I know that nothing you’ve said tonight is going to change my mind.”

She pursed her lips. “No, I guess not. All right then. You were always the most stubborn person in
the family, you know that? All the rest of us, we had tempers, I still do, and we hollered at each other. I imagine you heard some very loud arguments when your father and I got to going at each other, and Sam wasn’t a slouch in that department. But you, you kept quiet, always seemed to keep your temper. But not once was I able to influence you about anything important; you kept going your own way, your own steady direction.”

With difficulty she dropped her feet to the floor and stood, swaying, but Kirk was not in the mood to offer her support. “And see where your quiet determination has gotten you,” Sarah said. “The youngest commodore in the fleet. Maybe…maybe you’re right and you’ll keep going. I hope you’re right.”

“I’ll go where I want to go, Mom.”

“That,” she said, “you have made quite obvious. I was foolish to have this conversation with you, wasn’t I?”

Spock spoke up from where he was still, uncharacteristically, seated. “James Kirk,” he said, “is a man who knows his own mind.”

“And his heart, I think.” She looked steadily at Spock. “That’s the one thing that hasn’t been said here, isn’t it? Will you say it?”

Spock rose gracefully and folded his hands behind his back. “I love your son, Ms. Kirk.”

“You’d better. Welcome to the family, Commander, though I can’t say we’re a bargain.” Ruefully she asked Kirk, “I suppose this means no more grandchildren?”

“What do I want with kids? I don’t think so, Mom.”

She sighed. “I had always thought you’d meet a nice young woman when you were older and settle down. There are plenty of them in the ’fleet ranks. Oh, well, time to leave this alone. Commander, have you two set a date for the wedding?”

“I believe it would be appropriate for you to call me Spock, ma’am.”

“And you may call me Sarah. Not Sally.”

“As you wish, Sarah.”

“Well? The date?”

“We have not yet determined one.”

Kirk put in, “Will you come to the ceremony? It’ll be small, whenever it is.”

“Of course I will. I’ll want to meet the Vulcan ambassador. And Spock’s mother, too. What did they say when you told them? Do they approve?”

“We have not yet had the opportunity to inform them. We will do so at the earliest convenience. Possibly tomorrow.”

“Then I’m honored that you told me first. Thank you for that consideration.”

Kirk snorted. “It’s because you were screaming to be picked up from rehab, and you know it. You fit into our schedule.”
She advanced a few paces and laid a hand on his cheek. “You didn’t have to drive me here and give me some of your precious leave time, and I know that. Let me say thank you.” She turned to Spock. “I never thought I’d have a son-in-law. This is going to take some getting used to. To start that process, I noticed that Jim brought the rest of the wine in here. Let’s have a toast.”

Kirk was pouring when the house computer chimed. “The night aide, Ms. Colleen McMasters, is at the front door.”

“I’ll get it, Mom, you stay put.” He started to leave the room, then reversed himself and came back to her. He put both hands on her shoulders. “I always could depend on you, couldn’t I? To be yourself, but then always to give me support. I should have remembered that. Thank you.” He kissed her on the forehead, then was gone.
The sun set hours ago. The yellow glow from a street light merges with the full moon to create strong shadows and make Fortuna Street appear different than it did this morning.

I have not lived in a semi-permanent planetside residence since I attended Starfleet Academy. Since then, I have dwelled in small rooms in starships. And, recently, in a way that my logic cannot fully explain, I dwell in the heart of this human who accompanies me.

A flight of five steps leads to our dwelling. I go up them with a measured tread and key in the security sequence on the datapad. Jim enters first. Before he is completely inside he reaches to take my hand. It is a natural gesture, and my fingers close around his in an instant. He pulls me in after him and the door closes.

He turns to me here in the entry hall, though our hands part. The light of the full moon streams past my shoulders like a live thing in the house with us. It is as if I could touch it and feel its substance, but it bypasses me to bathe Jim’s face in distorted white light instead. The window in the door is patterned for privacy, and so the moonlight changes his features and makes him look different, too: as if his eyes are not set properly, his nose disconnected from his expressive mouth.

This is fanciful thinking. We are both somewhat fatigued, and I can especially see that now in Jim’s gaze and the way he is holding his shoulders. This is more than physical tiredness. I regret that I was forced to tell him of Versin’s prognosis today, but he left me no choice. I will not have him joined to me in any way but truthfulness and trust.

My news did not deter him. I had not thought it would. He is James Kirk, and I honor him. It is my choice to be with him.

He lifts his hand and caresses my cheek with his fingers. I press his hand against my lips while holding his eyes with my own. I want to make sure he knows what I am thinking, what I am feeling.

“Let’s go upstairs,” he says.

He is ever intuitive, of course. We have communicated in fundamental ways from the beginning.

“Yes,” I return. “To bed.”

I wish to express myself in a physical way tonight, although before Jim I was not fluent in the language of the body. On the surface, my relationship with him is not reasonable, except that he is the one I need. He has created the needing in me, and although I do not completely understand it, I accept the permanence of it. Before he arrived on the Enterprise, I carefully kept the bedrock of my existence flat and uninteresting, and myself so tightly controlled that I did not permit myself to explore all my own inner landscape. He opened my eyes to other possibilities. He is my own personal earthquake, for now my bedrock is transformed, lifted to a striving, fascinating mountainscape, and I see and understand myself in new ways.

I believe that I have done the same for him.

We are so much closer to the stars—and to the truth—from where we stand upon the heights side by side. I hold on to this certainty alongside many other, less comforting truths between us.

I do not allow him to go to our bedroom right away. Here in the entry hall, I pull him against me and seek his mouth, then I part it with my tongue. He wraps one arm around my back, another
around my neck, and we kiss. Minutes pass and still we kiss. He is intoxicating.

It is very quiet in this place we will call our home. I hear only the sounds we make as our lips connect, slide against each other and retreat, and our breathing, deep and becoming uneven. My eyes are closed to the darkness of the living area, and I see in my mind’s eye: his face. His lips, parted and hungry for me, as I am for him. His face glowing in the fractured moonlight.

“Jim.” I bend to kiss his neck, then return to his mouth to bestow what I cannot communicate in another way.

I kiss him not so much to deliberately escalate arousal in either one of us but for pleasure and for thankfulness. Over the time we have been together, I have grown accustomed to being touched. What I did not need or want before, I need and want now. To live a life in isolation, I have learned, is insufficient. For me, it is not logical.

But if Versin’s prognosis is correct, I will experience the ultimate isolation. I will not even be able to pass on my katra, as I no longer have that ability. And Jim…. He will be left alone.

I feel his solid body in my arms. The energy of him. The gift of him. He demands my mouth again, and I give it to him. I am here with him now, and I concentrate on that. On what we can share now. Our mouths, our bodies, our love.

We pull back at the same time, and I see in his eyes what I know from my throbbing genitals: it is time.

In silence and darkness—for I have not yet reprogrammed the automatic lights—we make our way across the newly-familiar space of the Great Room. Past the sofa where we were intimate this morning and on up the steel steps of the stairway. Again, I allow him to go first, and as he ascends I place my hand on his buttocks. I imagine his pleased reaction, but he makes no sound. The curve of his flesh against my hand is delightful.

I have not paid much attention to the master bedroom today. Jim unpacked my clothing and toiletries at my request this afternoon while I worked on the computers. He goes straight to one of the nightstands and pulls out a drawer, then he puts the tube of lubricant on top.

I stand at the foot of this large bed where I have not laid before. Jim returns to me without haste, but does not reach for me, instead shrugging first out of his sweater. He tosses it over to a chair in the corner of the room. Then he begins to unbutton his shirt, all while looking at me.

I consider commanding the computer to provide light at twenty percent, but the full moon is streaming through the two large windows that front the street, and even through the shades, the illumination is enough for me to see him without shadows. As I wish to see him, in the light and… imperfect as any being is imperfect, but gratifying to my eyes.

Jim is an exceptionally well-proportioned human male. No lover could find fault with his body, the tone of his well-developed muscles, or the resiliency of his skin. He is broad-shouldered with a defined, active man’s waist. His legs are strong; I know, for I have felt their grip on me both in the gym and in our shared bed on the ship. Any tendency he had to excess weight from the middle years of our mission has been ruthlessly suppressed, and he is everything a healthy man of thirty-seven should be.

He finishes unbuttoning and disposes of the shirt. His respiration is accelerating as he watches me watching him undressing.
A moment later and his pants are around his ankles, and then he smoothly takes his briefs off, too. His non-Starfleet issue shoes he removes along with his garments. That leaves him standing in his socks, otherwise naked. He smiles swiftly, and I wonder if he is remembering the time he told me a person wearing only socks, no matter how attractive that person might be, looks ridiculous. The socks find their way to the chair, too.

He is already half-erect and thinking of what we will do. I draw in a swift lungful of air as I imagine it as well.

I disrobe more hurriedly than he has. Before my jacket is off and my sweater is completely over my head his hands are on me, sweeping up under my shirt. But then he stops, merely holding me as I finish the task of undressing, dipping with me as I pull my pants down, and then again as I discard my briefs and shoes. He runs his fingers along the length of my legs and pulls at my socks. I lift my feet one at a time to allow him to take them off. I enjoy even the pressure of his hands against my ankles; anywhere he touches me, he is welcome. I had to work hard to release controls in order to experience this sharing of self, and now I reap the benefits of a physical freedom I had not considered before he came into my life.

From where he is crouched at my feet, he looks up with those eyes that speak a hundred tongues. He taps the knee brace. “Should we leave this on or take it off?”

Of course I say, “Off.” He knew what I would say as he asked the question, but he tries hard not to assert himself in ways that will emphasize the fact that he is my superior officer in our professional lives. I appreciate his efforts, although that is what he is. In addition to many other things.

It is a relief to feel cool air circulate around my knee. Jim rubs his fingers very gently against my skin, and I feel no discomfort. I think he is tracing the scar that exists there. It is a few centimeters long and insignificant.

I pull him up by his shoulders, although he comes willingly. Jim is smiling, and when I trace the expression on his lips, he kisses the tips of my fingers. Then, to my surprise, he gathers me up in his arms and hugs hard. The breath is forced out of me; my human has considerable strength.

“You are,” he says, half-laughing, “the most attractive man I have ever asked to marry me.”

“The only man.”

“The only person I want,” he says, suddenly serious.

Then his lips are on mine and we make our way to the bed.

I push him onto his back and recline on my side next to him. He opens one arm, offering one of our regular morning embraces from the days on the ship. I shift into his one-armed possession and lightly skim my fingers over his skin, across his collarbone and the left nipple that is already firm against my fingertips, over the valley of his waist, and then finally to his pubic hair. Rising from it is his finely formed human penis.

His breathing stills, and I know he is silently urging me to take it in hand. For years I have realized that my duty to put his welfare before my own has metamorphosed into a surprising desire to please him in all ways. I accept the desire as well as the impulse to touch.

“That feels so good,” he says softly as I explore the softness of penile skin, as I squeeze to test the throbbing blood at its core. The arm he has curved under and around me tenses and then relaxes. His right leg, the one next to me, moves sideways to stimulate my own genitals.
“Relax,” I tell him. “Enjoy this.” For this is what I want.

Today has been unsettling. I do not like to think that my formal union with Jim will not be entirely of my own free will, and that it will not include the mental intimacy enhanced by the bond that I crave, that would literally be life-saving for me. I imagine when Nogura broached the subject to Jim at the reception, and a sour taste explodes on my tongue. Nogura’s manipulations, Nogura’s subtle, oh-so-reasonable demands. I do not wish to live my life in this political, never-quite-what-it-seems way, and yet this is the way of Starbase San Francisco. Already we are caught in its mesh.

What I do wish…. What I do wish is to open my body to sensation in this bed with the one with whom I hope to share the rest of my life, however long that might be. To speak with my body and listen to his own silent words.

I focus on the now and center my awareness.

He exhales in pleasure at how I am stroking him, as I run my thumb over the silky softness at the crown and tease out the first trace of pre-ejaculate. I remember how it tastes, salty and distinctly human, distinctly Jim, and at the same time I remember the blazing excitement of this morning when I erupted in his mouth, pushing my seed forward with little regard for his comfort but knowing I would be whole-heartedly accepted. My penis against his hip swells and I smell my own arousal for the first time. I rub against him without inhibition and hum my pleasure.

“That’s right,” Jim whispers. “That’s right. So good.” He thrusts up, just once, within the circle of my fingers, then he subsides.

His free hand comes around to the part of my chest that’s accessible in this position, and he plays with the hair there. He has almost no chest hair in the genetic tradition of the Kirks, and he enjoys the contrasts between us. I enjoy his warmth against me, the flat of his hand against my flesh, the peak of my nipple yearning. Artfully, he avoids the spot of greatest nerve accumulation, instead circling ’round and ’round….

“Jim….”

“All right.”

His fingers brush against my nipple and a quiver of pleasure ignites there. I can feel it tightening, seeking more. I do not want his hand to stop. Sighing aloud, I fall against the pillow for a moment, two moments, the better to experience this physical delight he can give me. This gratification has nothing to do with Surak’s precepts and there is nothing wrong in sharing it, giving and receiving the fruits of the body. So good….

But then I realize that I’ve abandoned my grip on him when I had intended to continue stimulating him, and so I return to him.

“Oh, yeah. Right there. Uh-huh.”

His fingers thread through my hair as he sighs again at what I am doing to him, for him, and then his hand strays to the tip of my ear. I gasp as he lingers there, then finds a way along the curve and to my lobe, pinching gently, teasing…. I tingle in excitement from his caress and then, I cannot help it, I moan aloud.

He knows all the secrets of my body. I tell them to him willingly. Yes, Jim, yes, touch me here, there, and everywhere else. I feel his solid presence next to me, pressed into my chest and my groin and my legs that push against his, and the heaviness of his sex in my hand, and suddenly this
passive lovemaking is not nearly enough. I want more. More of him. With a grunt I do not try to stifle I roll over on top of him to maximize our skin contact and match our mouths again.

We are both moving now, in that turbulent tide of arousal that cannot be ignored, that courses through my veins in a race along with oxygen and copper-based blood. It is invigorating, exciting. If Jim had breath for speaking, I can imagine him murmuring, “I love this, I love it. I love you.” I adjust my position so that I can more directly experience my length against him. The sensation is enflaming, it flashes out from my organ to the chenesi rippling in my back. One of his hands is pressed between us and his fingers are on my nipple, twisting, contributing to our mutual excitement, and my tongue is in his mouth, and he is heaving up against me as we stroke together, stroking, stroking….

I rip my lips away from his to his voiced protest “Ahhh,” but I ignore him. I must…. I push myself up on my arms to look down between us and see what I want to see, his stiffness moving against my own.

Oh, my captain.

I squeeze my eyes shut and freeze into stillness.

This encounter will be over so quickly, but I would wish to prolong it. We so often seem to drive ourselves so fast, to love in a flash of passion and erotic desire, then to fall against one another, panting and sleepy. The pleasure is complex and worth lingering over: like the satisfaction of solving a difficult equation after hours of work or like soaring high with artificial wings on a light-gravity satellite in utter freedom. Holding myself still, just the tips of our shafts connecting, hearing his heaving breath and mine intermingling, it is like the moment on the platform before you step into the air, with only the wings strapped to your arms between you and the long spiral down to the ground.

I would wish to soar with Jim for hours, taking our time, extending our foreplay so it lasts an afternoon. Not settling to the ground for a long time.

But instead we race, propelled by hormones and something indefinable that chases after us. I do not know what we are running from or what we are reaching for. There is no overt logic or order to our frenetic motion, to what our bodies direct us, compel us to do. Orgasm? It is a chaotic, elusive goal hardly ever in our grasp.

But…. I want to plunge into that small insanity. And I want Jim in all ways I can have him.

In my mouth….

“Spock,” he gasps, impatient at this pause, because he does not know what I am thinking.

I begin by dropping on him again and seeking his breast. I tease the nipple hard and fast with the tip of my tongue, as I have learned provides the most stimulation for him. Jim goes still, but then his hand comes up and rests lightly on my head again, indicating he doesn’t want me to stop. I know. He enjoys this contact and yet is still embarrassed by it, as he associates nipple sensitivity with females only.

So much we did not know about ourselves before we met. That I could come to crave sex; that I could give him the emotion he needs; that I could become entangled so willingly in the mystery humans call love.

His head thrashes on the pillow, and he groans his delight as he throws both arms around me. I
revel in his reaction and my penis, trapped against his thigh, throbs a heavy drumbeat. He heaves upwards and I countermatch him, jabbing myself against him because I cannot stop myself. Once, twice, three times, I ride his body, sucking on his tiny nipple hard. I lose my suction in his insistent movement, shake my head in frustration, and then find it again. I bite it gently, never hard enough to injure or cause pain, then swab it with my tongue. He is quiet beneath me now, although his chest is heaving.

And then, the slow but definite slide down his body, because my mouth must be full of him....

I watch him as I give him this. He is...ecstatic, very close to orgasm, with his body bowed and straining, with his face lifted up to the bright bands of moonlight that streak the ceiling, with his eyes squeezed shut in concentration at my lips around him, the moist wetness of my tongue stroking his penis.

His fingers randomly pluck at my cheek, then over to my shoulder. "Oh, God. Spock. No, oh, God, that feels so good. I'm gonna come if you don't stop. Stop it, stop me."

I do as he asks me.

I remove myself from all contact with his body and sit on the side of the bed, my back to him. My organ juts out between my legs, and it is with an effort that I do not stimulate myself. If I did, the pleasure would be so great that I would not want to stop. Even as it is, my testicles tingle from the contact they are making with the sheet. I take the tube from the nightstand, slowly uncap it and squirt some of the lubricant in my hand. The substance is self-warming and silky, acceptably flavored and unscented, because I much prefer the natural scents of human and Vulcan arousal. I swirl the lubricant in my palm with my finger, my head bent, giving both of us time to catch our breath and for him to recapture some control.

After a minute I twist towards Jim. His hand is absently cupping his testicles, one of his knees is up and bent, but it is his eyes that command attention. Their intensity. The desire in them. To be desired by such a man....

He waits for me to make the decision, and because of that, it is such a simple one. He gives, I take. I give, he takes. We are an endless cycle that balances, and it does not matter to me where in the cycle we are. Right now, I want to be lifted up where only he can take me, to forget about Nogura and Versin and my uncertain future, to ride high on the thermal currents with my beloved.

For an instant, sharp as a knife that cuts through the skin, I wish we could join minds.

I lean down and liberally lick his penis in homage and affection, for the flat, human-metallic taste of it, because I want to. Then I slather the lubricant all over it.

“Oh, Spock,” he sighs, I think in gratitude with also some exasperation, but he is not about to deter me. He helps to balance me with hands on my hips as I swing my leg over him to straddle his waist. Then, quickly, in concern, "Are you sure your knee can take this?"

For answer I take the tube that I still hold and apply some more lubricant to my fingers. Then I reach behind myself and put it where Jim will be shortly, where I will put him. We have not made love in this way for several weeks and my sphincter is tight, but my forefinger circles and demands that it slacken.

He exhales heavily and his legs shift restlessly on the mattress. I withdraw my fingers from within, wipe them on the corner of the sheet, and then balance myself on my feet with my hands flat against his chest. I concentrate on doing this well for him, for my own pleasure, too. There is no
pain in my knee, only pressure that I ignore. I am sufficiently healed for this.

I lift up, then suspend myself with the tip of him brushing my anus. I am up on the balls of my feet, I am tilted and curved over him, the position somewhat awkward, but the strength of my hybrid body assists me in this maneuver. We have done this before and I know the rewards of it: full penetration that few other positions provide. We will both enjoy this, and I...I want it. I reach behind myself to steady him as he reaches, too, and our fingers meet at the base of his penis. He smiles up at me.

“Hello there, lover,” he whispers.

I smile back at him, a small curving of my lips that I know delights him. And then I release some of the effort that is holding me up and allow his hard column to slip inside me.

We groan together as I go just halfway down the length of him and then stop. Jim is panting wildly, as if he is running a race, and I am trying not to allow the discomfort of penetration to deter me. Some men are not like this, I know, but for me there is always a small amount of pain connected to giving Jim the pleasure of being inside my body—and taking the pleasure of our joining myself.

“Okay?” Jim asks breathlessly. “All right?”

I nod, for already the pressure is receding. After a few moments of concentration I can feel not only the stretching and the burning, but also the solid bulk inside me. It is a most satisfying sensation, one that feels fundamentally right to me and has from the first time we penetrated each other. It should not be true, as our bodies have not evolved for this act, but nevertheless it is. Holding Jim within me is a pleasure to my spirit as well as my body.

I ease down the final few centimeters until I am resting most of my weight on him. His hands come up to cup both my knees, and we adjust as he bends his legs to give me more support from behind. Then he wraps the fingers of his right hand around me.

He goes directly for stimulation of the ridges, thrumming the side of his thumb against their expanded, stiffened edges as if he is strumming a musical instrument. What little erection I had lost when I lowered myself onto him quickly returns, and a gush of sensation erupts along the length of me, contracting my testicles so suddenly I must gasp.

“Ahhhh!” I cannot help but move, but pierced by him as I am, the only direction is up and then down, up and then down, using my hands to push off from his chest. At first I manage but a few centimeters, but as my sphincter accommodates his thickness, as the lubrication makes our pathway easy, and as his fingers refuse to leave my straining ridges, I jettison restraint. Higher and higher on his penis I fly, further away from his body I go only to abruptly return. I jam myself down to grind against his pelvis and feel the full measure of him as he thrusts inside me and thrashes his head against the bed. The bed is moving with us, the mattress knocks against the headboard, and the sound of our excitement fills the room. His hand on me is exquisite, creating sensation that whips around to the sensitive organs in my back and rockets straight up my spine, as if I am flaming from the top of my head.

And then his other hand is on my upper arm, grasping tightly, before it slides past my elbow and demands its mate.... Our fingers unite and we grip each other hard, so hard that there will be bruises, but I do not care. There is just him and me and the chaos of our heaving bodies striving together....

I lift my face to the ceiling with its celestial glow, moving closer to it and then further away with our thrusting, but we are not serenely riding the thermal currents high above all the demands of
our lives. We are all frenetic motion, all disorder and turmoil. Nothing about our lives has been serene for months. Everything is out of joint since my great loss, and now with our home among the stars taken away we are marooned here on Earth together. And now this marriage. We are more than Nogura thinks. The fingers of my other hand curl into a fist as I try to grab onto Jim’s flesh, because I need to hold on to him, but they only scrape against the smooth, tight muscles of his pectorals. And so I seize his shoulder, and all the while we are moving against each other, he pushing inside me, me surrounding him, and the angle of penetration has changed as a result of my desperation, he is jerking his pelvis up awkwardly to stay within me.

“Spock!” he shouts as he grabs my hips to try to force me down fully upon him. For an instant I resist….

And then sanity returns and I shift back to where I should be, to where I want to be, and his shaft slides in to fill me completely again. He is on the very edge, and as the expressions of tight ecstasy pass over his features, he lunges up in the three quick thrusts that he so often takes immediately before orgasm. I ride his body and watch it overcome him.

He subsides. And then his eyes are open and staring up at me. There is a moment….

Then it passes and his hands are both on me, one of them coming under to roll my testicles, and the sensation is too great. There perched upon his body I prove the evidence of my passion for him with a groan that fills the room.

Almost immediately lassitude and a great sleepiness overcome me, and it is an effort not to simply fall off him to the bed and succumb to this tiredness. Instead I slump forward, bending at the waist to maintain the penetration but at last experiencing fuller body contact with my arms and chest as I half-lie upon him. I kiss his shoulder and am filled with an inchoate gratitude.

His fingers thread through my bangs. “Are you okay?”

I nod and realize that I really am. “You are here,” I say simply.

His fingers tighten on me. “I always will be.”

I pull back to my original position atop him—although his penis is softening, it maintains its place within my body—and look down at his open, determined expression. The room reeks of sex, and soon we will need to deal with the practical details of cleaning ourselves before sleeping. But for now we remain caught in the unique emotional honesty that physical union creates.

For an instant everything is clear, as if clouds part and all the dark matter of the universe arranges itself in obvious, glowing patterns. Here, sharing my gaze with the one I have chosen, there is something I am sure of in this uncertain life.

“Do you know,” I ask him, “that I will also always be with you?”

He has no words for that, but I see the ripple of a swallow along his throat. I am sorry for his pain. He rolls us both over to our sides, he slips from me in the process, and then he buries his face in the curve of my neck.

“You give me joy,” I say as I slowly stroke his perfect skin.

We hold each other for a long time.
PART TWO

Lachesis: The Dispenser of Lots

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labour and to wait.

--Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, A Psalm of Life

The bus was crowded this late in the afternoon. No transporter station provided service anywhere near where Fahtima lived with her cousin Hamza, so when she left the rehab center in Toronto and took air transport to San Francisco, she had no choice but to travel on the bus to get home.

The trip was long through the city center and then through the southern suburbs, and the baby in the seat behind her had been crying through most of it. Fahtima tried to ignore it and its mother’s ineffective attempts to calm it, but they were in such close quarters, and she was so tired, and she ached so much that she couldn’t. So she surrendered in a way she hadn’t in years—because after all she’d done, what did it matter, anyway? She reached out with one thought and a minute later the child was sleeping in its mother’s arms. Fahtima did not turn around to look, but in her mind’s eye she witnessed the woman’s fatuous smiling at her genetic contribution to the future.

Fahtima would never have children. It had been a fact she had accepted when she was a mere child herself, but as she grew older the realization pained her more. She would hold no one in her arms. Not a child. Not a lover.

She leaned her forehead against the window and stared unseeing as the world passed her by. Of course Hamza had not come to get her at St. David’s to escort her home. He was busy. He had things to do. He had called her once while she was still in the hospital—I need to make sure you’re alive, you’re essential—and disconnected after a minute. She understood. They—or rather, he—believed he had a mission for the good of humankind, and small considerations such as her injuries and her fatigue and her need to lean on him could not be taken into account.

“You’ll have someone meeting you in San Francisco, right?” the medical staffer had asked with a frown when, all alone, she’d swiped her medical card for discharge. Of course she’d lied. It was one of her shames. For all the light that blazed in her, never had she been able to translate it into the simple radiance that illuminated hearts: the care of one being for another. No one cared for her except Hamza, and he had not been able to come to Toronto. She told herself she understood why he hadn’t, and she did, too well. No one cared for her.

The bus was passing through a neighborhood of compact, well-cared for homes. Just like…. Fahtima felt a heavy psychic drag that pulled her north and east, toward where Commander Spock lived in a similar home. She had seen it in his memory hours before, what it looked like and what it represented to him and the man he shared it with. She had learned long ago to block the errant thoughts of those around her—which was one reason why she had been silent until she was four, because she’d been so busy suppressing the cacophony of voices within—but she had found that her mind slid into Spock’s like two streams joining together to form a river. She had not been able to stop herself the first time, had abruptly been there. And then the shameful second time after the explosion and the guarded third time at St. David’s, as she had lived within herself and within him simultaneously.
She had not allowed the hopeless voyeurism for many long years, and the unprecedented falling-into-him had frightened her at first. Why was it like this with him, this half-human, half-Vulcan being whom Hamza called an abomination? Hamza had railed against any appearances on the vid that featured Commander Spock, and so she’d known about him before her job called him to her attention. She had encountered few aliens in her life, though more since she’d managed the position with *The Galactic News*.

She hadn’t meant to exist in Spock’s mind, but there was a free flow of essence from him to her, it seemed. Not the other way around. The wounds in his psyche were all too apparent, burned out, darkened sites from the vicious attack he’d endured. She’d been almost overwhelmed by his experience of it: his last memories of being whole, the horror of awakening to find so much of himself gone, the long battle to rehabilitate and, much harder, to accept what had happened. Cradling the bittersweet joys of a limited functioning, trying to be grateful for the life that remained.

In a flash it had inundated her while she’d stood in the reception hall saying she hardly knew what. Her heart had wept because she knew him so thoroughly. His was the opposite of her own situation, because she had tried to lose everything and instead had kept it all; the light still blazed inside her. The despair, though, was the same.

But right next to his despair, he had much more. She’d tried to back away and protect herself from all that he had managed to keep that she herself had lost: strength, quiet resolve, and a soft, giving understanding beneath his scars.

She was not like him. She lived in the light and hated. He lived in the dark and loved.

The bus slowed. It was time for her to leave and walk the remaining few blocks to the house she shared with lover-of-her-heart Hamza.

She maneuvered her way down the bus ramp, careful of the stretching pain between her legs. Walking was still somewhat difficult. The specialists had offered her counseling, reconstructive surgery, and their horror at what had happened to her. She had turned away from their well-meant offers of assistance. What did it matter? Nothing would change her disfiguration, because it was more than physical. It came from within. Blazed from within. Twisted her and burned her from within until she was nothing but caustic smoke rising up, ready to be sent in whatever direction the wind blew.

Hamza would probably be waiting for her. He would not be pleased about Paris. He was likely to be furious. She wasn’t prepared for one of his tirades: the screaming, the fists. She was tired and wanted to go to her solitary bed and rest. To sleep a night without the intrusion of the light, that was too much to ask, but she breathed a silent plea—to the air because she no longer believed in a deity—*give my body rest. Give my spirit rest*. If Hamza would allow it. *Please.*

Her steps quickened as she approached the one-story house they had purchased a year before. By then she also had been earning a living wage with her writing, and she’d been able to contribute. She remembered that day: she’d been so proud. For so many years she’d been Hamza’s dependant. When everybody else had turned from her, he never had. When he left the village for the city, it had been with a fervent promise to come back for her as soon as he could. She had seen he meant every word and had every honest intention of doing as he pledged, but she had not expected to see him again when she’d sorrowfully bid him good-bye.

In a way she hadn’t seen him again. The boy-man she had loved who had left to find his way in the wide world had disappeared and been replaced with someone else. For years she had received monthly packets from first Khartoum, and then Tokyo, and then Melbourne and then Santiago…. 
Hamza moved a lot. The money he sent her had never been much, but she was a careful saver, and sometimes she had been able to manipulate funds in the village so that people didn’t know they’d once had so much and now had somewhat less. It had been easy to cloud their perceptions but more difficult to accumulate anything significant, since nobody who lived around her had much anyway.

The day had come when what Hamza had sent her and the little she’d hoarded herself amounted to just enough, and she’d left the village, shaking the dust of it from her shoes and not looking back. She would never look back. She would make a future for herself without recourse to the blaze that burned in her mind. She had resolved never to use any of her abnormal, hated powers again, no, not even for monetary advantage, not for physical comfort, not to help her in the studies she ardently wanted to pursue.

She hadn’t realized that what she might not do for herself, she would do for someone else. To make Hamza happy. To do as he asked.

The house was silent when she opened the door, and her tense shoulders relaxed in relief. The air smelled not quite fresh, as if the recycler were over-full because no one had turned it on, as she did every evening. Fahtima walked along the middle hall, past the living room and towards the kitchen. She would get something to eat, and then she would leave a note for Hamza so he would not worry about her, and then she would thankfully seek her bed.

The moment before she turned into the kitchen she heard the noise, a low thumping and then a breathy sigh, and then the unmistakable sound of her cousin’s voice, low and insistent, “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

She kept right on walking, even knowing what she would see; Hamza had made no secret of what he did with women who came to their home.

They were on the kitchen table. Or rather, the woman was, on her back, with her skirt up around her waist, her blouse flung open to reveal her breasts, and with her legs wrapped around Hamza’s torso as he stood between them and pounded into her.

They must know she was there. If they knew she was there, why wouldn’t they stop? Out of common consideration? Out of kindness? Out of a sense of modesty, perhaps?

It seemed none of that mattered, or perhaps she did not matter, because Hamza kept pumping into the woman and the woman began to emit soft, encouraging noises.

Fahtima placed her small bag on the floor just outside the doorway. Then she straightened. She had choices. She could speak. She could scream. She could leave.

Instead, she stood and watched intently. Quietly. She touched the surface of the woman’s thoughts. Went further into them. She knew the pathways to the sensory receptors….

None of this for Fahtima. Not the longed-for possession of Hamza’s penis within a normal, unwithered vagina, not the coursing excitement as his hands kneaded her breasts. Not the stirring of the tissues she lacked and the electric, indescribable feeling of an orgasm beginning to build in this intact female body. Not his eyes staring as if to devour her, she who was giving his body great pleasure….

Fahtima pressed a hand to her chest. Her heart pounded heavily against her palm. She tried not to breathe too loudly, because now she didn’t want to interrupt them. It was only the fifth time she’d done this. Never before in his presence. Never before had she seen both from within the body of the woman he was taking as well as from outside, with her own eyes, his beloved body moving,
repeating itself over and over. She was grateful her cousin was still covered with clothing. She could barely see the flash of his private parts as he pushed in and out, but if she had seen more, if she had seen his strong, toned body naked, seen his shining brown skin overlaying the muscles of his buttocks and his legs as they flexed, she would have wanted to put a hand on him so much she knew she would have fallen to the floor with her longing.

No, this was enough. It would need to be enough forever, for she was incapable of going further. She was Fahtima the not-normal, the one who was useful to him in other ways, but the one who would never truly be touched.

A wave of shame overcame her. This was not right, not right. But the shame was so familiar now, and certainly not enough to induce her to withdraw, for the woman was close to a climax, and Fahtima instead probed deeper into her perceptions.

“Oh, yes! Yes! That’s it!” A final shriek. “Oh, God!”

Ohhhhhhhhh.

The woman’s orgasm swept over Fahtima, up from her knees, down from her tingling breasts to her center that should have been, winding ’round and ’round into a coil, needing to be expressed, needing some release so it was Fahtima’s orgasm and not the woman’s, but finding none. Curling in upon itself until it was so tight and so pointed it could burrow deep and disappear inside, to an unexamined place that held the volcano of her wanting. Fahtima slumped against the doorway, panting as softly as she could.

It was always like this. So close and yet never quite there. Like reaching for a star up in the sky. She was so foolish. Nothing eased within her, no physical tension dispersed. There was not even any genuine pleasure. She was not this woman, she was Fahtima, and fulfillment was not for her. She would go on this way forever, suffering, until she finally managed to die. She would never be any closer to sexual fulfillment than she had been on the bus watching the world go by: condemned always to be a witness to what she could not have.

Fahtima limped to the living room. She gingerly sat in her favorite spot, the corner of the sofa closest to the window. She could not help but hear when Hamza achieved orgasm with a shout in the woman’s soft body.

How had she come to this? So wrong. So inevitable. An invasion of privacy that most telepathic races, she knew, would never condone. Telepaths valued privacy above all other ethical concerns. The Vulcans, for instance. She knew that Commander Spock would have thoroughly disapproved of what she had done.

But it wasn’t her fault! How could she live like a cloistered nun ignoring her longings when the copulating echoes of all the world resonated inside her? When the man she loved flaunted his escapades? Wouldn’t the Vulcan understand her and forgive her this weakness at least a little?

Fahtima wearily allowed her hands to support her aching head. She’d tried, and for many years she’d succeeded, but not now. She knew no way to curb the weaknesses that seemed to have sprung up at Hamza’s command, or earlier than that, when the Eternist doctor had robbed her of all hope.

She’d bled for days after the cutting when she was twelve, and the doctor had attended and transfused her, given her intravenous antibiotics, had apologized to Fahtima’s aunt because she’d gone too far and cut too much. I didn’t want her to die! Aunt Medina had wailed. We must not have her life on our hands, the priest had insisted. Infection had scarred and distorted her inside, ruining
what little was left by the hasty surgery. Eventually, she had gotten better and the doctor had gone away and Fahtima had learned to walk again. She had tried to examine her female parts in a mirror and seen...nothing. A tiny raw hole from which, the doctor had told her, she would bleed, painfully, once a month. Inside was scar tissue that forbade anything normal.

Of course there had been no difference in her mind. She had been so foolish to have given up her sexuality for no reward at all.

Her sexuality. She’d believed it thoroughly gone, cut away in the desert and a victim of her naiveté, until she’d moved into this house with her cousin. For the first time they were living together, because a suspicious, power-seeking Hamza had forced her secret from her that one horrible, glorious night: that the powers had not vanished at all, but she had instead hidden them with cunning after the circumcision. He knew that she could do what others could not, and he had said they would accomplish great things together. He would, he’d said, make use of her.

She had started to think of the different ways a man made use of a woman, and those thoughts had been reinforced by the stray sounds coming from the bedroom when a woman was visiting or sometimes by a stranger’s presence at their table in the morning.

_I want...someone to hold me. I want.... Why not a touch, a small kiss, a caress, even if I can’t have anything more? Why doesn’t anyone understand this hell I live in?_ 

Low murmurs came from the kitchen and there was a rustling sound. After a few minutes the woman made her way to the front door and left. Fahtima didn’t move. She would not contact Hamza’s mind, she never did, but she suspected what was coming.

She did not brace herself against the impact of his hand against her face.

“Ahhhh,” she could not help from moaning as she rocked to the side, down to the cushions.

“How dare you, bitch!” Hamza snarled, and he jerked her up. She saw the next blow coming through tears she couldn’t control, and she tried to dodge it. He wouldn’t let her, and this second assault sent stinging pain shooting through her head and her neck. She clung to the seat cushion, gasping and crying, but then what little was left of her energy drained away, and she slid with a thump to the carpeted floor. She landed right where it hurt the most between her legs.

“I didn’t, I didn’t,” she sobbed as she lay with her head on the floor. She didn’t know exactly what she was denying. Besides, everything was a lie.

“Oh yes you did!”

She stared at his feet and lower legs, and they moved restlessly, as if he wanted to kick her. He’d done that before, and she knew the power in his legs, for Hamza was a grown man in the fullness of his strength, and he had not hesitated to use it on her when he was enraged. If he kicked her now, it would really hurt.

Slowly she pushed herself up, not wanting to provoke him further, but he pulled her up and roughly shoved her onto the sofa. She bounced on the cushion before he grabbed her shoulders, his fingers biting into her skin and hurting. But she’d been through episodes like this before. Hamza hated being ignored. He always demanded her attention, and so it was safest to look him full in the face. She did, blinking. He was not far from her at all; Hamza was close enough to kiss.

“Don’t you do that again!”

“I...I...” she stuttered, “I didn’t know!”
“Like hell. You stood there and watched me!”

“Not for long. I left right away! What else did you expect me to do?”

“Not to watch.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry’s not enough.”

“You knew when I was going to come home!”

“What?”

“You knew I was coming home from rehab this afternoon. I sent you a message!”

“So?”

“Why did you have her here when you knew I was coming?”

“Because I thought you’d have the sense to go to your own room and give me peace!” He shook her hard enough for her ears to ring.

“I…I…I would have!” she stuttered out. “I will.”

“Good! Remember that.”

“I will, I promise.”

“Remember that I live my own life the way I want to, not according to your schedule.” He released his hold on her. “Besides, I forgot.”

She held his eyes as he always wanted her to, but inside she froze. He had forgotten. So like Hamza to be so focused on the professional aspects of his life and to be so uncaring in everything else.

She wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. It shouldn’t hurt so much to be forgotten, because she had lived most of her life trying to minimize her impact on the people around her. She’d wanted to be ignored because it was so much better than being feared. But then Hamza had wanted her here in the same house, and she’d started to hope, she knew not what for: maybe that she would be a person to him. A woman….

But he never forgot me when he left the village. All those months over the years, all those letters. And never, not once, not ever in the many years she had known him had her cousin made the sign to ward off evil in her presence. He was not afraid of her.

She sniffed and, probably unwisely, could not prevent a question. “Why didn’t you stop when you knew I was there?”

He peered down at her inscrutably, and this time she did brace for the next blow. Instead, Hamza let out a low laugh.

“Stop? In the middle of fucking? You are such a baby, Fahtima. You don’t know the first thing about it. No man is going to stop with his cock up a juicy pussy.”

He plopped next to her on the sofa, shook his head, and then suddenly wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Fahtima gazed at him, startled, because Hamza rarely touched her at all. Except when he
Fahtima endured the hours of the reception with her heart frozen. When she wasn’t taking holos by Randolph’s side, her hands clenched into fists. She would not allow herself to think of what she was about to do for Hamza. If she considered the lives she was about to take and the pain she was about to inflict, she didn’t think she could act. The people would wail in surprise and desperation,
searching for something undefined that might save them.... She could feel the location of the explosive like an itch in her brain, and it frighten her.

Then she had come face to face with Commander Spock, and her mind had slipped into his without warning. She’d pulled herself out as fast as she could, but not before she knew what was essential about him; it had been imprinted in her own heart.

How he would mourn when Kirk’s body, mutilated past recognition, was pulled from the rubble.

She’d maneuvered as far from him as she could in the reception hall, but nowhere was far enough. All that he was and she was not haunted her, and now it seemed he triggered her imagination, too, because she looked at a woman and instantly knew of her two children waiting for her at home; they would never see her again. She looked at a man and, without effort, heard the wailing of his inconsolable mother and father at his funeral. She looked across the mass of people and saw all that they might accomplish for good that would not be done, and she mourned.

Fahtima stood by a pillar at the side of the hall and clutched at the folds of her dress. She didn’t know if she could do this....

And then Ralph Randolph had offered her an honorable solution. He came up to her and said, “A change in plan, Fahtima. You’ve done well filling in for Hamza, and I think you should come in with me to the ceremony. Sending you home now like we’d scheduled doesn’t make much sense to me when this is a great opportunity for you. Come on inside and you can get the credit for whatever holos you can take. And it will free me up for text reporting.”

Perfect. A solution for her weakness born of kindness. Instead of being kilometers away when the bomb materialized and exploded, she would be in the same room, facing the same risk of injury or death as anybody else. So she entered Friendship Hall with a small, enigmatic smile. If this worked, she wouldn’t have to worry about Hamza asking her to do anything else as appalling as this assignment. She wouldn’t have to worry about her incursions into his lovers’ minds and bodies. This was a path she’d long considered and yet consistently denied herself.

She did her best. Pinpointed the most powerful explosive in the hidden armory. Brought it to Paris. She watched it materialize exactly where it should have, and she opened herself up to it, as she knew lovers opened to one another. Caressing the ignition mechanism, she found the exact molecules to move for detonation.

But before she could act, someone was standing and pointing. She should have known. Kirk was shoving Dubois to the side on the stage. She skidded the explosive after them and closed her eyes.

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“Tell me what happened.”

No, she never would tell him all her truth.

“I don’t think the bomb was strong enough.”

“We worked with what we had. If I’d been able to find something better that the feds wouldn’t miss, I would have. And there were some defenses that we didn’t know about that muted the effect.”

She’d read the same thing in the news. When she’d sent it after the fleeing president, the device had exploded near the side wall and that had protected many lives, primarily the prominent ones on the stage.

“But, Tima.” He took her chin again, this time with soft fingers like a lover’s, though his gaze
boring into her was hard steel. “I don’t understand something.”

He was so cruel to her. So kind to her with this touch she leaned into. “What?”

Gently he shook her head from side to side with every few words. “You weren’t…supposed… to be…in the hall.”

“It was Randolph’s fault,” she said in a rush. “He ordered me to stay with him, because he couldn’t handle text and video at the same time. There wasn’t any way I could say no without making him suspicious.”

Hamza’s eyes narrowed. “It must have interfered with what you were able to do.”

Fahtima shook her head and in the process dislodged his hold on her. “No, no. I concentrated and it worked. It was just…fate. Coincidence that others died and they didn’t.” She shrugged. She had done what Hamza had trained her to do. She had thought: a last act, a gift to him. But here she was, still sitting before him. The universe operated in strange ways and she had ceased long ago to question the rules that governed her sorrows.

“I don’t believe in coincidence.”

She told him earnestly, “In a random universe, anything can happen. I am sure it has.”

He got up abruptly and paced over to the curtained window, where he took in the last of the fading sun. “If you plan well enough, if you understand the motivations and capabilities of the enemy, you force fate to do your will. We’ve got a new mission.”

Her heart sank. “But I’m barely healed. I don’t know if I can…. I was cut again. The same place.”

Hamza was taken aback. “Oh. There. You mean where you were castrated.”

“I don’t think a woman can be castrated,” she said dully. “It’s called female circumcision. From a long time ago.”

He shrugged. “Same thing. That’s not too bad. None of that was working for you anyway, so it must not have made much difference.”

For all that Hamza was a man, in some ways he was also a child, because he truly didn’t understand. “You’re right. Not much difference,” she said quietly.

“And you can walk, you must have walked from the bus stop?”

“Yes.”

“Then you can do it.”

She sighed. “What?”
“This is one assignment you won’t want to miss,” he enticed, teasing. “At the end of the week. It will be worth pushing yourself for.”

“Not the job we missed that Randy took without us, in Johannesburg?”

“That’s old news and not important to us politically anyway.”

“You should have gone with him to South Africa. You’re fully rated as a photographer. It must have looked odd to him that you turned him down.”

“I told him I was too worried about you to do a good job and he took Sanchez instead. I needed the time to get the information about the next job.”

She would not be able to avoid it. Wearily, Fahtima asked, “Will you tell me?”

He strode across the room and stood in front of her, his feet spread and hands gesturing with excitement, the way she remembered he had done as a boy. He’d always held great enthusiasms that had made her weary. “Our next assignment,” he said dramatically, “will take us into space.”

And this he had obviously remembered: her deep desire to leave the arms of the Mother Earth that had done her wrong, in the same way that she had left the village. She was afraid that he was teasing her still. “Really?”

“Only as far as the Moon, but it’s a start, Tima. Once we get rid of the fucking aliens, we’ll have the whole solar system to ourselves and it will be better, but even this will be good.” He sat next to her. “We travel to the Moon with Randy first. Then, while we’re there…. You know that Space Dock is in orbit not far from the moon. Well, guess who’s going to be getting a VIP tour of one of the ships in Space Dock?”

She shook her head.

“Pren’felit.”

She knew the name instantly. “The same one who’s sponsoring the bill in the General Assembly, the Andorian that you hate so much?”

Hamza nodded. “Him.” His voice made a curse of the word. “We’re going after him when he’s on a starship, the Hood, we’ll go after all the bigwigs who’ll be with him, and we’ll go after the ship, too. We’ll scare the shit out of them, and everybody will know the aliens have a real enemy who can hurt them…but they won’t know who. They’re going to drive themselves crazy trying to figure out who is doing this to them, but we won’t tell them. Not until we’ve got the whole planet terrified after we’ve shown them our power three or four times, and then…” His fist smacked into his palm. “Then we’ll reveal ourselves and make our demands. It will take time, but it’ll be worth it.”

He twisted around to face her. “Think of it, Tima, a starship. It’s the perfect target for somebody like you. I’ve already got a plan, but I need you to fill in some details so we can take advantage of all you can do. What do you think?”

It would be better if he didn’t know what she thought, for she trembled at how many people there would be on board. At least four hundred souls, there had to be that many on a starship. Fewer than in Paris, but these were people who had made that great leap out into space that she so envied. She remembered that it had been an Andorian who had lifted the debris that had trapped her, and he had carried her to where the Starfleet doctor had staunched her bleeding.

Could she attack the starship and all those it sheltered? All to get to one Andorian whom Hamza
hated? Yes, it would make a political statement and undoubtedly slow the progress of the aliens that she saw as inevitable despite their efforts. Hamza and his fellows were trying to stem a flood with one finger in the dike that had already sprung a thousand leaks. She had no illusions and believed that she and Hamza would be failures in the long run no matter how many short term successes she gave him to boast about. But if this was what he wanted from her….

“With you planning it, it will work.”

“You’re right. It’s not only how much you hurt them, but what kind of a media impact you make, too. Listen, one other thing while I’m thinking about it. Being caught in the blast in Paris didn’t hurt your powers, did it?”

What a thought, that she might have emerged into consciousness to such joy. The screaming pain of her wounds and the draining bleeding would have been nothing compared to a realization that somehow the light had been blasted away into blessed, cool shadow. She would have felt transcendent, as if she had truly died and risen to a mythical paradise.

But it hadn’t happened that way. She would know, she was sure, if she ever lost an iota of the great curse that bore her down.

“No,” she said in her quiet way. “Nothing will ever rid me of what I am.”

“Don’t look so sad. That’s good. You’re good! Nobody has a weapon like we have, and we’re going to accomplish great things.”

She regarded him sadly. “I am your weapon.”

His fervor wouldn’t be deterred. “Of course you are. If there is a god, then he put you right into my hands.” Hamza grabbed her hands and squeezed, too hard, for he had not the slightest idea that he was hurting her. “Think of it, Tima. We were born in the same village, cousins, never knowing what was possible and the contribution we could make. We’re going to tear the Federation apart and create a form of government that will be for the humans alone.”

She’d heard his political tirades too many times before. His belief in the Eternist cause was the one great motivation of his life. “And what will you have your weapon do this time? Another explosive?”

“No, we don’t want to get predictable.” Hamza jumped up and began to pace. “We could just punch a hole in the ship so the air leaks out. They could suffocate. But I want something more sophisticated, more subtle.”

“With all the humans on board?”

“Only the kind that have turned their backs on humanity. Starfleet is such a polyglot mix these days, it’s disgusting.”

“Humans and Andorians and almost every other kind of creature in the Federation: if the air goes, they will die.”

He paused in the middle of the living room, puzzled at her fatalistic pronouncement. “Yeah. They’re all the same.”

“Do you hear yourself, Hamza? ‘They are all the same,’ you say. Is this the pronouncement of a true son of the party?”
“What are you talking about?”

“Just that maybe….” She stopped, frightened of what she had almost said to him. Was she mad? She would only encourage more blows. Hamza would not brook reason or opposition. “Nothing.”

He advanced on her angrily. “Nothing, shit. I know what you were going to say. That stay in Toronto corrupted you! What, did you have a Tellarite nurse? One of those pigs? Did he say sweet things in your ear?”

“No, no, nothing.”

“Or a Vulcan? Was he in heat and nobody else would take him? Did he want my Fahtima, my little cousin? Did he want to rape you, and was he angry because you don’t have what he needed?”

He was irrational and he would hurt her in another moment. She stood, thinking of the sanctuary of her room. “We’ll talk about your plan tomorrow, after I’ve had a chance to rest.”

But he wouldn’t let her leave. He grabbed her arm and swung her by it until she banged against the wall. She bit her lip and did not cry out. Then he was pressing against her in all his masculine strength.

They stared at one another, eye to eye, both of their chests heaving, and for the first time ever Fahtima realized that she could protect herself. It would be so simple, and he would never know it was done: all she had to do was enter his mind. There wouldn’t be any pain, because she could never possibly hurt him. One small cloud created over his thoughts and Hamza would forget the harm that blazed in his eyes.

She cringed at the idea. She hadn’t touched Hamza’s mind since he had left the village many years before, and she would not do so now. She did not want to know how far he had strayed from the boy who had adored her. If the evidence was merely felt in her body and with her senses, she could delude herself. But if she knew it directly, the world might spin out of her control. More than it already had.

He grabbed her hands and pushed them over her head against the wall with the force of only one arm, so strong, and she flashed back to the Vulcan’s hands on her as she lurched forward in pain on the floor of Friendship Hall. Even with those inhuman muscles he had been so careful not to hurt her. He had been gentle and understanding despite the urgency she had known he felt to find his captain. But this was not Spock, this was….

“I need to depend on you, Fahtima. You are my weapon and don’t forget it. You are the pathway to a new and better world for us and every other human trapped on this planet. If you listened to them, you’d know they’re calling out for deliverance. They’re calling for you. And if I can’t depend on you….”

“You can,” she choked out. “I’ll do what you say!”

“That’s what I’ve been counting on. But now I’m not so sure. Watching while I fucked Margie. That’s not the Fahtima I know. Promise me you won’t ever do that again.”

“I already did! I promise again, I won’t.”

The grip on her wrists tightened. “You won’t what?”

“I won’t ever watch you…fucking again.”
He laughed softly. “I like to hear you say that, sweetheart. If you had the parts, I’d do you, too, did you know that?”

She closed her eyes in utter devastation, and she slumped in misery. Only Hamza’s hands on her body kept her from falling to the floor.

“You’re always so prim, so uptight, it would be a pleasure. It’s a shame there wasn’t a Vulcan there in Toronto to take care of you. I’ve heard they sometimes fuck with their minds instead of their pricks. He could have done you that way, couldn’t he have?”

She knew what loving with the mind meant, she’d seen it in Spock’s memories, and through them she’d seen Kirk’s as well. What a blasphemy for Hamza to speak so evilly about something that she would give almost anything to experience. Or, even without the meld, to be loved by Spock as she had seen he loved his Jim no matter the circumstances. That was the way life should be….

“And now I think I need another promise from you. Open your eyes, Tima.” Then, when she didn’t, he said it again sharply, with a wrench to her arms he still held up. “Open your eyes!”

Fahtima licked her lips. “Yes, Hamza?”

“Promise me that you’ll never use your powers against me. I think you could probably cut off my breath with a thought, couldn’t you? Promise me you won’t.”

After a moment of incomprehension, she felt the bile rise in her throat. She was going to be sick….

She gagged and an awful retching sound came from her throat. Hamza jumped out of her way with a “God damn it!” as she sagged forward.

She dropped to her knees on the floor and held her stomach. Nothing came out, which was appropriate, because she was nothing, she would be nothing if she ever contemplated….

If she couldn’t bear to enter his thoughts to protect herself, how much less could she inflict harm on him?

“I love you,” she gasped. “I would never hurt you.”

His feet came within her field of view and he squatted down before her. Awkwardly, he patted her shoulder. “Ah, Tima. I didn’t mean to make you sick. I’m sorry.”

She groped for some form of composure. What a fool she must appear, crouched on the floor. But this was what she’d been reduced to, a woman-not-a-woman groveling at her cousin’s feet. From the first day they’d entered this house, Hamza’s glorious dreams of retribution and victory and her own simple desire to please him had tangled into a disordered mess.

Hamza was still patting her. “You know how I am when I get mad. You just…. You’re a good person, you know that?”

Fahtima wiped her mouth and looked up at him. She wasn’t sure that she was a person at all.

“Do you understand me?” she asked. “I won’t hurt you.”

“I do,” he said, as if to a child or a mental incompetent. “Now, let’s get you to your feet and into bed. I bet you’re tired. I’ll get you a glass of water.”

He was now all solicitude, and he helped her to her room. She slipped quickly into a nightgown as he went to the kitchen for the water, and she was under the covers by the time he came back. She
was vaguely hungry, but she didn’t want to stretch his caring too far by asking for food. He was never sure of himself in the kitchen and wouldn’t like being asked to provide a meal.

Hamza held out the glass and she sipped at it. “You go to sleep and tomorrow we’ll talk some more about what’s next. It’s gonna work, and after that I can’t wait to go after the abomination the next time. And Kirk, too.”

Her hand froze in the act of handing him the glass. “Abomination?”

“You know who I mean. That creature, Spock. Can you imagine any human woman willingly spreading her legs for one of those Vulcans like his mother did? God, it makes my stomach turn. We’ve got to make sure that cross-breeding like that doesn’t become a trend. We’ll make an example of him.”

She made a faint sound that he didn’t seem to hear, as he swept right on with his explanations.

“But one job at a time. First Pren’felit, then we’ll go after the others.”

She released the glass of water into his custody and kept control of her voice. “I guess so.”

“I know so. Fate is favoring us, Tima. We’re going to get them all and change the course of history.” He waved off the light. “You have a good sleep. We’ll plan in the morning so we do it right this time. And don’t forget, in a few days you’ll have your dream come true. You’ll be in space, and after that the Moon.”

She pulled the blanket up to her chin. What was to become of her? She did not sleep.
The instant Kirk awakened he knew that Spock was still in bed with him, behind him as during the
night they’d spooned into position. Dry, precise kisses were being deposited in a line connecting
his shoulder blades, reverently, each press of the lips lingering, making Kirk wonder at the
thoughts behind the expressions of quiet love. Spock always did make him feel extraordinarily
special…. Slowly his eyes closed in the lassitude of early morning, and he allowed himself to be
worshiped. Whatever Spock wanted….

Eventually the kisses reached their destination, and with one final wet kiss accented by that Vulcan
tongue—surely Spock knew he was awake by now—his back was abandoned, and a proprietary,
familiar hand came around his waist instead. Spock usually did end up touching him one way or
another throughout the night when they managed to sleep together, even, it seemed, in this
enormous bed they would share. Lots of times on the ship they had rested different hours and slept
alone, and they’d had to make an effort to meet for sex or solace or conversation. But it seemed
that on this, their first morning together in their new dwelling, Spock had decided to greet the dawn
next to him.

Kirk pushed the sheet down to the foot of the bed with his toes, then twisted over without
dislodging Spock’s possessive touch. He faced his wide-awake lover. Last night had been
disturbing and sad in the midst of their lovemaking, and in the dim morning light he searched
Spock’s eyes for a trace of the quiet desperation that had seized both of them before they’d fallen
into exhausted slumber. But Spock’s gaze was placid, and Kirk was relieved.

“Good morning,” Spock intoned. He pecked Kirk on the tip of his nose.

“Good morning to you,” he said. Then, “How’re you doing?”

Spock did not pretend to misunderstand him. “I am well.”

“Really?”

“During the time since I awakened, among other things I have achieved an understanding of why
Versin warned me against associating with you—speaking with unusual vehemence. Lovemaking
with you is an excessively emotional experience.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” Kirk said sincerely. It was what distinguished his relationship
with Spock from the relationships he’d had with the women who’d shared his bed in the past. How
ironic, that his emotionally-controlled male lover could call up the depths of emotion from him that
nobody else ever had, uncharted territory for him before Spock.

“And, despite Versin’s protestations, neither would I. I have reminded myself that the future will
inevitably arrive, and what will be will be. We live in the present, and I intend to make the most of
it. I find it quite interesting that I am in this house with you. It is not a possibility I had ever
imagined before you assumed the captaincy of the Enterprise.”

“Let’s face it, neither one of us is exactly the domestic type.”

“We will manage,” Spock said serenely.

“Yes. I think we will.”

Kirk spent a few quiet moments taking in the mussed hair and the morning softness that made
Spock so appealing. That was probably one reason why, when they did awaken in the same bed, they almost always started the day with sex. Kirk couldn’t resist him. The façade that Spock wore in the waking hours hadn’t been assumed yet, and Kirk loved interacting with that unguarded part of Spock’s person.

“And how are you?” Spock asked.

Kirk considered. They’d had their night of silent sorrow, and this was a new day. He was never one to look backwards, anyway. The future…. They would twist the future to do their bidding. “Like you. I want to make the most of the present.”

Spock threaded his fingers through Kirk’s hair and began to gently knead his scalp. “My logical one.”

Kirk closed his eyes in pleasure. Spock had shown an inexplicable fondness for his hair from the very beginning of their love affair. Kirk had never asked him why, maybe because he didn’t want to hinder the chance of more of the incredible massages Spock occasionally graced him with.

Blindly, Kirk found his lover’s chest and rested his palm against it in pure contentment as Spock’s knowing fingers worked their magic on the perpetually tight muscles at the back of his neck. After a silent minute Kirk sighed happily.

“Hedonist,” Spock softly accused.

“Purveyor of unnatural pleasure,” Kirk languidly returned. “Don’t stop.”

“Eventually we will need to vacate the bed and begin our project for the day.”

“Not yet.”

“What a commanding individual you are.”

“Admit it, you love that about me.”

“I do not believe I will allow myself to be coerced into any declarations of the sort.”

Kirk laughed quietly, so as not to dislodge his masseur. He didn’t need the words right now. Spock’s actions spoke volumes.

But he couldn’t just lie there forever absorbing affection. “So, what else have you been contemplating while you’ve been waiting for me to wake up?”

“In addition to what I have already told you, my satisfaction over our relationship.”

Kirk’s eyes popped open long enough for him to punch Spock lightly on the shoulder. “On which you spent all of thirty seconds. One minute, max.”

“You underestimate yourself, Jim.”

“Hah. Not likely.” Kirk’s eyes drifted closed again. The exquisite massage continued as Spock went on.

“No, that is true. You have always had a good understanding of your own abilities. Very well. I did not wish to disturb you by leaving the room to obtain the latest data from Paris on the blast area, so I have been considering the transwarp project and its ramifications vis à vis the theories presented by Professor Kramer on the gravitational constant. As you know, there is a speculative footnote
from his latest paper on the subject that concerns me. I have considered it in combination with the data we accumulated from our encounter with the Graves Gravitational Mass six months ago. It is possible that the transwarp testing that will occur in several months may not yield what Starfleet expects.”

This was interesting information. If they’d been on the bridge and involved with a mission, he would have demanded more facts, some figures, a copy of the article, and a briefing room discussion. But…not…now….

Kirk wriggled closer into Spock’s embrace, so that they were pressed together from groin to chest. Neither of them had bothered to put on clothes after they’d cleaned up the previous night, and Spock’s skin against his own was instantly arousing. Chest to chest, belly to belly, cock to cock. Kirk stretched to maximize the contact. God, the familiar warmth along the length of his body felt good. They would make something of it, soon. “I thought you and Kramer didn’t agree on matters of the gravitational constant.”

“There are elements of his theory that are consistent with my observations.”

“My practical scientist. You know, that’s something I’ve always liked about you.”

“And what is that?” Spock finally ceased his ministrations on Kirk’s head, and Kirk reluctantly opened his eyes again. He had to pull back a little to focus properly on his lover’s face.

“That you’re firmly grounded in reality. You aren’t one of these guys who labors in a lab concocting theories on how many angels can dance on the head of a pin—”

“Unlikely,” Spock contributed.

“—or the exact date when the universe will end. You’re a real life kind of guy.”

Spock’s lips twisted in amusement. “Of the many terms of endearment with which you have endowed me, that is the most ludicrous.”

“Ludicrous? I’ll show you ludicrous.” With a quick lunge Kirk rolled Spock over onto his back. Spock steadied him by grasping his shoulders, then slid his hands down to take possession of Kirk’s ass. “I find nothing ludicrous in this position. It is somewhat invigorating.”

Invigorating was right—those big warm hands cradled him like no others ever had—but if Kirk didn’t take care of business first, nothing much more would happen. Something below was demanding his morning attention. “Uh. Wait a minute. Before we go any further, I’ve got to go see a man about a horse. Be right back.”

He stood in their unassuming bathroom for a frustrating length of time trying to empty his bladder while Spock lay naked in their shared bed waiting for him. There was definitely something to be said for a desert-adapted Vulcan physiology that conserved fluids. Kirk washed at the simple porcelain sink, brushed his teeth, gargled as silently as he could, and made a bee-line to sunrise delight.

He paused before he got back into the bed. “Oh,” Kirk breathed, because Spock was still lying on his back on the apricot-colored sheets, but now with his erection in his hands, fondling it. Both thumbs ran over the fully defined head and ridges and then along the shaft, squeezing as he watched. Whatever it was that Spock had concluded in the middle of the night, Kirk thought a bit dazedly, he’d obviously decided to grab life with both hands. So to speak.

He advanced to the foot of the bed and touched himself as he witnessed more from his uninhibited lover. His own cock lengthened and hardened with insistent demand, and he began to breathe
heavily. Spock looked up from his introspection and caught his gaze, and Kirk’s knees literally weakened, such lust swept through him at how open Spock was being, how lascivious, how incredibly damn sexy he was lying there with his legs splayed, his pre-cum glinting, his fingers busy extracting pleasure from his own body. This was so good. The freedom was incredible. They could have this whenever they wanted.

Spock’s self-stimulation stilled. “Are you coming back to bed?”

“I sure as hell am not going downstairs to make breakfast. And,” Kirk said as he finally got his shell-shocked body to move, “I thought that was my job.” He crawled up straight from the foot of the bed, straddled Spock’s knees, and stared at the cock he intended to do wonderful things to.

“I am assisting you.”

“You always do, lover.” Kirk planted a wet smacking kiss to the right of the neat navel and then without more ado slid his mouth over the Vulcan treasure.

As often as they had done this with each other, still each time the furnace heat against his lips was always a surprise. Almost too hot, never too hot, always a beckoning promise and the feeling of rightness, of coming home, the promise of sex at blazing intensity, the promise of ease and comfort afterwards.

He felt that if he could have swallowed the hardness before him, he would have, he wanted it in his mouth so much. Spock sighed heavily as Kirk’s lips rushed past the expanded ridges all the way down so he was holding all of it in his mouth, then he stripped up the entire length, as slowly as he could, listening as the sigh turned into a small grunt and then a louder one. Spock tangled his fingers in Kirk’s hair again. “You do that exceedingly well.” It came out in a whisper.

Kirk looked up with a satisfied smile. “Practice makes perfect.”

“I think it is possible you have a natural ability.”

“You think I’m a natural cocksucker?” Kirk mock-frowned. “Men have died for saying less than that.”

“I sincerely hope you will restrain your homicidal tendencies and continue with your efforts to achieve perfection in this exercise.”

_Oh, yeah._

Then to do it over again, over the ridges much more slowly this time, savoring their out-thrusting shape that slid against his tongue and then the hard, becoming harder shaft beneath. He loved the taste of Spock’s sex in his mouth and the texture of it. Such soft skin, such thrumming power at the core and a delicate taste that promised the sweet flavor of his emission. Again and again he went up and down, moving freely, getting into the rhythm, and the only sound in the room was the music of his lips and their joined, heavy breathing. Yes, he was good at this, at giving Spock the kind of pleasure that pulled him right out of his ordered, controlled existence and into a new world of the body, where they were connected in a powerful way. As his mouth went over the ridges for what must have been the fiftieth time, Spock arched upward, just a little. Kirk went all the way down to meet him, checked his gag reflex, and hummed.

This time it wasn’t a whisper. “Jim!” Spock exclaimed through his loud, accelerating respirations that he was doing nothing to mute or restrain, not in this space that was truly their own. His fingers restlessly moved over Kirk’s ears, then back up into his hair.
The best, Kirk thought, and his own cock rose between his legs with a flash of triumph. He’d have Spock shouting soon….

He spared a hand to wrap around himself, jerking several quick strokes and then squeezing to calm the sensations. It was hard to do with his mouth stuffed full, and he had to release a little to breathe.

“Uh. Uh,” he wheezed with his mouth wide around the base, and then he swallowed, knowing the ripple would drive Spock crazy. It did. His lover’s head thrashed against the pillow and his groan of pure pleasure could surely have been heard downstairs.

In a little while…. He nuzzled his nose in reddish-brown pubic hair. Spock was always meticulously clean and there wasn’t a spot on his body Kirk hadn’t feasted on at one time or another. He had been so hungry for this at the beginning of their love affair, and time hadn’t blunted his appetite. If anything, he wanted more of this long, lean body laid out before him, the power and the decency of him, and the passion displayed for him alone.

Kirk reversed his progress and began to lick his way up to the spongy tip, taking his time to lash against the bottom ridge, to insert his tongue in the space between the ridges, and sucking hard against the top one. He couldn’t help himself, he had to keep one hand on himself, too, stroking.

“You like this, don’t you?” he murmured, and he began to plant a line of kisses from hipbone to hipbone.

“I like everything we do,” Spock replied breathlessly. “Jim…. Spock relinquished his hold on Kirk’s head and snaked one hand down to encircle the base of his own penis. “Please…."

Oh, God, Spock really wanted it this morning. Kirk’s arousal doubled. He instantly considered different scenarios that might best fulfill the simple physical yearning he heard. What would Spock love the most? Maybe something that they didn’t do too often, didn’t usually have the time or energy for. Now he really wanted to hear Spock shout….

He grabbed both of his lover’s hips. “Over,” he commanded. “Roll over.”

Without a word Spock complied, though he had to reach to adjust himself against the sheet. Kirk was presented with the narrow albeit powerful shoulders, the trim back, the slightly furrowed skin over the chenesi, and the neat, tight buttocks. He knew that Spock wouldn’t want to be penetrated again so soon after the previous night, as that might make him sore, but something else drew him.

“I think this will be okay,” he murmured as he leaned over and parted the ass cheeks to expose the wrinkled hole he had been inside last night. In the faint light of their morning bedroom he could barely see it, but he knew its greenish cast and how it was probably now contracting with surprise and anticipation.

Oh, yes, Spock did like his tongue there, if the utter stillness of his lover’s body was any indication. Kirk kneaded both ass cheeks with his fingers as he dabbed at the center.

“That is…” Spock’s labored voice started, “…quite…oh…..”

Kirk abruptly pulled back as a long ripple made its way down Spock’s back, lifting his ass and then settling it on the bed as he thrust once, mightily. “Don’t do that,” Kirk said in alarm. “You’ll give me a bloody lip.”

“If you were not engaged in such a stimulating activity,” Spock accused faintly, his head tensely turned on the pillow and his eyes slitted as if to limit their sensory input, “I would not be compelled to move.”
“Want me to stop?” Kirk asked with a grin.

“I did not exactly say that.”

And Kirk did not exactly want to stop, either, not when he was having such a delicious effect on his bedmate. Anything that aroused Spock was a good thing in his mind, and he returned to the wet caresses. He enjoyed the contrast of the different textures of skin against his tongue tip: the smooth flow of the curve of the buttock leading and narrowing to the puckered muscle of the sphincter, so strong and yet so yielding when it opened to him, his needs and passion. A strong wave of gratitude and love washed over Kirk as he spread the ass cheeks wider and managed to run the flat of his tongue again and again over this entry to Spock’s body—and the source of so much pleasure for him. That the so-formal, so-correct, and so-inaccessible Vulcan first officer who had stood on the bridge as they warped out of orbit on the first day of the mission allowed him this liberty…. Kirk paused in his labors, remembering, and then he pressed a gentle kiss on Spock’s ass. He lingered there. His devotion and attraction to Spock were compounded of many things, but it seemed he would always experience the thrill of the mysterious and the unknown, only because Spock willingly gave that to him…. And he could give Spock a lot in return, including this joy of the body. He went back to the target of his efforts, tonguing to the rhythm of his lover’s accelerating breaths. After several otherwise silent minutes, he glanced up to see both of Spock’s hands gripping the pillow and his eyes shut tight as if in pain. Not really pain, though.

He doubted that he would be able to keep himself so still if Spock were doing this to him, and he grabbed himself again and stroked several times. God, he was close, and if he didn’t watch out he’d be splattering all over Spock’s ass before his time. So he concentrated instead on long wet swipes across the delicious curve, crossing over and then up, and then with deliberate kisses that brought his mouth back to the center.

And that was apparently as much as Spock could tolerate. With a warning grunt that Kirk was able to easily interpret, Spock heaved up onto his hands and knees.

“Touch me!” Spock commanded in a deep, almost guttural voice that sent shivers down Kirk’s spine. “Touch me!”

Kirk did more than that, he began to suck-kiss the chenesi as he grabbed the weeping cock. His own erection was aching-hard against Spock’s leg, pushing against it strongly, he was just on the edge….

But still Spock was ahead of him, and with an inarticulate cry that was the satisfying shout Kirk had wanted, Spock shuddered all over and flooded Kirk’s hand with his orgasm.

“Oh, yeah, lover,” Kirk murmured as the spasms shook the beloved body, the beloved mind and soul, and as he rode sympathetically on Spock’s back. Moments later Spock collapsed to the bed, and Kirk followed him, then rolled them both over onto their sides and gathered his panting lover into his arms.

“You” he declared, “are fantastic,” and he kissed Spock’s shoulder loudly.

After a minute, Spock had the breath to respond. He turned over and seriously said, “I would like to see more of you.”

“What?”

“You are not yet satisfied, although you were stimulating yourself freely. Would you do that—more of that—for me?”
Kirk looked at him blankly, trying to assimilate a request that hadn’t come much before, but as soon as he did, there was nothing he wanted more. To bring himself to the peak before Spock’s devouring eyes…. His hand was stroking as he rolled over onto his back. He watched as Spock went up on one elbow and leaned over him, and he wanted to capture that gaze and hold it, but he’d been hard for too long, and so his eyes closed as he concentrated on the sensations sweeping through him.

It seemed, though, that Spock couldn’t resist him. A wet mouth descended on his nipple and made him jump and then moan.

“Spock!” Accusing and half-laughing.

And then a sure hand was on his balls, under them and feeling their contraction, and Kirk felt the first wave of ecstasy gathering, gathering…. When a single finger assuredly breached his sphincter, that was more than enough to put him explosively over the edge. He cried out and pushed his cock one final time through his tightening fingers, but then insistent Vulcan lips muted his voice.

He opened his eyes as Spock pulled back and gave him the ability to breathe again. “You,” he said with feeling, “are evil.”

“Please do not subscribe to racial stereotypes. The pointed ears do not go with a pitchfork or a tail.”

Kirk laughed happily and stretched as far as he could, with his palms against the headboard. “Oh, God, I could eat a horse. Or run a marathon.” His arms came down and he wrestled a very willing Spock onto his back, rolling over on top of him and looking into the face he was delighted to wake up to in the mornings. “Three times in less than twenty-four hours. This is the way to live.”

“It would be pleasing to continue this schedule, would it not?”

“You want it as much as I do. Who could have known that my quiet Vulcan was going to be a demon in bed?”

“It is providential that our sex drives appear to be well matched,” Spock said complacently—and with some self-satisfaction. “It would have been unfortunate if my demands on you had exceeded your own desires.”

“Huh. Not likely.” He regarded the sparkling eyes and the uneven line of bangs, and a pang of affection overtook him, compounded of satisfied lust and all that the two of them were ignoring this morning. “Hey,” he said, and he ran his fingers through the short strands of his lover’s hair. “You do know that I love you, don’t you?”

Spock smiled with his eyes and nodded. “I know, Jim.”

“Good. Then let’s get going. Analysis and evaluation of the events in Paris awaits us.” He swung his legs over the side of the bed as a hunger pain contracted his stomach. “After breakfast, that is.”

Once they had showered and were dressing, Kirk discovered another reason why Spock had stayed in bed; he was limping much worse than the day before. Kirk froze in the middle of stepping into his briefs and glared at his stubborn Vulcan. He flashed back to the demanding position they’d used the previous night and the strain that had undoubtedly put on the injured knee. Arousal had caught him and smothered his objections that common sense had prompted; he doubted that Spock would have listened to him anyway.

Spock favored him with a raised eyebrow that dared Kirk to comment, and then he noticeably—in a deliberately exaggerated manner, to make a point—limped into the bathroom, presenting Kirk
with his neat backside as he did. Kirk shook his head and went back to dressing as he uncharitably thought *it serves him right*. Still, McCoy would have just cause to complain that the commodore wasn’t taking very good care of the commander, but who could compel Spock to do anything when he was set on something else? As soon ask the Earth to stop spinning. Kirk didn’t try to stifle a sudden grin as he shrugged into a blue cotton shirt and tucked it into a well-worn pair of jeans. He rather liked Spock’s stubbornness, though he wouldn’t admit it out loud. His Vulcan was not an easy man to convince—or to cross. Strong, opinionated, sure of himself…and yet at the core of him, he needed Kirk. Wanted him. Kirk had seen it in their melds, and he remembered with a stab of longing how they’d fit together in that world.

He glanced at where the prosaic sounds of tooth brushing were coming from the bathroom and suppressed the sudden worry that threatened to spoil the mood they’d created in bed. He wouldn’t let himself consider it: that all the wonder that was Spock might be lost. He wouldn’t face that pain.

They hadn’t yet had the time to stock any fresh food in the kitchen—Spock commented that they should add that to the weekly chores of the household engineer that Unifalawa was hiring for them—and so they made do with a replicated meal that even so was of a higher quality than what they’d typically consumed on the *Enterprise*.

“I recall,” Spock said as he put his dish in the recycler, “that you once mentioned your mother made excellent waffles.”

“I did? Well, she does.”

“Not replicated? Not frozen? From primary ingredients?”

“She even has an antique waffle iron that her grandmother used. Why?”

“I cannot imagine your mother being so domestic,” Spock said flatly, as he stepped aside to allow Kirk to place his dishware and cutlery to be cleaned, too.

“It was a long time ago,” Kirk admitted. “One of my childhood memories. We’ll have to give her the chance to prove she can still do it someday.”

“That will be interesting.”

They made their way along the short hall to Kirk’s office on the first floor, larger than Spock’s upstairs and with a computer just as capable of accessing the basic information they needed. Two narrow ceiling-to-floor windows offered the signs of late autumn in big leafless bushes and a few small, golden-leafed trees in the corner of their backyard. The grass was browning, too, but the sky promised a beautiful day, nevertheless.

Without comment Kirk lifted the few unpacked boxes in the room over to one corner, under the small round table there, as Spock settled carefully in the plush office chair before the computer. Kirk had specified no leather furniture in the house because of Spock’s sensibilities, and he felt sure that the brown-cushioned chairs—which matched in color the over-sized, heavy sweater that Spock had donned for the day—were synth-leather instead. Then Kirk swiveled an armless chair-on-wheels around so he could sit backwards on it at his scientist’s side. He clamped his lips over a comment about the knee as Spock extended his leg as straight as he could.

First Spock called up their mailboxes and skimmed through the subject lines. Silently he opened one entitled “Itinerary for Ethical Standards Meeting on Luna: Prime Directive Evaluation.”
“A full two days out of our schedule for a two hour session. What a waste of time,” Kirk lamented.

“There are political reasons, as you well know, for conducting the meeting on Luna.”

“Sometimes there are more important issues than politics.”

Spock raised a brow. “Not to the politicians. And as a wise individual once said, all of life is negotiation and compromise, and that is the art of politics.”

“You are your father’s son.”

“Occasionally, yes, although I would ask you not to stretch the comparison too far. While we are on Luna, perhaps you will find the time to visit the Featherstone Museum. You once expressed a desire to do so.”

“I did?” Kirk regarded his lover fondly. “You spoil me, you know. Do you remember all my desires? Besides the carnal ones, that is.”

“I endeavor to provide you with the emotional support you expect from an intimate partner,” Spock said primly.

“And you succeed. Now, let’s hope that the announcement is what we expect it to be.”

“There can be little doubt of that. Shall we continue?”

While Spock brought up the additional data that the team in Paris had uncovered during the day he’d been away, Kirk allowed some satisfaction over finally having the time to start this analysis. This responsibility, this not-knowing had been hanging over his head from the moment he had realized the president of the Federation was in danger and he’d roughly jostled him across the stage. It had been weeks now and still there were no official answers coming out of Paris, and his frustration had compounded with each day. Now, at last, maybe he could do something to relieve it.

The screen filled with numbers. “This is raw data,” Kirk said. “Where’s—” Spock opened another file with synthesis and conclusions.

“This is the twice weekly report from the site to Starfleet Security.” They both read without comment for several minutes. Spock silently called up the previous reports, printed them out and handed them over to Kirk.

Eventually Kirk dropped the sheaf of papers to the floor and pinched the bridge of his nose. “This information goes to the task force that’s been set up to investigate. Three fleet admirals, one commodore, and fourteen politicians. I’m not reassured.”

“As you are aware, much depends upon the composition of the staff.”

Kirk sketched a smile. “Yes, as a commander who was served by the best staff in Starfleet, I am aware of that. Okay, then we assume the staff is competent.”

“If you had not been needed in Operations, you should have been appointed to this group. Your experience suits you to it.”

“Any command crew from a starship is accustomed to dealing with events like this in the field. How many times were we attacked by dissident groups while negotiating with a planetary government?”
“Six times in four and one-half years.”

“Point made. You should be on this task force, too.”

“So you say. But since neither of us is, we will function as a duplicate entity instead.”

Kirk looked directly at him. “I’m serious about this, Spock. It was my promotion ceremony that somehow triggered the attack. Responsibility goes with that.”

“I understand.”

“Let’s review what we’ve got so far,” Kirk said. He ticked off one finger. “One, from the damage done and the fragments recovered, we know that the bomb isn’t a bomb at all but an explosive used for civil engineering work. Blasting through terrain for construction.”

“That is also the conclusion from the reports of eyewitnesses who saw the device materialize. I am one.”

“Me, too, though I was never interviewed for whatever information I can give. Do we know specifically what it was?”

“Computer, display image of explosive from Paris.” A schematic of a rotating cylinder came to life on the screen. Kirk recognized it and his lips tightened.

“A device of this type. This is the unfortunately named Terrainblaster TB-3A. There are several other types similar to it.”

“And where would somebody get this?”

“Because the probability of an offworld source is so low, I have confined my speculations to Earth. On Earth it would not be difficult to obtain for a determined individual. The output of factories that produce such explosives is monitored, each unit is embedded with an ID chip, and once in the hands of the contractors reports must be made on usage and inventory. I have spent some time tracking such reports. However, you and I both know these requirements are easily circumvented.”

“So it could have been stolen.”

“Or, more likely, the device was sent straight from the factory to an unknown user. Theft might not be involved if malfeasance occurred at a more basic level.”

Spock didn’t make comments like that unless he had reason to. “Any evidence of that?”

“Computer, display factory file from Melbourne.” An instant later the screen changed. “These are records from a plant in Australia.”

“You suspect them?”

“If I were attempting to transfer explosive material without detection, I would set up the records in precisely this way. However, if that is what has happened, those involved have been successful, because I cannot point to any data as evidence. This may be coincidence.”

“Hmmm. The world seems full of it, but…. Have the investigators followed through on this yet?”

“My suppositions have not been met with much enthusiasm from the site team or from Commodore Beldon, the team commander. I would wish to submit a separate report to the task force on this and at least one other issue, but I am restraining myself until the appropriate time, when my further
investigations may yield more information.”

“They’re ignoring your recommendations?” Kirk asked, genuinely startled.

Spock considered. “Rather, let us say that I have not yet managed to convince others that my particular line of inquiry is fruitful.”

“Idiots.”

The Vulcan lips showed the faintest hint of amusement. “I would not have said that.”

“Which is why you have me to say it for you. What’s their counter theory?”

“At this time, outright theft, but they have no specific suspect nor original manufacturer pinpointed.”

Kirk nodded, his mind racing ahead. He gestured at the screen. “So, what else?”

“We may be able to recover DNA fragments from whoever handled the bomb, but it will take many months for such painstaking research, if we are successful at all. The site itself is severely degraded and contaminated.”

“I know. But what’s the probability that you’ll be able to come up with identifying markers of some sort?”

“Relatively high. Over sixty percent.”

Kirk fingered his upper lip. “Then that explains why the task force is willing to go slowly. They figure eventually they’ll get good data to work from.”

“But with no guarantee that it will lead us to the perpetrators,” Spock pointed out. “And in the meantime—”

“There’s a threat hanging over the Federation. Assuming the Federation was the target.” Kirk lightly pounded one fist against his thigh, then swung up from his chair and in his frustration paced to the doorway, a matter of five quick strides, and then back. “It’s not like on the ship, is it?”

“On the ship I endeavored to give you sufficient information as expeditiously as possible, to enable you to make informed decisions.”

Kirk’s hand fell to his erstwhile first officer’s shoulder. “I know. You did it all the time. We’re stuck here with less than sufficient information and in a system that moves more slowly than we’re used to.”

“We did not often have the luxury of time during our active service.”

“And I’m not sure we have it here.” Kirk stretched by pushing against his lower back. “For now let’s approach this problem from a different angle. How the explosive was transported.”

Spock steepled his fingers. “I have devoted considerable time to that issue, as has the rest of Beldon’s team. We appear to have reached an impasse.”

“How come?”

“While we understand the mechanisms of the explosive device, the current transporting system, and the shielding over the hall, we do not understand how those shields were breached by any type
of transporter currently in use. There is not even a theoretical proposal that would cover the circumstances.”

“So you’re stymied, huh?” At one time in their service together, Kirk would have used that phrase as a not-so-veiled challenge to prod his science officer into action. Now, it was just a game they played.

“If there is one thing that life on the Enterprise taught me, it is how to extrapolate from insufficient data.”

Kirk grinned. He remembered the early days on the bridge when sometimes he’d had to force his science officer beyond the facts into speculation. “You mean how to make a guess.”

“More than a guess when an informed mind prompts it,” Spock said severely.

“So. Should I make a guess here and suppose that you have another proposal that Beldon doesn’t endorse?”

“Beldon,” Spock sniffed, “is not an imaginative man. There is a popular quotation from the works of Arthur Conan Doyle with which I am familiar from my youth that covers this situa—”

Kirk interrupted him. “Sarek let you read Sherlock Holmes?” Kirk sat again, this time facing forward with his elbows on his knees.

“As an exercise in human logic. And the lack thereof. If I may continue?”

“By all means.”

“‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.’ The esteemed detective utters it in a short novel entitled The Sign of the Four.”

“And it means?”

“Commodore Beldon’s team, of which I am a member—”

“Reluctantly,” Kirk couldn’t resist interrupting.

Spock ignored him. “—is working on the assumption that new technology has been developed by one of the Federation’s enemies that is capable of circumventing the shielding at Friendship Hall. They propose the existence of a new method of transporting matter that does not use the same matrix as our conventional transporter system.”

“And you reject that. Why?”

“I see no sound theoretical basis for it or evidence that such a device has been used elsewhere, as it seems to me it would have been by now. And the team has been consistently unsuccessful in their attempts at formulating a theory. Although it is quite early in the life of the investigation, I believe there is a reason for that. No such theory is possible. At this point in our understanding of the structure of matter and the energy fields of which our universe is constructed, any modification of the transporter must involve the gamma boson and the neutrino at its base. Neutrino emission measured at the time of the blast, however, showed no change from the expected.”

Kirk contemplated this information and Spock patiently waited for him. But before he could bring forth the thought that was teasing at the back of his mind, he was interrupted by the house computer.
“There is a visitor at the front door.”

“Again?”

Spock swiveled his chair somewhat awkwardly. Kirk could hear the creak of the knee brace. “Computer, can you identify who is present at the front door?”

“Maeve McLaughlin.”

Spock asked the obvious question. “Do you know a Ms. McLaughlin? A significant acquaintance you have not yet mentioned to me?”

Kirk rolled his eyes and stood. “Stop it. Not every woman we encounter is a former lover. Computer, identify Maeve McLaughlin.”

“Maeve McLaughlin is in residence at 2116 Fortuna Street.”

“I will remain here while—” Spock began.

Kirk caught his arm. “Oh, no, you don’t.”

“Jim, my knee—”

“—must be okay because you wouldn’t have been so unwise as to do anything to hurt it. C’mon, this is one of the requirements of being a homeowner.”

Despite his annoyance at the disturbance, Kirk was hard put to keep a straight face when they opened the door on their tall, anorexic neighbor holding, unmistakably, a cake. He glanced at Spock, whose expression was priceless.

“Yes?” Kirk said, trying to make it sound like they hadn’t been debating the fate of the Federation and she was interrupting. That was another adjustment they were going to have to make while on Earth; people kept living their lives no matter what.

A few moments later McLaughlin was shaking Spock’s hand as vigorously as she could. The sparkle in her eyes showed she was entranced to be actually in the presence of a Vulcan, and a famous one at that. Spock responded to her with the same consideration he had extended to both potentates and peasants, but Kirk could tell by the look they exchanged over the woman’s shoulder that he was amused.

Kirk was amused even more when she shyly placed the plate into Spock’s hands. “It’s chocolate with peppermint icing, a family favorite. I baked it myself,” she explained. Spock didn’t bat an eye, though Kirk knew that Spock actively avoided the flavor. Something about the Vulcan digestive system and mint didn’t mix.

“Thank you,” Spock said in his courtly way that usually made the recipients of his words believe that all his considerable attention was focused exclusively on them. Kirk knew better.

Common courtesy demanded that they spend at least a short while conversing with her, though it was obvious that she was intent on satisfying her burning curiosity about her in-the- news neighbors. Kirk politely escorted her to the sofa and then sat next to her, and Spock sat on her other side, holding the cake in his lap as if it were a much-pampered pet and completing a tableau that Kirk thought bordered on the ridiculous. He mentally allotted her fifteen minutes. It was early in the morning and they still had many hours to continue their analysis; they could give her a little of their time.
Spock wasn’t so patient. He only granted their visitor ten minutes and started the “getting her to leave” maneuvers in advance of Kirk’s agenda.

“We’ll have to talk sometime about our experiences with Vegan choriomeningitis,” McLaughlin said to Kirk as Spock courteously opened the door—wide—and held it open. He had abandoned the plate on the entry table.

“Yes, we will,” Kirk lied. She wasn’t a boring or unsophisticated woman—she was assistant curator at a downtown museum—it was just that he had no interest in the life she led; and he had better things to do right now.

She extended her hand. “So nice to meet you, Commodore. And you, too, Commander Spock. I can see that we’ll be good neighbors.”

Kirk stepped forward, which forced her outside. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Ms. McLaughlin. Thank you for the cake. Good-bye.”

She waved and started towards her own home. Kirk stood on the top step and nodded at her, then took in a deep lungful of the crisp air and surveyed the scene. The houses to either side of them and across the street were well-kept with trimmed trees and bushes in the side yards and the tiny strips of lawn in front. There was the nip of cooler weather to come teasing his nose and the hint of the ocean miles away. This was the way he remembered San Francisco from years ago.

Two ground cars rolled almost-silently along the narrow street: the latest models, Kirk noticed, as his eyes followed them. He hadn’t planned on getting a car of any kind, though if they did, he’d want one of the latest air vehicles, maybe a Model Ten sedan. He didn’t know if Spock would be interested.

McLaughlin’s door closed as she re-entered her home on the right side of their own house. Bones’s Italian restaurant was in that direction and a man walking a big dog. The figure of a jogger in red was moving further away, and Kirk was reminded that he’d have to reinstitute an exercise program, soon, or he’d lose the muscle tone he’d worked for years to maintain.

And that was enough of this small mental vacation and distraction, Kirk decided. He was still amused at their neighbor, though. The universe was full of characters.

He closed the door and leaned back against it, folding his arms across his chest. Spock was in the middle of the living room, standing by the sofa with patience. “We have too many questions,” Kirk said decisively. “There’s a reason why your site team hasn’t gotten any closer to identifying the perpetrators. We could spend all day going through your data, discussing it, and we still wouldn’t get any further than the questions.”

“That is my opinion as well.”

“We need different data. New data.”

“You have considered, then, that it is possible that the target was not only the Federation, but you as well.”

After all these years of thinking their way through problems, Spock had easily followed his leap in logic. “That’s right. It’s worth testing.”

“If your supposition is correct, then a great many people died in the attackers’ effort to reach you, while they failed in their primary objective. It does not seem likely.”
“I don’t mean I was the only target. But we can’t ignore the possibility that I’m wrapped up in their motives somehow. I’ve been awfully visible on the vidwaves the last few months, Spock. Maybe somebody hit the saturation point.”

“I do not wish to see you deliberately expose yourself to danger.”

“Not danger. Just find a way to be more visible. To test the theory and see if someone reacts by going after me. I’ve been practically buried in Ops.”

“May I point out that the perpetrators were able to transport an explosive device into one of the most thoroughly shielded rooms on the planet? We do not know what else they may be capable of. They are capable of mass murder. They would not stop at killing one more individual.”

“There was something about Federation Day being celebrated with my promotion that created a window of opportunity for somebody. Prompted them to act. I don’t think I’m barking up the wrong tree here, but even if I am, a negative response still gives us information.”

Spock regarded him with a lifted brow. “I will not debate with you the activities of canines in a forested area.” He began to limp back to the office and Kirk followed him, still talking.

“And you won’t debate with me that this is a good idea either, will you?”

“I am not sanguine about using you as bait….”

“But?”

“But we are debating in a vacuum. We do not have the authority or the power to present you in a public way outside of Operations.”

Once again Spock sat down gingerly in the chair before the computer. Kirk resolutely took a seat and rolled it closer, convinced he had hold of a good idea.

“Then we’ll convince—”

This time he was interrupted by the soft chiming of the comm signal.

“A call for Commander Spock.”

“Oh, for the Bard’s sake. This is getting ridiculous.”

“Spock here.”

The figure of a round-faced man in a gold uniform tunic formed on the computer screen. “Beldon here, Commander. There’s been a change in plans. Are you still in San Francisco?”

Kirk, who’d been poised to give his lover privacy, settled back in his chair. His irritation at the interruption faded; both of them were accustomed to the demands of the service co-opting their free time. And he was interested in this Beldon, who didn’t realize the treasure he had with Spock on his team. The man must be no judge of character or talent.

“Yes, sir.”

“Starfleet’s called a meeting in one hour to discuss change in alert status and they want a report from my team. I’m tied up right now; I’ve got a conference with the task force ballistics subcommittee, and that’s got to come first. This function with ’fleet is only politics, and I don’t want to release anybody here who’s doing valuable work for a meaningless meeting. So I want you
to go in my place. You’ll know how to deal with this at least, given who your father is.”

A short beat while Spock absorbed the back-handed insults. “Of course, Commodore.”

“And I want you to present the facts, just the facts, and the agreed upon interpretations that have been in the task force reports. Not any flights of fancy colored by your five years out in the back of beyond. Those sorts of things don’t happen on Earth.”

“Of course not, Commodore.”

Beldon stared across the kilometers that separated them. “Of course not—what?”

Spock actually sighed. “I will represent the site team as you direct, Commodore.”

“Good. The meeting’s in the Sammons building at ten hundred hours San Fran time, so get moving. Beldon out.”

Spock punched the line closed and Kirk tried hard to swallow his indignation. He didn’t succeed. “Where the hell does that jackass get off talking to you like that? You’ve got double his experience, four times his knowledge—”

“Perhaps you expect me to compare medals and citations with the commodore?”

Kirk wouldn’t be deflected. “If you did, you’d win, hands down. Spock, what he said about your father—”

“It is common knowledge that Sarek is one of the most influential members of the Council and has been for many years. It is logical for the commodore to expect that I have absorbed some expertise in political maneuvering from him.”

Kirk snorted. “You have less patience with politics than I do.”

“But I dissemble better.”

Kirk had to laugh at that. “Yes, you do. And I know how to use politics to my advantage when I need to. But—”

“Jim. Just because you live the life you do, and hold the values that you hold, does not mean that others are the same.”

And suddenly Kirk saw the point, saw that the life Spock and other non-human ‘fleet members lived depended, at least in part, on the attitudes of the numerous humans around them.

“‘Fleet integrated the Enterprise two years ago—”

“And as a result the Eternists have grown in power. That is not a coincidence. People are frightened of change. All people, humans included.”

Kirk’s lips tightened. “Beldon’s an asshole.”

“Really, Commodore. Such language—”

“Is perfectly descriptive. He’s got such a charming personality. But I’m glad to see I don’t have any competition from him.”

Spock awkwardly got to his feet and pulled him up into a fierce embrace. Kirk didn’t object to
being so manhandled; Spock’s strength had never intimidated him.

“You know very well you have no competition at all from anyone,” Spock said low and intensely.
“The image of Commodore Beldon in my bed is revolting, and I would appreciate it if you did not conjure such visions in the future.”

Kirk laughed and smacked a kiss loudly onto his ear. “It doesn’t have to be him in your bed. I’ll volunteer. But you don’t have time for an afternoon delight. Or rather, a morning delight.”

“Another morning delight,” Spock corrected. “Regrettably, I agree. I must find my dress uniform and gather the appropriate materials I will need.” Spock released him and began to limp towards the door. Before he went far, though, the comm chimed again.

“A call for Commodore Kirk.”

“We are uncommonly popular this morning,” Spock commented.

Kirk punched in the connection. The image of Admiral Nkapa formed.

The old warrior dispensed with pleasantries. “Kirk. There’s a meeting at ten hundred hours at HQ that I need you to attend…."

*****

They lost no time in donning their dress uniforms—along with the standard issue short jacket for Spock—and making their way the few blocks to the local transporter station. Spock’s limp seemed to diminish as they walked so that by the time they reached headquarters it was hardly apparent at all. Kirk didn’t know if that was because of willpower or genuine healing.

The attendant on duty was the same woman who’d beamed Kirk in the day before, and she nodded to both of them as if they were old acquaintances. San Francisco’s metropolitan transporter system was an older version of what they’d had on the ship, and the whine that signaled power-up and then imminent dissolution was just a tone off from what Kirk was accustomed to. He closed his eyes as if hearing a discordant squeak instead of a reliable machine doing its job, felt that instant of almost-disorientation and then the solidity of his own body again. He opened his eyes to the dimly-lit basement station of the seventy-two story centerpiece of the headquarters complex.

This was where power was concentrated. Most of their debriefings, conducted by boards of senior officers, had taken place in the floors above. Operations had its administrative offices here, although the command center where Kirk was working during the emergency was situated underground closer to the edge of the campus.

Even in the corridors of the basement, headquarters had an air of emergency to it, as if it were operating under a state of siege. People hurried along briskly with tight lips. Security was tight. They had to submit to retinal scans shortly after they left the transporter pads. After they were cleared, they were hailed by a familiar voice.

“Jim. Commander Spock. Wait a minute.”

It was Bob Wesley, approaching from a long passageway that connected from another building on the HQ campus. He was accompanied by a pretty blonde woman who barely came up to the tall commodore’s chin.

“Bob. I’m glad you came through unscathed,” Kirk said sincerely as he shook Wesley’s hand. He’d scrutinized the lists of casualties and had known Wesley hadn’t been killed, but it was still
reassuring to see his hearty face again.

“Only a few scratches,” Wesley assured. He nodded to Spock and then gestured towards his companion as the group of them moved out of the path of traffic. “Remember I wanted you to meet Lori before, at the reception? This is Commander Lori Ciani, my first assistant in Strategic Procurement and Design. Commander, let me introduce Commodore Jim Kirk, a good friend and ‘fleet’s wonder boy.”

Ciani briskly offered her hand. “How do you do, Commodore,” she said. “Of course I know about your many accomplishments. Congratulations on your promotion.” She gave the impression of a supremely competent officer, someone he’d probably welcome around the briefing room table… and pretty enough to have tempted him, in a previous life, to invite her into his bed as well.

Except that he didn’t bed his officers. With one notable exception.

“A pleasure to meet you,” he said sincerely, for he did appreciate the way she filled out her tunic and black slacks, the de rigueur uniform for women at Headquarters. He would have noticed her figure on any street in the Federation. “May I introduce my partner and former first officer, Commander Spock?”

She reacted graciously to this, the very first time he’d introduced Spock that way and acknowledged their relationship in public.

“I have heard of you, of course, Commander.” She offered the Vulcan taal in greeting.

Spock returned the gesture. Kirk couldn’t tell what he thought of the introduction but didn’t think he minded.

“I have also heard that you are effective in your position here, Commander.”

“Thank you, but, please, call me Lori, both of you. Commodore Kirk, I understand that you’ve already been initiated into the pleasures of old-fashioned ice hockey.”

Kirk looked the question at Wesley, who shrugged. “What can I say? Jeanine won’t go with me and Lori loves it. She went to one game with me as a mercy and now she’s hooked.”

“I am. I love it.”

Kirk warmed to her genuine enthusiasm. “I haven’t seen the sport in years. Only air hockey is broadcast, so at least for that we could catch the final series on the ship.”

“You did? I’m surprised, considering how far from the center of the Federation you usually were.”

“You’d be surprised what starship techno-wizards managed to pull in,” Wesley joked. “I would have had a mutiny on the Lexington if we hadn’t caught the Olympics.”

“I know what you mean,” Kirk said with feeling. “We had an active betting pool on those. My chief engineer—Bob, you know Scotty—he and I bet good credits each year on the air hockey playoffs. But unfortunately ice hockey doesn’t have the same broadcast contracts.”

“Which is a shame, because ice hockey’s great,” said Ciani. “The Sharks have a new goalie this year, a rookie who’s already played four shutouts.”

“Bouldelar,” Wesley agreed with a nod. “The team brought him up from the minors for the season, two years early. A little bit like you, Jim, he’s a wunderkind.”
“That’s right,” Ciani said, who looked at Kirk with admiration in her eyes. “Someone whose talents they couldn’t ignore. Bouldelar has adjusted to the old-fashioned game perfectly. Hockey is better in its pure, original form, don’t you think?”

“Definitely. The grav boots and boosters make air hockey a totally different experience.”

“Which is fortunate for the players,” Spock put in, “who are not subject to broken bones or ruptured muscles, as they would be while playing the more traditional form of the sport.”

Ciani regarded him with sympathy. “I see you are one of the unconverted. Pardon us, there’s nothing more boring than being forced to listen to the conversation of sports enthusiasts.”

“On the contrary, I am pleased that Jim has found fellow…. I believe the term is ‘fans.’ Perhaps he will accompany you to a game.”

“If things ever calm down around here, yes,” she agreed. “I’d especially appreciate the company when Bob is busy at home.”

“It will be my pleasure,” Kirk said. He smiled at Spock, liking the confidence that the suggestion represented.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like to come to a game yourself, Commander? Just to give it a try?” Ciani queried.

“I believe I will forego that opportunity.”

“I can understand that,” Wesley put in. “It’s a violent sport, and Vulcans and physical violence are a philosophical mismatch.”

Ciani looked uncertainly from Kirk to Spock and back again. “That’s true. Are you sure you’re interested in attending….”

Kirk caught her unspoken question and answered easily. “Spock and I are accustomed to agreeing to disagree. We’ve had our opposing points of view before on the ship.”

“I can imagine,” Wesley said with feeling. “I’m not sure I would have been up to having a Vulcan —and his logically delivered opinions—as my first. But I guess you two managed.”

“Obviously,” Kirk said dryly.

Ciani gave a gurgle of amusement and put a hand to her mouth. The action transformed her from a serious if enthusiastic officer to an even more attractive woman who was younger than he had first assumed. She must be talented to have achieved commander’s rank at her age. He grinned at her, enjoying the freedom of the conversation and admiring the way her blonde hair gleamed in the artificial light. Spock was surveying them all placidly.

“Then we’ll call it a…I mean, next time our schedules match and the team’s playing, I’d be happy to go with you. You too, Bob. And Spock doesn’t care if he misses out.”

“Indeed. I am sure I will find far more congenial ways to pass my time.”

“IDIC,” Wesley agreed. “So,” he continued, turning to Kirk, “what brings you here? I thought you were buried in the Ops Center.”

“I am, but we’re on a two day leave. Or we were. Both of us have been called to give reports at this
alert status meeting."

“That’s where I’m headed, too, though I know it’s a waste of time.”

“Nevertheless, procedures require it,” Spock put in. “And there are times when such meetings can be useful.”

Kirk nodded. “You’re right. Come on, let’s go.”

The four of them made their way to a turbo and waited for it to arrive. Wesley took the opportunity to address Spock. “Commander, the position of administrator for the transwarp project is still open, and I think you’re the best man for the job. I’d welcome you to my staff. You understand the science and you have superb administrative skills, as anybody who’s ever seen your ratings from the Enterprise knows. I’ve lobbied for you.”

“I appreciate your support, Commodore.”

The turbo arrived and they entered the car. “Floor fifty-two,” Spock ordered.

“Floor twenty-one,” Wesley put in.

Kirk continued the conversation. “You should know that Spock’s working on a theory that would throw your prototype out the window.”

“I know, you told me that before. Spock, I’m sure we could convince you that our science is sound.”

“I hope to be given the opportunity, Commodore. Lacking that, I would advise your people to direct their attention to the gravitational constant and its fluctuations within a Graves Gravitational Mass, data collected by the Enterprise on stardate 7912.3.”

Wesley blinked. “But the gravitational constant can’t fluctuate, can it? That’s the point of being a constant.”

“So one would think. However, the data recently gathered does not necessarily confirm such an assumption.”

“That’s…interesting. I’ll have somebody check into that.” The turbo slowed and Wesley and Ciani prepared to leave. “I’ll see you two upstairs. Lori’s not cleared for this meeting, but I need to get a tape from the office.”

Kirk nodded. “Bob, we’ll set up a hockey date, okay? Lori, good to meet you.”

She nodded and the doors closed on the two of them alone in the lift. Kirk surveyed his lover, trim and handsome in his glossy blue tunic, and said, quietly, “Just don’t make a habit of throwing me into the arms of beautiful women, okay?”

“I have great confidence in your strength of will,” Spock said serenely.

The turbo stopped to let a tall Canopan in, went up a few floors and stopped again to let her out. A more familiar figure in everyday science blue joined them.

“Mister Spock!” Lieutenant Irina Hunyady said, her throaty voice rich with authentic pleasure. “How good to see you, sir. And Commodore Kirk. I was so relieved to know you both survived the blast.”
“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Spock answered for both of them. Hunyady, whom Spock had once characterized to Kirk as the most competent young scientist on the ship, had become the first officer’s protégé without Spock quite being aware of how it had happened, and Kirk had been amused by her brilliance and outgoing personality finding a way to interact with the Vulcan, whom she regarded second only to her steady-as-a-rock husband. Taking a step back in the turbo with a sliver of a smile, Kirk surrendered the conversational duties to the mismatched admirers.

“We were also pleased to note your own survival—and that of Lieutenant Dawson as well.”

Her face fell. “Yes. Well…. I guess you haven’t heard the news.”

“No, Lieutenant, we have not.”

“It’s not so…. Just to Brian and me. I lost the baby.”

Kirk had barely been aware that she had been pregnant, but he was able to understand some small part of the sorrow she must be feeling. Into the silence he said, “I’m sorry to hear that, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you,” she said simply.

“I grieve with thee,” Spock said.

Hunyady lifted her downcast face. “I knew you would. We’ll try again. But I do truly grieve for that little girl. Hajna, that’s her name.”

“Can I presume it was the explosion that caused the miscarriage?”

“Affirmative.” She smiled sadly and flipped a lock of her long auburn hair over her shoulder. “I mean, yes. Sometimes I forget I’m not in the lab reporting to you, sir. It’s an adjustment.”

“As it is for us all, Lieutenant.”

The turbo slowed as it approached floor fifty-two and she turned to Kirk. “I don’t know if I ever really had the chance to say…. Sir, it was an honor serving on your vessel. The media accounts… they don’t express the half of it. You saved so many lives in so many ways. And best of all, I never saw you give up. Many of the crew, we’d love to serve with you again if we ever get the opportunity.”

Kirk murmured, “Thank you, Lieutenant,” just before they exited. He tucked her words, heartfelt, into his memory. He’d heard many plaudits from many sources, and he was accustomed to praise. Hunyady’s words, though, were special. I never saw you give up. Yes, he’d always tried.

He caught Spock glancing at him as they walked along the hall. “What?”

“A most perceptive woman.”

“Of course, she adores you.”

Spock gifted him with a glimmer of understanding in his eyes, and then they were at the doorway. As he always did, the Vulcan allowed Kirk to precede him.

Function dictated design, especially in the no-nonsense world of Starfleet. This particular meeting room could have been transplanted to a starship and not been out of place, except for the fact that the table’s gray expanse would accommodate at least thirty people sitting around it in plush black chairs, and there were more molded plastic chairs along the walls for staffers. Screens were inset
on the surface of the table at each seat, too, and the central display was larger. Something else was different: the warm yellow sunlight streaming in from the bank of windows at the far end of the room. Between skyscrapers, the indeterminate gray of San Francisco bay could be seen not more than a kilometer away.

Kirk had recommended more natural holographic displays in official areas of all starships—to break the tedium of blank walls and the psychological effect of enclosed spaces—in his end-of-mission report, but he knew already he’d been vetoed. One of the men who’d disagreed with that recommendation was already there: Admiral Ted Komack was conversing with another admiral from Nogura’s small staff.

Kirk reminded himself of the new realities at headquarters. Nogura was in temporary stasis while organs were grown for transplant, and in his absence one of his five assistants, Admiral Chandrababu Yadav, had assumed acting CinC duties. But the remaining four had also stepped up, since Yadav wasn’t making a move without consultation from the group as a whole. That wasn’t the way the arrangement was supposed to work on paper, but it was the reality, Kirk knew. He and everybody else had to deal with what was virtually rule by committee. His initiation into the company of the elite—those highest ranking in Starfleet and right now the decision-makers—would be as everyone swam in uncharted waters.

Komack held far more power than he once had. An advisor to Nogura was one thing; exercising some of Nogura’s power was another. It wasn’t that Kirk didn’t trust the man, he just consistently disagreed with his decisions, his interpretation of his duty, and the way he interacted with his subordinates. And that, Kirk wryly thought, was as close to mis-trusting as you could get. A thorn by any other name….

Kirk made his way through the group already gathered, nodding, exchanging greetings, stopping twice for more extended comments, easily slipping into the alert, information-gathering, genial mode that usually worked in these situations. He could play this game with the best of them when he had to. He knew all the men in this room…and suddenly remembered Janice Lester and her vitriol. Someday people like Irina Hunyady and Lori Ciani, women Starfleeters with real talent and experience, or people like Spock or Representative Pren’felit would find their way to this room and meetings like this. There weren’t any women or non-humans here now…. Then he saw a dark-haired, dark-skinned woman sitting off to the side and was pleasantly surprised, until he realized that the lieutenant commander was the recording secretary for the meeting.

Kirk turned and there was Komack, abruptly ending his own conversation. “Jim,” he barked, as if wanting to get the name out of his mouth as quickly as possible, and he offered his hand.

The use of the first name was deliberate, an acknowledgment at last of Kirk’s recent promotion into the ranks of senior officers. Komack of all people would not violate the unwritten rules. Kirk was owed more than a handshake now; he was in the “club.”

Kirk took the hand and remembered that Komack had once predicted he’d never be promoted past “rogue captain.”

“Ted,” he nodded.

“Here for Nkapa, eh?”

“That’s right. Representing Operations.”

“Hmph” was all Komack returned, but Kirk pulled back to end their contact and the admiral stalked away to a chair.
Eventually everybody took seats around the table, and their losses from Paris were obvious when several of them remained empty. Not only the seat at the head of the table, where presumably Nogura normally presided, but all along the table green nameplates glowed, and no one sat behind them. Rao, Spandalieri, Hasselhof, Chandler. And dozens, no, hundreds more who would never attend another meeting of the service for which, for all practical purposes, they had died. Casualties to…what? They didn’t know.

The only staffers present, sitting by the wall, were the recording secretary and Commander Spock. He didn’t stay there for long, though, as after Yadav called the group to order and briskly went through the preliminaries, he ordered Spock to the table for his report “from the front,” the admiral said.

Spock had already sent his data to the HQ computer network and he capably used it to illustrate what he was saying with holographic displays. Kirk watched as he presented the team’s research so far. Spock had often proclaimed his affinity for the laboratory and his interest in pursuing purely scientific goals, but in Kirk’s opinion he was even more superbly gifted as a practical problem solver. His powers of organization and analysis were outstanding.

Spock succinctly went through the site team’s findings on the origin of the explosive device and speculation on its movement in the hall immediately before detonation—the sudden swerve to the right indicated that it was able to process real time information and was possibly controlled from afar. Then he added a summary of research on how the explosive might have been transported into the hall.

That last part of the presentation brought a skeptical snort from across the table. Admiral Sertaine commented, “Don’t we have top scientists on this project? Any fool who reads *The Scientific Federation Citizen* could tell you that’s wasted effort. We don’t need a new scientific theory about matter transportation, which will take years to formulate and then implement anyway. What we need is just enough of an insight to lead us to the perpetrators of that outrage in Paris. We are under attack and we are under siege, gentlemen, just in case anybody has forgotten it.”

Kirk looked at him with interest. He didn’t know the hawk-nosed officer who oversaw Weapons Design and Protocol, but Sertaine spoke what was on Kirk’s own mind.

“Nobody’s forgetting anything, Piers,” Wesley growled. “Especially those of us who were there.”

“And they are top scientists,” said the officer next to Kirk.

“Which doesn’t guarantee vision,” Sertaine shot back. He shifted his attention to Spock. “Does everybody on Beldon’s team buy into this research? It seems like weeks wasted if you ask me.”

“Not every member of the team is pursuing this line of inquiry, Admiral,” Spock responded.

“And who isn’t?”

Not the least bit reluctant, Spock said, “I am not.”

“You’re not, eh? I think that’s interesting.” Sertaine was of the same old school as Nkapa, though he was as thin as Nkapa was broad. “You were Kirk’s first, weren’t you? You did good work with him, and I’ve never known a Vulcan who wasn’t sharp as my mother’s tongue. What do you think?”

Spock, standing before them all, folded his hands behind his back and said, rather demurely, Kirk thought, “I have been instructed by Commodore Beldon to present the consensus of the team’s
“findings.”

“And you’ve done that. Now we want your opinion.”

“Not only is that line of inquiry unprofitable because of the timing involved, it is not readily apparent that such a new theory is even possible. Therefore, I conclude that the explosive device was not transported into Friendship Hall by conventional or unconventional means at all.”

And suddenly Kirk saw it, what Spock had been leading up to before they’d been interrupted by Maeve McLaughlin with cake in her hands. *When you have eliminated the impossible….*

Wesley had caught on, too. He was leaning forward with excited, dawning comprehension that Kirk knew he must be displaying as well.

But others weren’t so quick. Commodore McCormick, a competent journeyman who would never rise to the admiralty but who could be depended upon to do every job assigned to him thoroughly and well, croaked, “Not conventional? Not unconventional? It’s got to be one or the other.”

“My apologies, Commodore, I do not intend to speak in riddles. There are many other species in this galaxy who are not allied to the Federation. A very few of them are capable of transporting material objects by the power of their minds alone.”

There was a general stunned silence down the length of the table. Finally, Komack, who was sitting back in his big padded chair and idly fiddling with a stylus, spoke in an uncharacteristic drawl. “Sure you aren’t letting your personal problems get to you, Commander, and affect your analysis?”

“I do not believe so, Admiral.”

Kirk spoke up for the first time. “You mean somebody like the Metrons. The Organians. Or Sargon’s people.”

“The Organians signed a treaty not to interfere except for war with the Klingons,” someone said.

“Sargon’s people are long dead, Kirk,” said another.

A third contributed, “Who the hell are the Metrons?”

“We can’t fight the Organians,” Yadav said in genuine concern. “Our technology can’t match their powers.”

It was Wesley who saw beyond the obvious. “Commodore Kirk didn’t say those species were involved. He said someone *like* them. Like the Dwi’ni that the *Lexington* encountered.”

“Yes,” Spock agreed. “We know that there are some races who can manipulate matter through the power of their minds. Although we do not understand the mechanism, some of us have witnessed such actions and know they are real.”

“I’ll say,” Wesley contributed. “I lost eight members of my crew before we were able to establish an understanding with the Dwi’ni. They’re real, all right.”

“But none of these people have much to do with the more ordinary peoples of the galaxy,” Kirk said. “What about a—”

“—a motive?” Spock’s eyebrow was on the fly. “Logic does not lead to a motive for any of the
races already mentioned. Examination of the evidence shows that the pertinent element is—"

"—the underpowered bomb," Kirk said. "Races with the power we’ve mentioned don’t need to use an explosive device, they could basically kill us with a thought."

"Indeed. Which leads to a seeming contradiction in my theory. Assuming that the attack was intended to inflict a devastating blow on the Federation, why would beings with great mental powers use an underpowered bomb?"

The room fell silent. Komack eventually added, "I thought it was a devastating blow at the time."

"As did I, Admiral. However, our federated union survives. And we…" Spock surveyed the room, "are still here."

"Point taken," Yadav said. "Commander, you’ve given us a lot to think about. Do you have anything more to add to your report?"

"No, sir, except to emphasize that Commodore Beldon’s official team position is that a new transporting technology was involved. Supporting material has been filed under meeting records."

"Then take your seat and stay in case we need you as a resource," Yadav addressed the table at large. "The four other members of Admiral’s Nogura’s staff and I have already discussed it, and we’re prepared to proceed with the stand-down from red to yellow alert. President Dubois is pushing this primarily because of the economic damage of a general red. He’s already decided, and I think all of us in this room agree with him, that we won’t be held hostage to our fears and that the government is to proceed as normally as possible. Public meetings, trips to be held on schedule and so forth. If we elected not to cooperate by staying on red alert, we’d need to have a good reason. Kirk, any operational reason why we shouldn’t?"

Kirk stood where he was and provided a summary of the situation as both he and Nkapa saw it. Fortunately, they agreed with one another. His graphic presentation wasn’t as elaborate as Spock’s had been, but it adequately supported his conclusions.

"There’s no indication of organized hostile activity, with the exception of what’s happening on Leonis IV."

Komack sat up straight in his seat, his eyes alight. "Interesting. Nkapa has extrapolated from that?"

"We both have. There have been pockets of discontent on the frontier for several years, and about twenty-eight percent can be traced to the Eternist movement. It’s not an uncommon viewpoint to have on the outer settlements, and those are primarily human. The Utarf-Pren’felit proposal is being used as effective propaganda to stir up support by what are probably professional agitators sent by the party headquartered here on Earth."

"If that proposal passes, a shift of power in the Council is inevitable. Far fewer human representatives," Komack said. "That sticks in the Eternists’ craw."

"That’s right. What’s happening on Leonis could be totally isolated, or it could be the precursor of something more. At any rate, there’s no indication that it’s tied into what happened in Paris."

"Yet," Komack said flatly.

"Yet," Kirk agreed. "Other than that, we see isolated incidents that are the usual."

"And how would you know what the usual is, Kirk?" Komack asked. "I’m not sure of your ability
to interpret the data.”

“Five years leading the Enterprise gave me a fine understanding of the typical challenges we can expect on the front lines of exploration and defense, Admiral, and that’s what we’ve been seeing,” he responded promptly and without rancor. He’d already decided he wouldn’t let Komack provoke him, and so the comment didn’t.

“I don’t like it,” Admiral Bertellini spoke up for the first time. The one time successor-in-waiting to Nogura had grown old in service to the Federation, but his was an influential voice in any conference. “If we lift this red alert, our forces and installations won’t be able to respond adequately in a crisis.”

“We weren’t able to respond the last time,” Kirk observed. “I’m not sure the enemy will give us the luxury of any lead time if it happens again. If we’d been on red alert status on Federation Day, it wouldn’t have made a difference.” He shrugged and ignored the glacial look Bertellini was aiming at him.

“Standing down to yellow,” Bertellini challenged him, “means there will be less security by definition. I don’t know that I want to be the first one to expose himself to the eyes of whoever these enemies are.”

The admiral’s sagging cheekbones, rheumy eyes and his leathery hands proclaimed that he was a very old man, certainly well over one hundred years of age. Surely he was due for retirement soon, unless Nogura was letting him hang on out of kindness. Sometimes it was the very old who were the least willing to put their lives on the line; they knew how precious, and how short, life really was.

Into the silence, Kirk said, “Someone has to. Anything less and the enemy triumphs, the way terrorism swept across the Earth before the Third World War. A few can hold millions captive through fear, and there’s some element of terror in an unknown assailant, when you don’t know who your enemy is, the way we don’t right now.”

“That’s a truism, Kirk,” Komack put in.

“And here’s another. If you live with anxiety, then they’ve won. I don’t want them, whoever they are, to win. Let’s resume normal operations and see what happens.”

“You don’t have a say in this decision, Kirk,” Bertellini sniped.

“Not yet,” Sertaine said, sotto voce, but everyone heard him and a ripple of reaction went up and down the table. Kirk carefully kept his eyes forward; his mother’s ambition wasn’t his own, or at least not yet, as Sertaine had said.

Yadav cleared his throat and then nodded at him, so he sat down. There were several other reports from various departments, though none as elaborate as either Spock’s or his own. Wesley barely provided three sentences, as his area wasn’t pertinent to the discussion and he wisely refrained from the opportunity to grandstand. None of this meeting, really, had been necessary except to satisfy bureaucratic procedures, and was nothing like the quick decision-making that crises during their five year mission had forced on Kirk and on which he’d thrived. Well, the bigger the ship, the harder it was to turn around, and despite his impatience with the process, he did appreciate that the Federation was a very big ship indeed. And with Nogura gone, at least temporarily, the need for documentation must be looming large for everyone.

The voices droned on. He couldn’t compartmentalize his attention like a Vulcan, but he did
consider more important issues when it seemed the presentation, like Wesley’s, wouldn’t be relevant. The problem wasn’t yielding to the brute force of scientific and investigational methods, so it might be worth while to apply oblique ones. He’d long ago come to realize that was a specialty of his. Kirk brooded as the meeting lasted thirty minutes, forty, approaching an hour.

Finally Yadav addressed the group a last time. “Any other comments? Thank you for your information, gentlemen. This meeting is adjourned.”

Everyone got up, scooped up whatever pads or cases they’d come in with, and started to file out. But Kirk stood where he was and called, “Admiral Komack. Ted. A moment of your time, please.”

Komack gave him a hard look from under his bushy eyebrows, apparently on the edge of refusing, then he nodded. “All right, Jim, a few minutes. Let’s have Commander Spock in on this. I’ve got something to say to the two of you, and it may as well be here.”

Everybody else left, including Wesley, who threw one curious look over his shoulder, but then the door closed and the three of them were alone. Komack sat, Spock sat across the table from him and two seats from Kirk.

Kirk waved a hand over the computer display to clear it, then ordered, “Computer, display file twenty-three.” A simple holographic bar graph of casualties materialized, arranged by species.

“One thousand, two hundred and forty-seven beings died in the attack on Paris,” he began before the impatient admiral could complain about his time being wasted. “And we still don’t have a motive. Everyone seems fixated on this being an assault on the Federation itself, but it has occurred to me…. It was my promotion to commodore that got mixed up with Federation Day. I might have been a target.”

Komack put a hand to his chin, his eyes giving nothing away, not even the customary aggravation with which they usually regarded one another. Encouraged, Kirk continued.

“If I were a target, or part of the agenda, then we might be able to gather some more information if I were made more visible. Lately, I’ve been invisible in Oper—”

“You actually think,” Komack drawled as he sat back in his chair, “that one thousand, two hundred and forty-seven people, many of them prominent people of talent and importance, died because of…you? Kirk, I’ve had the misfortune to confront your ego for some years now, but this…. This is a bit much even for you. You’re just not as important to the rest of the universe as, say, to your former first officer here.”

If Komack were an insect, Kirk thought in an exercise to diffuse his anger, he’d be a Tellar pustule-mouth. Uglier than a nightmare, more offensive than rotting garbage in August, and almost impossible to stomp on effectively and kill. But the Tellar ecology depended on the pustule-mouths, and so they were tolerated because of what they did for the soil. He could tolerate the intractable man before him, of course he could.

“Ted. Admiral. I offer another way of evaluating the situation that might yield some additional information.”

Komack nodded. “Go on. You’re interesting.”

He had misjudged the man and the timing; he already knew that no matter what he said, he’d be shot down. But he’d started, so he would finish. At least this might get Komack thinking. “I’m scheduled to attend the Ethical Standards Board meeting on Luna in a few days. I suggest we
relocate the meeting to a more secure location on Earth and...publicize it. Let Andersen pull out all the stops and use it as a lure to whoever perpetrated the attack on Friendship Hall. If I actually am a target, we might be able to induce them to act quickly, without much time to plan, as they must have had the first time. If we set up the security right, we should catch them. Or at least gain some valuable information.”

He hadn’t told Spock exactly what was in his mind, but he probably had guessed. They’d each served as bait more than once during their tours of duty, and fate so far had been kind to them. As Kirk finished his proposal, Spock stirred in his seat, but he didn’t say anything. If he had the chance to do this, he wanted Spock on sensors and Giotto heading the security detail. Fate wasn’t all he was going to depend on.

But it was Komack who held the power in this room. The admiral appeared lost in contemplation, staring at the table surface where his fingertips were silently drumming. Kirk stood and waited; sitting would have been an admission of defeat, and he wouldn’t give Komack that.

The seconds ticked by as they were held in thrall by Komack’s ego, when finally he said, “You don’t seem very worried about the announcement to be made at the meeting, Kirk.”

Kirk knew exactly what he meant, and he would not for one minute allow this man to know his doubts. “No, sir, I am not.”

“You should be. Suppose the board doesn’t announce what you expect it to? About your flagrant and continued violations of the Prime Directive and other behavior not expected of a commanding officer?”

“I will accept the decision of the board, Admiral.”

“Because you must.”

Because, in his heart, he’d always done what he believed he should. He and Spock had concluded, weeks ago, that there was no chance that he would be charged with any significant violations. He’d been too prominent in the public relations campaign for that; Starfleet—and Nogura—would not waste their ammunition. But that realization had made Kirk uneasy, because he didn’t want the appearance of a clean report, he wanted the reality of a well-considered one.

He’d known that several times he’d violated the letter of the law, sometimes in defense of his ship, but never the spirit of what he understood the Federation was all about. Each time a preliminary board had absolved him and sent him to continue with another mission, but the accumulation of those boards had troubled him and caused many a late shift contemplation of his actions. In the end, he’d decided that he could only proceed the way he saw best in each situation. If his thinking didn’t jive with what Starfleet wanted from him, then he’d be removed and that was that.

Komack went on, heavily. “You will no doubt be unsurprised to hear that the board is issuing a positive report. I had nothing to do with that decision except for the briefs I submitted accusing you of every violation in the book plus a few you invented all by yourself. There was serious consideration given to pressing charges against you, I want you to know that.” He paused, but Kirk didn’t choose to fill the silence. “But you have the devil’s own luck. You’re too visible, of too much political use, and in the end Nogura made it obvious that he wanted you cleared. And what the Almighty doth declare, it is done.” Komack skewered him with a sour look. “But you knew that, didn’t you?”

“It wasn’t hard to guess,” Kirk dared to agree.
“And now you want to be the sacrificial lamb and try to lure our enemy out of hiding. I’ll say this for you, Kirk. As stupid as some of your stunts have been, as unwise as some of your decisions have been, nobody has ever accused you of being a coward. Why don’t you sit down, Commodore.”

Kirk slowly sat; every word of Komack’s was really a challenge.

“What you propose is not a bad idea. Pretty good, actually, and something that might work. I like the part about transferring from Luna to the Earth: much less dangerous that way. But I have a different idea.” He smirked. “A better one.

“I’ve considered the same thing you have. The great unknown someones might have been after the esteemed and very well known James Kirk. Even the Op-Ed pages toyed with the idea a week ago and then let it drop when we didn’t have any evidence one way or the other, but it’s a possibility. And if so, that responsibility for all those deaths carries a moral obligation with it, don’t you think?”

“Of course,” Kirk said warily.

“So I’ve made a decision to try to accomplish the same goals you have. I’m taking you out of Operations to make you more visible. I’ve already contacted Nkapa, and as soon as you come back from Luna City, you have a new assignment. You’ll like this one, Kirk. You’ll get your name and face in front of millions as you represent Starfleet in one of our highest profile projects ever. We’ll make sure it’s very high profile over the next year, and whoever perpetrated Paris will have plenty of time to see you. I want you as head of the transwarp project under Strategic Procurement and Design.”

The position that Wesley had just mentioned to…. “Ted,” Kirk protested, “that’s not exactly my line. I don’t know a thing about the science behind it. It’s more within Commander Spock’s many capabilities.”

“Oh, so you want to put your…your….” Komack gestured towards Spock, at a loss for words. “What the hell do you call him, anyway? You want to put your paramour in the line of fire instead? I wouldn’t have thought that of you, Captain Hero. Pardon me, you’re Commodore Hero now.”

Kirk wouldn’t allow himself to be provoked by petty taunts. “Admiral, I will go where I am sent and serve where I am assigned. For the good of the ’fleet.”

The admiral got up and stalked to stare out the windows over the bay. “But you think it’s a waste of your vast resources, don’t you?” he said to the cloud-dotted sky. “Don’t worry, it won’t last that long. The project is scheduled for completion in three or four years. There will be plenty of time to work your way back into Operations. You’re young, Kirk. Practically a child in man’s clothing. Plenty of time for you to figure out how to serve without violating the Prime Directive.”

It was obvious: this assignment punished Kirk for surviving the judgment of the Ethical Standards committee despite Komack’s recommendations. But there was absolutely no way he could contest it, not if he truly put the welfare of the Federation above his own plans for his career.

And Komack knew it. The admiral was regarding him from across the room with immense satisfaction, knowing he had Kirk’s balls in a vise. He threw a swift glance at Spock, too; the admiral also knew of the Vulcan’s suitability for the post. The author of the strategy and tactics textbook used at the Academy could not have done better than Theodore Komack had this day.

“Cat got your tongue, Commodore? Aren’t you the silver-tongued orator of Starfleet?”
He had far more practice in Starfleet taking orders than giving them, and he had learned through hard experience when it was wiser not to protest. He saw all that he could have accomplished in Operations fading away; he saw the expertise that Spock could have brought to the transwar project extinguished. Damn Komack!

“There’s nothing to say, Admiral. I have received my orders and I will fulfill them.”

“Good. I’m glad you understand that’s the way Starfleet works. Now, there’s one more thing to add.” He walked casually back to where he’d sat before and took his chair again. “Both of you,” he said. “There’s something more we need to discuss.”

Kirk had no confidence in the next item on Komack’s agenda. It seemed the hard-headed admiral would never stop punishing him for disobeying orders and heading for Vulcan.

Komack picked up the stylus he’d been twiddling with before and idly stroked it with his thumb, then suddenly dropped it as if it had burned him.

“All those times I accused you two of screwing each other,” Komack began, “I never really thought you were. What did I do, give you ideas?” He shook his head. “Don’t answer that, I don’t want to know.”

“If you don’t want to know, don’t ask,” Kirk said in a hard voice. He contained another surge of irritation that bordered on anger with an effort, as he recognized how close he was to his breaking point. Why the hell did it seem that every conversation he had found its way to his relationship with Spock? Everybody formed relationships. He wished the world would get over his and Spock’s and leave them alone.

“Don’t forget I am your commanding officer, whatever Piers Sertaine thinks and no matter what Nogura has planned for your future,” Komack snapped. “If I’d had a hint you two were really involved with each other while you were a command team, I’d have had you both grounded so fast your heads would have been spinning. Your conduct was inappropriate, totally inap—”

“Admiral,” Spock reminded him from his position across the table, “We are not currently serving on the Enterprise.”

“No, you’re not, and a damn good thing, too, because you two can be useful here.”

“I do not believe our personal relationship is within the scope of Starfleet’s concern.”

Komack’s face and voice hardened. “Admiral’s Nogura’s last log entry included a notation that he wanted to talk to the two of you. He was going to advise you to make your relationship legitimate and avail yourselves of the traditional and honorable means of human partnering and get married.”

He looked a phaser blast at Kirk. “Yes, that’s what I said,” though Kirk hadn’t made a sound of protest. “Get married. The admiral wanted to head the Eternist faction off before they got wind of your relationship, which they would consider illicit from several points of view.”

Something made Kirk hesitate to acknowledge that Nogura had already had that conversation with him, that he’d acted on Nogura’s advice, and that he and Spock were already joined in the decision to follow the commanding admiral’s wishes.

He offered silence instead, so Komack continued. “We’ve got enough trouble with this bombing and the threat to the Federation, we don’t want to have to deal with the Eternists and their demands, too. I agree with what our CinC intended to do: show them who’s boss. So I’m following orders, the orders that were in Nogura’s log, in asking both of you to do the right thing.
“When the rest of the staff and I first went through Nogura’s log and saw the information about the two of you, I was pole-axed. I’ve heard the stories about you and the ladies, Kirk, so at first I didn’t believe it. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was…reasonable.”

Kirk found his voice. “Not that we need your approval, Ted.”

“You don’t have it,” Komack growled. “I can’t imagine…doing whatever the hell you two do together, and it’s just another indication of how you insist on going your own way, Kirk. But if you’ve got to partner with another man, at least you’ve shown sense in picking Commander Spock. He’s got qualities of restraint and good reasoning that you lack. His log entries explaining the rash decisions you made were the only elements of some of your missions that made sense.

“So here’s what I propose. I’ve already discussed this with Andersen, and he’s full of ideas about how we can exploit this for ‘fleet’s benefit. We’ll announce your intended union right after the Ethical Standards meeting. Andersen’s all set with some press releases already. We’ll put a few interviews in the can when you arrive at Luna City. That will generate more publicity, because it isn’t every day that the son of the Vulcan ambassador to the Federation who is also prominent in Starfleet involves himself in a human ceremony. So you’ll have to make yourselves available for whatever interview requests come in. As soon as you’re back on Earth, say within a week or two, we’ll set up the wedding here on the headquarters campus. We can use the chapel if you want, or there’s that grassy spot over by Weapons Design that the kids like to have their ceremonies on. Both of them work well for vid recording; we’ll want to give a few media outlets exclusives. All of that will tie in to publicity for Kirk’s new position under Wesley, and we’ve got the stage set for whoever might be looking. And letting the Eternists know that Starfleet does things our own way,” Komack concluded with satisfaction.

It was a nightmare. Kirk couldn’t imagine anything he was less likely to want to agree to. He remembered his quiet, heart-felt conversation with his lover by the wall in Iowa, and how Spock had agreed to his proposal only on the condition that they try their best not to make a public relations spectacle of their marriage. How Spock had said that compared to the soul-deep communication of a bond, marriage seemed superficial. What Komack proposed degraded what they wanted, degraded what they were to each other, and he’d be damned if he went through with it.

Slowly Kirk turned towards his intended. Spock was looking right back at him, but he couldn’t read his lover’s—his paramour’s—expression. Spock was regarding him gravely, but he was unnaturally stilled. Waiting for…what?

Was it only last night that they’d made love with such desperation? He’d felt Spock’s disquiet though they hadn’t spoken of it. Something had not felt right, not under the trees in Iowa, not as they’d kissed to honor the two-year contract that Spock had said was logical. And this morning…. They hadn’t spoken of their decision, hadn’t placed a call to Sarek and Amanda on Vulcan, and he hadn’t thought even once: this man is to be my spouse.

And then Kirk knew what Spock was waiting for: for him to come to the decision that Spock had harbored in his heart from the beginning. The time was not right. The circumstances weren’t right. And the person pushing them into this decision shouldn’t be Admiral Heihachiro Nogura, and it sure as hell wouldn’t be Theodore Komack.

“No,” he said, still looking straight at Spock. He saw agreement in his lover’s eyes. “That’s not something we’re willing to do.”

“Kirk,” Komack blustered, “This is for the good of—”
“The commodore has said,” Spock added, finally breaking the gaze that locked him with Kirk, “that we are not willing to engage in the proposed activity. Starfleet cannot compel us to formalize our relationship.”

“Marriage,” Komack argued, somewhat desperately, “is a good thing. I’ve been married for forty-two years, all to the same woman. If you find the right partner, there’s nothing more fulfilling than a one-on-one relationship.”

“Oh, I’ve found the right partner,” Kirk said. “But I respectfully decline your suggestion that we marry.”

“And I do most respectfully agree with Commodore Kirk,” Spock added. “If there is nothing more that you wish to speak to us about…” He rose and stood, the image of deferential attention.

Komack stared up at both of them, obviously weighing if he could order them into it, and then just as obviously concluding the futility of such an action. “Oh, go on, get out of here.”

They turned to go. As they reached the door, the admiral called after them. “Kirk, contact Wesley for details on your new assignment.”

But as they took the crowded turbo to the basement level—busy with the lunchtime crowd—Kirk couldn’t help but find some satisfaction in the morning’s work. Komack didn’t know the favor he’d done them. With all his machinations, the admiral had forced the two of them to be honest with each other, and he couldn’t regret their decision. They’d have to tell his mother the wedding was off, but there was no other harm done. Rather, something important had been reforged in a minute or two of united protest—an acknowledgment that only they should shape their futures, and for their own reasons.

He looked over the heads of the other people in the turbo to where Spock was mostly hidden by two young lieutenants. But he managed to glimpse the graceful curve of his lover’s ear. Someday they’d do it, he thought. Just…not now.
Spock had been driving through the tunnel for one hundred and thirty-seven kilometers at the prescribed speed of one hundred kilometers per hour, and at last the roadway began the steep ascent that indicated he was approaching his destination. A sign that he could barely see through his annoyingly clouded vision proclaimed *Featherstone Amphitheater Parking Ahead*. The bright lights overhead seemed to intensify their glare as he took control of his vehicle from the traffic grid and slowed it.

Spock parked his car and swung the winged door up, then he lithely emerged with little effort. He’d left behind the artificial gravity more than half an hour ago, and it was a refreshing novelty to experience one-sixth his normal *Enterprise* weight. He blinked as he surveyed his surroundings; his vision showed no signs yet of returning to normal. His inner eyelids had been ungovernable since the attack, and occasionally over the past year and a half he had been forced to function with impaired sight because they would not retract. Nevertheless, around him now he could see the expected low ceiling of unfinished granite, a sign pointing out the pathway that led to his destination and, to his disappointment, another vehicle in the lot. He had hoped for solitude but it seemed that even after ninety minutes of driving he would not find it here.

The path over which his booted feet traveled was poorly lit although well paved, and the rough walls of the tunnel narrowed until he could reach each side with his outstretched arms and easily touch the ceiling with the flat of his hand. As he paced along and up the precipitously inclined trail, he was aware that approximately two meters over his head was the attenuated almost-vacuum of the surface. Few beings had survived unprotected contact with such an environment; flesh could burn after only a few seconds of exposure to the sun and cell membranes were likely to rupture from the sucking power of the vacuum. Plus, there was no air.

The passageway branched but the trail to the right was protected by a warning sign that said *Authorized Personnel Only*. He would prefer that the vehicle he saw in the lot belonged to a municipal employee who had gone that way. Spock increased his pace. This trip was taking longer than he had estimated, and he wanted to make sure to get back to his ’fleet-assigned accommodations in good time. Jim would be waiting for him.

“I can’t believe it,” Kirk said once they’d settled into their separate quarters and he’d had the chance to check the daily update. “The Alpha Nu Kings are playing tonight!”

*At Spock’s inquiring look, he elaborated.* “The air hockey champions. Remember how they lost that game we saw on Fal-T Three? They were robbed of the championship then, but they won it all last year. They’re here to start the new season.”

Spock would have done his duty and attended with Kirk, but he was thankful that there had been no need to change his own plans. Commander Lori Ciani had been dispatched by Wesley to accompany Kirk to the Ethical Standards meeting and begin to brief him on his new duties as transwarp coordinator. One comm call had confirmed her availability and willingness to go with him.

“You can brief me between playing periods,” Kirk jokingly told her right before he cut the connection.

“And you,” he said as he swung around to Spock, “don’t care. God, you have no idea how good that makes me feel.”
Spock caught his lover around the waist and kissed him soundly, echoing Kirk’s happy enthusiasm. “She may have you this evening, but I will have you tonight,” he said smugly.

Kirk swayed within their embrace. “Or maybe I’ll have you.”

They shared another kiss. “That,” Spock intoned, “we will leave to the caprice of the moment.” But he knew what he wanted.

The first hint of the brimming light of the surface penetrated the gloom. He passed a locker loaded with protective gear and an admonishment for individuals to use it: visors to protect sight and foot guards to slide over shoes as an aid when maneuvering in low gravity. Spock ignored them both and went on.

Then he was out in the open, with a dome of reinforced transparent aluminum between him and the stars. Spread before him was a hillside, sloping down and away, made of gray-white basalt and sculpted into terraced seating of semi-circular benches that curled around a stage. Beyond that, a lunar plain spanned into the distance and was crowned by jagged peaks.

Any serious student of history would have recognized this place, as unlikely as it might have been in this setting: a reconstruction of a theater from classical Greek times, specifically 400 B.C.E. The great-granddaughter of Trey Featherstone, the famous first and most successful colonist on Luna, had used her fortune to create this oddity that lunar geology had favored. Three times a year, Greek choruses still made dire proclamations here in poorly attended plays.

A hundred years before, visitors to Luna City had flocked to see the careful replica, but the tastes of the fickle masses had long since changed. Many distinctly human forms of entertainment had found a home beneath the lunar surface where Earth’s first outpost among the stars was buried deep. Ancient Babylon and its fleshpots had nothing on Luna City.

Featherstone’s Folly was a testament to a rich woman’s caprice, but the view was incomparable. The theater had been carved from the side of a mountain, and the breathtaking panorama of the harsh landscape fell off from where the arena was perched up high. Spock blinked rapidly as he attempted to adjust to the contrast between the darkest black of sky and the sunlight bathing the rock. He stood upon the topmost step of the theater, simply experiencing both the vast distance spread out before him…and the silence.

He did not mind being alone here. The silence at first seemed complete, but after a few minutes a scratching sound intruded into his contemplations. The ubiquitous lunar rodents lived even so far out from civilization.

Spock stirred and began the long trip down the uneven steps. The unaccustomed gravity made taking them one at a time impossible. He skipped down three, four, sometimes five in leaps that required minimal effort, and a small smile curved his lips at the sensation. He had always enjoyed less than one gravity and had never had a problem with nausea or disorientation. Moving within its influence was, he had secretly concluded the few times he’d experienced it as a child, the closest an individual could come to flying.

He took one leap after another, landing gently and with sure balance, to launch himself immediately again. It was incongruous: a Vulcan somewhat recklessly experimenting with flight by skipping along the steps of a simulated ruin that brooded in solitary splendor. He could easily imagine Jim charging down the slope with a laugh flung over his shoulder. For Spock, this was an unaccustomed activity he would not allow himself often: both the leaping and the emotional response to it. But at this time, it seemed appropriate.
Spock steadied himself on the last step by touching the seat; the cold of it seeped through his hand immediately and he was reminded of how far out from the settled area he was. He easily absorbed the rest of his momentum by shuffling forward. Then he walked straight up to the railing that kept him away from the boundary between a biosphere and vacuum.

He spared the Spartan landscape but a glance. That was not what he had driven so far to see. Slowly Spock lifted his head to look up into velvet night.

When he had lived on the Enterprise, he had not frequently visited the observation deck. His double duties had not permitted much free time, and once he and Jim had become lovers, what leisure he had been able to carve from his schedule had been spent with Jim. Nevertheless, it seemed that all through the days and the months, the years, he had carried with him an inner view of the darkness that had cocooned them, for with the ship now in drydock, he missed the compelling space through which the Enterprise had soared.

Regretting the passing of an ideal environment was not illogical or inappropriate. It had been eighteen years since he had spent any significant time grounded instead of on a Starfleet vessel of some sort, living in artificial gravity within artificially produced air.

Sol blazed over his left shoulder, sharply defined and injurious for anyone who gazed at it directly, which was why the visors were supplied. The orientation did not allow him to spot Eridani, either, but he had no need to view any one celestial object over another. The impulse that had brought him here required only the pinpricks of light and the blackness, and he indulged himself for long minutes.

It was cooler here than he would have liked; he should have brought the jacket that he now wore much more often than he ever had before. He actually shivered as he stood with his head tilted up, staring at the infernos that had produced the complex elements of life. Remember, his father had said long before, we are the all the products of supernovae. That was where the elements necessary for organic life were created. The young Spock had taken the information to heart, for it had allowed some perspective in difficult times.

Perspective in difficult times. It required a surrendering to the rhythms of life, an acceptance of what would be. Jim would never have this uncertain calm in the center of his soul, and if he ever found it, by mistake, he would reject it for his own tumultuous vision. Spock loved that about Jim, but he could not live like that himself, not now, not as he was.

“Commander Spock.”

The words whispered in his ears. His first impulse was to whip around to confront whoever had managed to come up behind him so silently, but then he remembered the acoustic properties of this place. Patrons seated far away could hear every word spoken on the stage. Slowly he scanned up, up, up to the topmost row. There, far to the right, sat a figure he could barely discern, as it was wrapped in a cloak the color of the lunar stone from which the seats had been fashioned.

“I wish you good afternoon.”

Yes, he thought he had recognized the soft, restrained voice, and now he was sure. Fahtima Gabon had journeyed to the Earth’s moon along with others from the Starfleet entourage on a special shuttle, including her cousin, a photographer she had introduced to Spock in a brief exchange, and Ralph Randolph. Randolph had bought both Jim and himself alcoholic beverages as soon as the shuttle had docked, in an elegant and well-appointed spaceport hostelry with a view, and Spock had actually enjoyed the time they’d spent relaxing with informal conversation.
But Fahtima Gabon and Hamza Machar had disappeared after they’d disembarked. Before they left the terminal area, Machar had jerked his bag from the hands of a Tellarite porter with a disturbing curse. Spock had tensed at the obvious xenophobia exhibited, but the porter had shrugged and gone on to other passengers. Perhaps she was the subject of such verbal abuse regularly.

Spock surveyed Gabon’s still form over the considerable distance that separated them. The other vehicle in the parking lot must be hers, and she had witnessed his whimsical flight down the center stairway. He refused to be discomfited by that.

“Hello, Ms. Gabon.” He gauged the volume of his words carefully; not much effort would be required to reach her.

Her answer was but a whisper. “I am sorry to intrude.”

He had achieved what he had come for, mainly, and what little else he had hoped to experience was banished by her presence. Spock considered that a conversation with this woman would not be unwelcome. He began the trip up the stairway. Her camouflage was most effective, huddled as she was in the cloak and its hood. She was but a shadow on the bench, or the slightest discoloration in the stone, and he was not surprised that he had not noticed her before. She had achieved the trick of making herself fade into the background.

She stirred as it became obvious his path was toward her but made no objection. Nor did she stand as he came up to her, and he wondered if he had misjudged her attitude during the other times they had met. She had seemed quite subdued, it was true, in the shuttle. Her dark, large eyes flashed up at him.

“May I join you?” Her ambiguity interested him.

She moved aside with a rustle of her voluminous cloak, as if there were others in the arena with them and she needed to provide space for him to sit. A set of protective goggles picked up from the locker were on the bench on her other side, discarded for the moment.

“I welcome you.” She pushed back the hood that had covered her hair.

He sat and surveyed the arena from this new vantage point. The stone was cold against his buttocks and legs. Spock said, “I must explain about the condition of my eyes.” He did not relish speaking of it but felt compelled to do so. He remembered that she had little experience with other species.

“There is no need.”

“Nevertheless, I understand that my appearance may be alarming. Vulcans have inner eyelids, and mine are at present somewhat ungovernable.”

“Does the condition interfere with your ability to see?”

“Somewhat. There is a grayish cast imposed. It is more annoying than debilitating.”

“I understand.”

Silence fell between them but it was not awkward. The setting encouraged it, almost as if this were the minute when a hush fell over a crowd, before the action began on the stage far below them. Idly, Spock considered how much he had changed over the years. There had been a time when he had been so intent on his duties and on his image as a Vulcan that he would not have seen the value in a casual conversation with a woman chance-met, or half an hour spent in companionship in a
spaceport establishment over beverages, or an embrace and a whispered promise with an intimate partner. He would certainly have never felt it appropriate to speak of a physical imperfection with someone who was almost a stranger. But he was more comfortable with himself now. Had Jim done that for him or had he achieved that state of being earlier, thus making the relationship between them possible? He did not know and was not inclined to spend much time analyzing the phenomena. He did know that he preferred the person he was now.

That person might not have much time left. A small knot threatened to develop in his chest at the thought; he resolutely rejected the sadness. Yes, it was possible that he would be struck down by his condition just as he had achieved some small equilibrium and happiness, but the universe owed him nothing. Who could predict fate? No one. He would not make the mistake of dreading an uncertain future.

He said, “It is interesting that we two should meet again here. Luna City is large and the Featherstone Amphitheater is seldom visited.”

“Yes, this is a coincidence that I hope is not unpleasant for you. But I was told by the concierge at our hotel that there are few other places where one can view the sky directly.”

“Did you come to view the Earth?” Most visitors to the moon immediately wanted to see where they’d come from. It was an emotional reaction Spock understood.

“No. Not the Earth.” She gestured up. “The stars. All the other worlds. Where all the other people are.”

“I see,” he said, using a conversational placeholder. Then, “Where all the telepaths that you inquired about on October twenty-fifth are?”

She went very still, and he realized that his offhand remark meant something more to her.

“Yes,” she said in a small voice. “They and all the others. We live in a crowded galaxy, Commander, and you have seen so much more than most.”

He twisted to regard her. Fahtima was intent on the tips of the protective shoe coverings she had donned. Her thick hair was pulled back to the nape of her neck, leaving her face exposed to his scrutiny, but he did not know what he saw there. Not envy. He had seldom encountered another human whose emotions were less easy to read. Fahtima always seemed to be folded in on herself, much more like a Vulcan than a human.

Her last comment didn’t seem to need a reply, so he sat in silence, his hands on his knees, his appraisal of her obvious as his gaze lingered on the profile of her plain, broad features. The rest of her was truly covered by the cloak she had fastened up high against her neck and that fell to her feet; it obscured her petite stature. He remembered small breasts that the gown she had worn in Paris had done nothing to enhance. She must have been aware he was examining her, but she made no move to stop him. There was no false gesture of modesty as she pushed imaginary strands of hair from her face, no small, uncomfortable smile—or coquettish smile for that matter—no increase in respiration. It was as if she held herself still for his inspection, almost as if he had the right….

Spock turned away, suddenly uncomfortable, and not knowing exactly what impulse had led to what might be considered a rude act on his part. He hoped she understood there was nothing sexual in his perusal. He had no interest in her or any other woman; he wanted only Jim Kirk. Besides, he had gained no insight from his examination.
Again he cast his sight over the lunar plains. “I believe you said before that you had never been off planet. Is the experience what you expected so far?”

Spock sensed a release in the tension with which she had held herself before. “I greatly enjoyed the shuttle trip here. But here, on the moon…. I think, perhaps, my expectations were unrealistic.”

“What had you hoped for?”

She shrugged, a gesture muted by the cloak. “Luna City is so closely allied to the Earth, it’s practically a suburb. Or so my cousin Hamza says. I hope some day to travel further, far away from the Earth, where everything is…different.”

Starfleet was filled with individuals who wanted to escape not only the gravity of their home planet but all the troubles they had accumulated there. Spock was familiar with this attitude; he had shared it at one time.

“It depends on one’s definition of ‘different,’” Spock said. “The environment can change, but some constants always accompany our exploration.”

“Our own natures,” Fahtima contributed with a hint of wistful sadness to her voice. “We cannot leave ourselves behind.”

“Nevertheless, there are wonders to be seen in this galaxy that defy explanation. Races of beings as unlike us as can be imagined. Silicon-based life forms that mimic rock. Incorporeal beings without substance. Beings of pure thought and beings of pure malice.”

Fahtima had turned toward him as he was speaking and her face was suddenly and genuinely alight. “Tell me more,” she breathed.

Hers was no ordinary interest. Her intensity vibrated between them, a sharp contrast to her demeanor moments before. Normally Spock would have been put off by such raw emotion, but coming from such an inoffensive woman who wanted to hear what he had to say so badly….

“I have seen a city that exists in the clouds. Anti-gravity devices of enormous complexity suspend it five point seven kilometers above the ground.” Her eyes encouraged him to go on. “I have observed a phenomenon that literally changes the nature and fabric of our universe; once in its vicinity, memories are warped, personalities change, and most individuals retreat into a trance-like state that renders them incapable of rational action. But a Graves Gravitational Mass appears to be innocuous, a small gaseous cluster. Its beauty—for it is beautiful, with rainbow colors that sparkle and burst into brilliance—its beauty masks the danger it poses to any who stumble within its influence.”

“You speak as if from real experience. How did you escape?”

“I am sorry, Ms. Gabon, specific details of that experience are yet classified information.” That was an exaggeration. He could have told her enough of that frightening, challenging experience to satisfy her curiosity, but he was loathe to do so, as it put him squarely in the spotlight. There was no need.

“Forgive me, I did not mean to press you for information you cannot convey. Please, continue.”

There were many examples from his years in space to speak of. “I have encountered an entity that feeds on the emotions of others. Actually, two beings of this general type, one of whom almost definitely visited your Earth hundreds of years ago. Both were strengthened by the negative feelings of humanoids and were unable to withstand more positive emotions.”
Fahtima pulled back as if stung by this news. “Really?” she asked in a small voice. Then, hastily, “I do not doubt your word, but it seems…unlikely. For instance, how was the energy transfer accomplished?”

“That is the subject of much speculation. Nevertheless, the fact that such creatures exist is indisputable.”

“Are they intelligent?”

“That also is a question being debated. Instinct prompts many actions that occur without reason.”

Fahtima sighed softly. “Yes, you are right.”

He sensed that she wouldn’t ask for more, although she would probably eagerly listen to him recite the wonders he’d encountered for as long as he was willing to speak. He offered her one last experience before he would have to think about leaving to rejoin Jim in the city. He had some time; he could elaborate. “Many years ago when I was an inexperienced junior officer, my ship performed the second survey on Sinoptus IV, on the southern continent. Have you heard of the singing trees there?”

Her liquid eyes seemed to widen. “I have.”

He straightened and spoke out to the rows of empty benches with his fingers curled lightly around his knees. It was not that he was uncomfortable conversing with Fahtima Gabon face to face, but this was an emotional memory he offered, and he preferred that small separation between them.

“The trees themselves at first seem unremarkable, although they are not well distributed throughout the area. They are perhaps ten meters in height, with gray tree trunks approximately three meters in circumference. The large golden leaves are curled into a funnel shape. What we did not know then was that the leaves can assume other shapes, enabling them to create sound.

“Our first night we camped in the open as regulations suggest in a non-hostile area, when there is a premium on gathering data. Half of our number were engaged in observing nocturnal behavior, but that team was concentrating only on the animals. The rest of us prepared to rest in anticipation of our next day’s duties.

“I was already in my sleeping bag when an evening breeze began to blow, and then the songs began. They were so insubstantial that I initially believed them to be a product of my own imagining, from that time between wakefulness and sleeping that produces strange thoughts and dream-like illusions. But the music increased in volume until it could not be mistaken for anything other than what it was: complex musical compositions.

“Those of us in the camp quickly established that the trees were the source. We gathered around a grove of them near us. The security members of our team, I recall, had their phasers drawn, although how they expected to defend us or themselves against song escapes me. At any rate, the phasers were quickly abandoned as we succumbed to the beauty of what we were hearing.” He could hear the notes in his mind, and he remembered the rush of feeling that had taken over his young body. He had not even known the words to describe the emotions that the trees had coaxed from him. But now he knew.

“I have read,” Fahtima said, “that the songs are incredibly beautiful.”

“Unlike anything I have heard before or since. Many have attempted to describe them who are more gifted with words than I, and I do not know that any has succeeded.”
“Will you try?”

Spock gave her a sidelong glance and acceded. “There is an overtone of voice to the instrumental. As if, if one were only able to listen closely enough or with the right perceptions, one would hear beings weaving a complex harmony.

“And one does not tire of hearing the song.” He shook his head at the memory. “No matter an individual’s background or preferences for music, all are equally entranced.

“I am inclined to agree with the theory that a telepathic or empathic element enhances the actual experience of the music, since this explains why no attempt to record the music has ever been completely successful, and why witnesses feel they cannot describe it. There is an emotional response associated with hearing the songs that cannot be duplicated. No telepathic being can easily explain, for example, when they join with another. No words are adequate for that experience, either. So the situations are somewhat similar.”

“You are a telepathic being,” Fahtima said in her quiet voice. “Do you agree that the union of minds is impossible to describe? Don’t you think that you would be able to describe it to me?”

Spock reminded himself that the woman asked from innocence and did not know that she was treading on one of Vulcan’s greatest taboos. He had no desire at all to share any part of the mental life he had lived with Jim. Not with her, not with anyone. And he did not know why he had made the comparison between the music and telepathy in the first place, either.

“The Vulcan meld,” he said gently, “is somewhat different from telepathy as typically encountered in the Federation.”

“I know.”

“And I do not believe that words can adequately convey—”

—running his fingers through Jim’s hair and kissing him to initiate the joining, Jim was so desirable Spock could not breathe for wanting him.

—throwing himself into the bright beauty of Jim’s mind with eager anticipation, as if swimming in a cool lake on a hot summer’s day. Moving through the ripples of thought with strength and vigor and reveling in the lap of the water against his bare skin. Pleasure and relief, such pleasure and relief.

—the exquisite gratification of rubbing up against Jim’s essence, so similar to one body lying over and merging with another that a shiver ran through both their bodies as they mentally embraced, and they were so tuned to each other, the resonances so perfectly in harmony and exactly what Spock wanted that time lost its meaning as they simply touched, simply basked in each other, simply loved with a thought, a stroke, a feeling. Delight. They had experienced such delight simply by sharing what they were with one another.

—the memory of the last time they had melded. “I will wait for you,” Jim had promised as the connection between them attenuated and then disappeared. Bittersweet. Agony if he let himself dwell on it, and that he never, ever did. One year, five months and twenty-one days ago. Never again. Never again.

Spock drew a breath. Beside him, Fahtima bit her lip and turned sharply away, possibly because she had realized how inappropriate this conversation was. “—words cannot convey the experience,” he said bleakly, although he hoped she would not discern his sudden despair. “I
Fahtima picked up a paper pamphlet that must have been on the bench next to her. She began to slowly leaf through its pages while Spock contemplated how he must not fear the future, he must not revel in the past, he must always balance precariously in this unsatisfactory present.

Fahtima closed the pamphlet and reflected, almost to herself, “So the trees sing music that cannot be recorded.”

Spock was relieved that she brought their talk back to Sinoptus IV. About that, he could speak. “That is true. And no song is ever repeated, either.”

“It isn’t?”

“That is what the researchers at the site say, although it is difficult to verify. Each composition is complete unto itself and then gone. I am most fortunate to have heard one of the true wonders of this galaxy. The beauty of the Sinoptian songs is unparalleled.”

An emotion he could identify was shining from her eyes: admiration. “You are a Vulcan, yet you can admit that.”

He promptly replied, “I am a Vulcan with unique life experiences. And my people admit much that is beautiful in life.”

“Thank you for telling me about the trees.”

He inclined his head, pleased that she appreciated his tale.

Her gaze fell again. “In the midst of all the beauty of the songs, still, it is so sad that the melodies are not repeated.” She examined her fingers, twisted together in her lap. “Beauty exists and then is gone. Isn’t that just the way life is? Happiness and sadness. Though not nearly enough of the happiness.” She looked up at him. “I would apologize for what I have said, but you are a man who has seen so much. I think you must know what I am talking about. The inconsistencies. The way we never know what life will bring us. How we cannot control any of it. Why is life the way it is?”

And there it was, in her voice a hint of the deep sorrow that he had suspected from his first meeting with her. How interesting it was that this apparently meek woman should be employed with trust by such a powerful news organization. How fascinating that she would not be satisfied with a casual, ordinary conversation, but should steer it into depths that had indeed been occupying his own thoughts of late. As he could not deny her one more tale about the singing trees of Sinoptus IV, now he would not withdraw from this wholly unexpected examination of the meaning of life.

“Ms. Gabon, if I knew the answer to that question, I would tell you. I believe all living creatures struggle with it.”

“They did in ancient Greece, too.” She showed him the paper in her hand; it was the program to a play that had been performed recently at the amphitheater. The front cover displayed a marble statue of three women: young, middle-aged, and old. “These are the Three Fates. The weavers of life. One to spin the thread of our years….”

Spock took up the tale. “…one to decide its length, and one to cut the thread of life with her knife.”

Fahtima nodded. “We know almost nothing else about them except for their role in a few myths.”
“There are not many who make the Greek myths a study.”

“Nor have I. But I have always been interested in the randomness of our lives. What makes us who we are. There was a time when I dearly wished to meet with Lachesis. She is the middle Fate, who not only decides how long we live but thereby assigns our destinies. I wanted to…wrestle with her.”

“As Hercules wrestled with Death itself?”

She nodded with deliberation. “Yes.”

The obvious question that sprang to his lips—Are you dissatisfied with your destiny, Ms. Gabon?—Spock would not ask. The answer seemed clear anyway. Instead he commented, “In our own ways, we all wrestle with life, its uncertainties and its inflexibilities, and we find different solutions. Among humans, many look to religion. Among other peoples that is also a solution, for some variant of religion can be found on almost every civilized planet. Adherents invest all the answers to a Supreme Being.”

“I have never been a believer,” Fahtima said, simply. “I…see too much. Including those who refuse to confront the questions of life at all. The ones who resort to drugs, sex, gambling….”

“They seek the immediacy of the physical experience. Any way to create an adrenaline rush or to numb the senses so the questions do not intrude.”

“But the questions are still there.”

“I believe that some discover answers within the biological imperative of reproduction. Individuals immerse themselves in children and family, and their purpose in being is to pass on their genes and tradition; duty to family can be satisfying.”

“That is not for me,” Fahtima said quickly.

Spock remembered the injuries done to her in the blast. Perhaps she was now unable to bear a child; or perhaps years before she had made a choice that others made, too. “Nor is it for me,” Spock agreed.

“But you are homosexual.”

Taken aback by such a categorization, Spock hesitated. Although there had been Leila, and Zarabeth, and a few others, all of those encounters had been either in the presence of or in the reverberation from the heterosexual bond that had been forced on him with T’Pring. Since then, since he had been free of the sexuality imposed on him by Vulcan….

“I am with Commodore Kirk.” That was sufficient for him now and for the future.

“But where is there meaning in all this senselessness?” Fahtima asked sadly, gazing into the distance of the desolate plain where no life stirred at all. “What of us? Those of us who cannot find any order or meaning in religion or drugs or children.” She abruptly straightened. “Forgive me, Commander. I make assumptions when I should not.”

“No,” he said slowly. “You do not presume. I share your search for meaning.”

Her hands twisted in her lap. “I worked very hard for the chance at The Galactic News. My talent is genuine, but I had to learn a way to express it and for others to appreciate it. It took a long time. I thought that once my career was established, I would be….”
“Happy?”

“No, not that. Fulfilled, maybe. But it doesn’t work that way, does it? You must be fulfilled in your career with Starfleet. You’re free.”

“Starfleet would not agree with you. I am at the command of others.”

“But you travel on a starship, you see new worlds, you live out so far from Earth. Or from Vulcan, your world. You’ve cut the strands that tie you to your previous life.”

“It is possible,” he said gravely, “for anyone to do that. To start anew, that is. It may not be easy, but it is possible.”

“And suppose Lachesis has a different destiny for a person? Our threads are made by the Fates a certain way, a particular strength or hue. It may be impossible to fight against her.”

“Although the wiles of the universe may be inexplicable to us, I cannot help but believe that it is possible for us to impose some order upon our experience of it.”

She shook her head. “Sometimes I feel like a leaf blowing in the wind.”

“Ms. Gabon.” He waited until her eyes met his. “On Sinoptus IV, such a leaf sings a song.”

She smiled then, and he realized that this was the first smile he had ever witnessed from her. He had seen her quizzical, tormented, and apologetic, but he had never seen her lips curl. Unusual for humans, who indulged in this particular expression of emotion far more often than most other species.

Fahtima turned away, although he could see from observing her profile that the smile lingered. “Commander, you are…a most unusual man.”

“Who has been generally fortunate in the threads that Lachesis has allotted to me.” Despite the attack. Despite the future predicted for him by Versin, a Vulcan Fate if there had ever been one. “But you must know that I do not believe in the Three Fates of Greek mythology.” He stood in a smooth coordinated movement that compensated for the lower gravity. “I must leave in a few minutes. However, I do have something else to contribute to our discussion. It may be difficult to see meaning in our lives or to force the universe to bend to our wills, but there are solaces to be found that ease our way as we travel through the wilderness of life. One is…conversations with friends.”

She looked up at him quickly and searched his face; it was easy to see that she was at a loss for a response. At last she managed, “Thank you.”

He nodded. He had already exchanged more emotional words with her than almost any other individual he had encountered. It crossed his mind that if he had not met James Kirk, and if his sexuality did trend in that direction….

Spock prepared to make his way along the row. An efficient sideways hop would propel him several meters at a time. But before he said good-bye, he looked back to Fahtima, who regarded him quizzically. “You have not encountered one-sixth gravity before.”

She nodded and demurely lifted the cloak to show her feet with their safety-boots stretched over her shoes.

“Then, before I leave, may I introduce you to the pleasures of it? You saw the way I made my way
down to the stage?”

Her eyes shining, she stood. “Like flying?” “A small imitation of it.”

She hung back a moment. “Your eyes. They haven’t changed. Are you sure you see well enough for this?”

“Sufficiently. Let us proceed.”

****

Commander Spock had been an excellent teacher; once she’d become accustomed to the disconcerting way her muscles were so much more effective in the lower gravity, Fahtima had flown down the steps and then back up them with considerable pleasure.

Now she was alone. The sounds of the car leaving the parking lot had already dwindled into silence. Instead, Fahtima heard a new sound: the songs of the trees of Sinoptus IV. The complete experience, along with the empathic overlay that made the songs so extraordinary, had been waiting for her, there in his mind, and she had not hesitated to take it. As she had taken many other things. She had not been able to stop herself.

An abomination, Hamza called Spock. Fahtima did not find him so. He had named her friend, but with little reason. He did not see well enough.

Fahtima hid her hands in the folds of the cloak. She felt dirty and didn’t want to. She had done nothing wrong: only reached for a touch of joy and beauty. Didn’t she deserve that?

Yes, she did.

So she allowed the soaring melody of the songs to wash over her. She would postpone being Lachesis, who assigned destiny, for just a little while.
The next morning, Spock dutifully attended the meeting of the Ethical Standards Board that declared James Tiberius Kirk innocent of any violation of the Prime Directive during his time as captain of the Enterprise. There was a role for a former first officer to play during such events, and he performed his part well. No one needed to know that his thoughts ranged over many other things and that a most welcome feeling of satisfaction suffused his body. Last night had been… most memorable, and the ease in his limbs, the feeling that any blockages in the nerves that ran through his body had been removed, was proof. Jim had accused him, sotto voce and with a quirk of his mouth that hinted at his own amused satisfaction, of being “fucked out and relaxed” as they’d strolled away from breakfast and headed for the small public room in the city government center, and Spock had been unable to deny it.

Commodore Kirk stood on the low stage. Spock remained in the first row of the meager audience as the formal pronouncement was read, and he showed no emotion. Logic and an understanding of the situation had provided him with every confidence Jim would be exonerated. Despite the criticisms that he had not hesitated to log during their voyage, he believed Jim deserved the board’s favorable finding. Yes, it was appropriate that some of the Enterprise’s activities be scrutinized, but balance among intention and execution and circumstances must be considered. Spock himself had been called to testify before the board weeks earlier; he had spoken truthfully, with the firm conviction that Jim Kirk learned from his mistakes and executed the will of the Federation to the best of his ability, while always considering the safety of his crew. There had seldom been a black and white decision for the captain of the ship to make. Thankfully, the members of the board, three of whom were seasoned commanders from active service themselves, seemed to understand that.

The president of the Chamber of Commerce and two of her assistants were present in the small room, as well as the five board members and a scattering of the civic leaders from Luna City. Captain Rajani, commander of the Starfleet Luna Base, had made an appearance early and then slipped away before the chairperson opened the floor to questions. Spock listened patiently while Ralph Randolph began with “Were you expecting this result, Commodore? What had you intended to do if the Board ruled against you? I notice that you are not represented by counsel.”

Spock was planning the rest of his day. Jim might wish to visit the Featherstone Museum, and there was a cocktail party with local dignitaries scheduled for late in the afternoon that they both must attend, but Spock had already toured as much of Luna as he wished. The Paris evaluation team had forwarded an interesting wave signature from the explosion that he wished to examine in detail.

Earlier in the day, Fahtima Gabon had been working in the back of the room with her cousin, a thin man with a clear sense of purpose and an obviously hot temper. He appeared to be the expert in the holographic recordings, for he had directed Gabon with impatience in how to assist him, and twice he had raised his voice in a way that Spock found disturbing. Spock had glanced at the diminutive woman, but she had not reacted in any way that encouraged Spock to interfere in what was, after all, her own affair. He had turned back to the stage then, where Kirk was waiting for the press conference to begin, and he had noted Kirk’s eyes on the dark-skinned man as well.

That had been forty-five minutes ago. Now Ms. Gabon asked Kirk what he perceived the purpose of the Prime Directive to be. Spock was amused; what a perfect opportunity for his lover to make one of his inspired, optimistic, and only-somewhat-staged speeches. Kirk didn’t disappoint him and took up more than five minutes with an examination of the role of Starfleet and the Federation in exploration.
Sooner than anticipated, the meeting was over and the few people present began to disperse. Spock allowed others the opportunity to speak to the commodore privately before they left. After a few minutes, Spock noticed that Rajani had reappeared, and he interrupted a conversation that Kirk was having with the board chair. Apparently Rajani had something important to say that wouldn’t wait. Less than a minute later Kirk beckoned Spock to join them.

It seemed that Spock’s plans for research and Kirk’s hopes of playing the tourist were to be discarded for duty.

“Sorry about this,” the commander of Luna Base said, and he included Spock in the apology. “But Representative Pren’felit is already here and we promised him a starship. With the Hood called away, the only one we’ve got now is the Enterprise. It makes sense for the two of you to act as tour guides. It was Admiral Komack’s idea.”

*****

Kirk was quiet as he, Spock, and Rajani rode in a small cart along an arched passageway towards the heart of the Starfleet base. Pedestrian traffic proceeded through the center in opposite flowing lanes, and the ubiquitous electric carts had two lanes, one to each side. On Luna base, they were the best way to get around, and Rajani had commandeered one as soon as he had been able to hustle them away from the board members.

“Surely the Enterprise is not in any condition to host visitors,” Spock had initially objected. A starship half-dismantled in orbit 5,000 kilometers beyond Space Dock, which was in turn in a generous orbit around the Moon, was not necessarily a safe place to be—for visitors or for the man who had once captained her.

But Rajani had assured them that parts of the ship were still intact and perfectly safe for those not in work envirosuits. He’d taken the precaution of clearing the entire project in anticipation of their assent; there wouldn’t be any workers suddenly cutting power or interfering with the pleasure they wanted to afford the important visitor.

“If we’re going to do this, let’s do it right,” Kirk had abruptly decided. “We’ve got ninety minutes, right? We’ll need updates on what’s been accomplished so far, so at least we know what we’re talking about. And I don’t want to inadvertently invite our guest to step into vacuum.”

“I’ll set you up in a briefing room with all the information you need ten minutes away by cart,” Rajani had said, and he took the steering wheel. Spock sat next to him and Kirk was left to think in the back seat.

More than a year into the mission Bones had called him to sickbay, and he’d been subjected to a lecture about personifying inanimate objects and how unhealthy it might be to devote his major relationship to the vessel he commanded. He’d resented that talk mightily. He well remembered the jeers that underclassmen at the Academy had reserved for older officers too wrapped up in their ships, and he didn’t think he fell into that category. Yes, he loved his ship and his duty and the life he was leading, but that didn’t mean his feelings were obsessive or unhealthy, and so he’d told McCoy.

“Fine,” the doctor had nodded, “just make sure it stays that way. Normal feelings of responsibility and pride, those are all right. Don’t take it further than that.”

It had only been much later, when he was alone one night in his cabin, that he had acknowledged to himself that McCoy might have had a point. That had been after the mess on Omicron Ceti III, and what had saved them all had been his inability to abandon the inanimate metal shell that was his
lovely lady. He’d had a hard talk with himself that night, recognizing dangers and possibilities. He didn’t want to become…un-balanced, and he saw the pathway down which he might have gone.

And now, he was convinced he hadn’t trod that path. He wasn’t one of those people whose lives fell apart when they were transferred or retired or, in his case, forced into a ground position, and his feelings of reluctance at the prospect of seeing his ship in pieces were perfectly normal.

A little distraction was in order, but the view didn’t provide much. The concrete walls flashed by monotonously as the cart hummed its way deeper into the ‘base. All of Luna City was tunnels outside the larger public areas, and it was one of Kirk’s least favorite spots in the solar system. Humans had started development on the Moon before they quite had the concept of living-off-the-Earth down right, and the whole area could have used a big overhaul. Besides, it had grown tawdry. Cadets usually loved being posted here for any of their summer assignments, because the nightlife was, well, constant. It was always night underground. He allowed himself a small, reflective smile. Okay, so he’d had a good time here when he was a lot younger. But age and experience did lend a certain perspective.

Which was maybe what he needed now: perspective. He was about to show an important political personage he’d never met the remnants of what he’d once been intensely proud of, but the Enterprise was only a shell of what she’d been, and he wasn’t sure what he’d find when they beamed over.

He had two years at least to acquaint himself with her recommissioning and redesign, and he shouldn’t have had to confront the Enterprise, impotent, at all. He wanted to remember her strong and with the core of her engines throbbing, all her power under his control as he stood on the bridge and gave commands….

And what Bones would have to say to that, he thought wryly, didn’t bear thinking of. Delusions of grandeur, probably.

Kirk looked overhead as the cart slowed. Somewhere in…his head swiveled as he calculated…that direction, his ship waited for him again.

*****

Fahtima stood before her room at the Kensington Selene hotel early in the afternoon, feeling in the pocket of her long, flowing red pants for the magnetic key. She glanced down the hall both ways; no one was there to see her retreat into her room at an hour when most people were out and about on business or pursuing the pleasures of tourism.

That morning, at the official Starfleet function where the Ethical Standards board had declared Commodore James Tiberius Kirk innocent of any violation of the Prime Directive, she’d dutifully supported Ralph Randolph by taking notes and helping Hamza with his holograph equipment. She’d asked three questions at the press conference following the announcement, since the only other news organizations there were the AP stringer and a few local outlets. The meeting hadn’t garnered much attention from the media; she could only suppose that it was Randolph’s friendship with James Kirk that had brought The Galactic News to the Moon at all. Randy was increasingly powerful, it seemed, and when he deemed an event worthy of coverage, the News listened.

But now that her duty to the News had been discharged, she had another obligation. The duty to Hamza and to the Eternist cause. It was almost time for the attack on the Hood and on the Andorian Hamza hated.

She closed the door behind her, sealed it with both locks, and engaged the privacy sign.. Almost
time. She could do this.

Fahtima confronted the room and did not know quite where to go. She was a little early, so there were minutes enough to have second thoughts, to get nervous. She walked over to the fake window at the far end of the narrow room. It displayed the default picture, a vividly-colored desert view of low scrub bushes and yellow, caked soil with a clear sky overhead. She hadn’t bothered to change it when she’d checked in yesterday, for no matter how authentic the scenes looked, she knew they were not what they seemed. Deceptions. She was trapped many hundreds of meters below the lunar surface, and no picture could change that.

Fahtima surveyed the room. This would be an extended effort, more than she’d ever tried before. She wasn’t sure she could…. Where should she sit during the time it would take to kill? Should she recline on the bed? Sit in the chair before the small table? Before she could decide, she noticed the blinking light by the comm unit on the nightstand. Someone had left her a message.

The Kensington Selene was not a high-end hotel; no visual was provided. But Fahtima recognized her mentor’s voice right away.

“Hi, Tima, it’s Randy. I’ve got great news: I’ve got a chance for an exclusive interview with Representative Pren’felit. I’ve been trying to get to him for weeks.”

Ah, that explained Randy’s decision to head for Luna City. An interest in Kirk had been a smokescreen; he was after the most controversial figure in the Federation Council.

She returned her attention to the tape.

“…tour he was supposed to take of the Hood? It’s been canceled because the ship just left Space Dock for places unknown. You might want to follow up on that the next few hours, find out where it’s headed if you can. Check with Solari in Luna Central Ops, he owes me a favor or two.”

Foreboding tightened her chest. Going after the Hood was impossible now. It must already be past the orbit of Jupiter and ready to enter warp. It didn’t matter if Pren’felit wasn’t aboard anyway. And Hamza had planned so carefully. He would be angry. Very, very angry….

“…fleet’s taking him through the Enterprise, even though it’s not in the best shape. I’ve managed to wangle an invitation, which is good because there’s only a small group going over there for safety reasons, and I should have lots of opportunity to get to Pren’felit.”

All the strength left her limbs and she sat with a thump on the very edge of the bed. Her arms flailed to prevent her from slipping to the floor, but her thoughts were clogged with despair. Randy….

“…wish I could take you with me for the photo op. I know you’d love being on a starship, but Jim said only one person from the press and that was it. Next time, I promise, I’ll see if I can bring you along. Commander Spock’ll be there. I’ll tell him you said hello, okay?

“Anyway, I wanted to check in. We’ll be beaming over in a few minutes. Great scoop, huh?”

With a keen of anguish Fahtima doubled over on herself and buried her gasps in her lap. Too much, it was too much to ask of her. Yes, she could follow Pren’felit where he went, she had his mental signature in her mind and should be able to home in on it, even on half-a-starship in orbit around Space Dock. It was what Hamza would expect her to do. The plan they’d had for the Hood, it should work on any starship, should kill any of the beings who were there, though there wouldn’t be nearly so many as Hamza’s vindictive spirit demanded. But…not Randy. And not the man who
had spoken to her so kindly yesterday about fate and the solace of friends.

She wasn’t prepared for this.

Her blunt fingers clawed at the bedspread that billowed around her hopelessness. “No,” she denied. “No.”

She’d been prepared to assault the Hood. She didn’t know anybody there and she would carefully avoid contact with any individual, as she had managed to do in Friendship Hall…with the exception of Spock.

Yes, Hamza had said he was next in line for their revenge—how dare he be anything but an acceptable human?—but Fahtima had maintained the hope that she wouldn’t have to…. After yesterday, how could she? Spock had told her she could sing.

The minutes ticked by and still she sat, immobilized, hunched over and staring at nothing, trying desperately to not think at all. But she couldn’t. Instead she imagined leaving this room and seeking some diversion. She would go on a guided tour of the Highlands, perhaps, or maybe she’d visit the casinos and gamble the afternoon away. And then, in early evening, she’d get on the scheduled public shuttle with Hamza, not admitting that she hadn’t done anything. Hamza would be suspicious, he always had seen into her heart, but he wouldn’t be able to say anything in front of others, and so she’d be safe until they landed. She’d slip away to the bathroom in the terminal and then….

But where could she go? So long ago she’d considered escaping to Khartoum, but that had been a child’s folly. This fantasy was, too.

Or she could…. She could do it. She could stay in this room and reach out with her power and implement the meticulously detailed plan that Hamza had presented her with, one designed to show their power, although she’d apply it to the Enterprise and not the Hood. She told herself that far fewer people would die. She would benefit from Randy’s death, for she was privy to his contacts and his methods and though the News might not promote her to his beat she would almost definitely have more responsibility and more pay. She and Hamza might be able to afford a larger house in a better neighborhood.

She would cry when told of Randy’s death. Yes. That would be easy.

And Kirk. What did she really know of him? A man who had been polite to her in the corridor of the rehab center, that was it. So what if he was dearly-loved by someone? Weren’t most people? Weren’t most people except for her?

And then, what of…Spock?

All her rationalizations fell to pieces. She threw herself on the bed. She blanked her eyes with an arm flung over them, but she knew better than to think she could blank her real vision. Nothing had ever dimmed the brightness in her mind.

She knew him. She knew him as only one other person ever had, but now the pathway between Kirk and Spock, between beloved and beloved, was well and truly blocked. So now only she witnessed this abomination’s true self. Truthfully, she could never stop herself from knowing him, as any time she was near him the siren call of his spirit demanded that she sail within.

…if he had not met James Kirk, and if his sexuality did trend in that direction….

*His hand on her elbow, steadying her as she prepared to skip down the theater steps for the first*
time.

The look of shared satisfaction on his face when she lifted glowing eyes to his, in triumph over her accomplishment.

The words they had exchanged when he left. “I hope to see you again, Ms. Gabon.” And behind his words, she read his surprise that he had enjoyed their time together as much as he had, and his honest desire to pursue their acquaintance.

…if he had not met James Kirk, and if his sexuality did trend in that direction….

“Fool,” she whispered.

Spock had met Jim Kirk. He was not attracted to her sexually. And if he were, what could she offer him? Nothing.

No, Commander Spock Xtmprsqzntwlfb was not for her. Even any friendship they could construct would be forever warped by her incursions into his inner self and her guilt over what she had done and would do again.

She concentrated on working the air in and then out of her constricted throat. What should she do?

She knew her answer. It had been there all along, from the moment she’d heard Randy’s message and realized its implications.

Of course, she would continue with the plan.

She had promised Hamza, and he was counting on her. Their actions were important to the cause that was so essential to him even if not to her. If he succeeded in this campaign of terror, then once it was revealed that he was responsible, he would be elevated in the Eternist hierarchy and gain a self-worth that he lacked and yet desperately needed.

She imagined Hamza confident enough of himself not to hurt anyone, including her. There would be no slaps, no blows to her shoulder that forced her to the floor, and no irrational swings of mood when he faced any opposition. Hamza as he was meant to be. He would smile more often and value her…. If she gave him what he needed.

She sat up in the bed with her legs over the side, calmer and resolute. She had known Hamza all her life and owed almost everything she was to him. Without his steady financial support, without the knowledge that someone outside the compound in the great wide world thought of her, she would never have had the chance to meet Spock, and she certainly wouldn’t have fulfilled a lifetime dream and flown in a shuttle to Luna City. Wasn’t all her life owed to Hamza? After this was over, and she never had to use the light in her mind in these ways again, she would live with him in gratitude and peace.

Fahtima took a deep, cleansing breath and then scrubbed at her eyes with her hands. She walked into the bathroom and grabbed a wet cloth to blot her tears away. In the mirror, her long-sleeved red blouse and red pants glared at her. They marked her as guilty, though no one would know as she took the shuttle to Earth this evening.

The room looked the same when she emerged, but she knew she was fundamentally changed. Hamza could trust her. She was committed to him. Now she knew that.

She blanked the view of the desert to a dark nothingness.
The base transporter released the small group in the deck three briefing room. As he always did after transportation, Kirk checked to see that everyone had safely materialized. Representative Pren’felit and his aide and nephew Neari’lon, Spock, Randy, Lori Ciani—who had been enchanted with the chance to visit a starship, as her ’fleet career had been almost entirely administrative—and two security guards Kirk knew only by name: Symon and Goldthwaite. The guards didn’t carry phasers, they were only window dressing, but Rajani’s idea of protocol when a member of the Federation Council was involved had compelled him to add them to their party.

Briskly, Kirk forced himself to survey their surroundings, but even prepared as he was, the barren room in which they’d materialized was a shock. He would hardly have recognized it if he hadn’t decided on the coordinates himself. All the furniture was gone. The lights were low, not regulation norm. And had the room always been this small? He sniffed; there was a metallic odor, not musty but certainly not the pristine and carefully monitored air that had filled the ship’s hallways and rooms while she was in glorious flight, a high-flying ambassador of the Federation’s strength.

And, final indignity to his sense of order and neatness and the way a starship should be, the door had been left agape, as it was undoubtedly bereft of the circuit that allowed it to sense when it needed to open or close.

Other than that it could have been any other day on the Enterprise. Maybe after a Klingon invasion.

But after this refit, she’d be better than ever. And maybe the walls of the briefing rooms would be a livelier color than the gray he’d become heartily sick of. And her engines: if they managed to get the transwarp engines installed, they would take them further into the depths of the unknown, and faster, than any ship now in the fleet.

“Starfleet designed this room for bridge conferences,” he said with a sweep of his hand, directing his comment to the Andorians. “But in practice it was rarely used for that. When there’s an emergency on the bridge, decisions have to be made right away, and there isn’t any time to move essential personnel down three decks and have a reasoned discussion.”

“Indeed.” Spock had already crouched on his haunches to examine the connections that had been severed from the floor to where the table computer console had been. He looked up with a fiberglass conduit flopping limply in his hand. “Such a course of action would have jeopardized the ship and crew in many situations. Consultation on the bridge itself resulted in satisfactory action.”

Ciani asked, “So is that one of the recommendations you’ve made for changes?”

Kirk nodded. “A small room directly off the bridge for when time permits discussion would be best. Representative Pren’felit, if you’ll follow me, I suggest we visit the bridge first.”

Pren’felit wore formal Andorian dress: a stiff white skirt that fell just above his knees and a thin purple sash that was tied around his ribs, and that was it besides the brown rega-hide boots that encased his spindly blue legs. He agreed with the characteristically sibilant “Yessss, Commodore Kirk” of an Andorian speaking Standard, and he followed Kirk out into the hallway.

The turbo was still functioning this high up in the disk, although the reports Kirk had read made it clear that such wasn’t the case throughout the ship. They’d have to use access ladders if they wanted to get to any deck beyond auxiliary control, for instance, and the engine room or a tour of the nacelles was out of the question.

The lift accommodated all eight of them, but without much room to spare; the close confines had
prompted another modification Kirk had recommended. Dual lifts would have been very useful when they’d been trying to evacuate injured from the bridge and bring in their replacements, not to mention the added safety of redundant systems. He had found it startling how design elements he had accepted without question during the early part of his ’fleet career had become irksome or dangerous when seen from the eyes of a captain. Having the ultimate responsibility for the lives of his crew had sharpened his perceptions.

In the turbolift, Kirk was very conscious of Spock standing supportively behind his left shoulder and of Ciani with her wide blue eyes. He was certain Spock was aware of his ambivalent feelings and undoubtedly shared them, but he wondered if Ciani had any idea of the emotions this tour was producing. She seemed to be an intelligent, compassionate woman, and they’d had a good time the night before at the hockey game, but what did she know of the ties that bound a man to the ship that had sheltered, nurtured, and fought for him? No, the Enterprise wasn’t alive, and she wasn’t his love, but—defiantly he straightened and tightened his hold on the turbo toggle—in a way he would never be able to explain to Bones, he did love her.

The doors swished open to where he had spent so many hours defining himself and serving the Federation. No refit report he read could have prepared him for what he saw, but at least he’d been warned. It had been masochistic to include the bridge in this tour at all.

Ciani let out a soft “Oh” of dismay. She glanced over to Kirk in perceptive sympathy, but he ignored her.

Perhaps only half of the recessed lighting was still functional, and it was set at a minimal level. He was tempted to instruct “Computer, lights up to one hundred percent” as he would have under other circumstances, but he feared he wouldn’t be obeyed. The central computer had been lobotomized. Only some parts of it worked now, and the primitive brain that controlled life support, lighting and other basic functions had been diverted through the construction computer housed at the base of the engineering hull. No voice saying “Computer working” would answer his commands; it had been silenced.

The nav and helm console had been dismantled and only supporting stumps half a meter high remained. The console chairs were gone, as was the captain’s chair. Except for a square slightly lighter in color than the rest of the deck, there was no indication that there had ever been anything there, in the center of the bridge, at all. The viewscreen that had been his eye on the rest of the universe—outside the small universe they’d created within the ship—had been removed, so that a blank bulkhead stared at him. The central well was littered with a random debris of wires and Habri conduits and some memory crystals that had been carelessly crushed underfoot.

The upper circle of stations had fared better. Two of the eight chairs were still there, keeping watch forlornly over science and engineering, one to each side, but none of the stations was active. No lights enlivened the boards and no small twittering sounds of the ship “thinking” intruded on the metallic air.

“The sssship is not asss intact assss I had been led to believe,” Pren’felit said softly.

“The bridge is scheduled for complete dismantling within three days when the hulls are temporarily separated,” Spock said in a dispassionate voice. “After that, it will be opened to vacuum as structural changes are begun.”

“So you can see,” Kirk said, “that we’re lucky to be able to show you even this much and breathe in the process. Over here, Representative Pren’felit, was the engineering station….”

*****
Spock would not have believed he would be unduly affected by the sight of the bridge dismantled, but it seemed that once some small sliver of emotion was allowed into a Vulcán’s life, more emotion—unseemly as it might be—would follow. Or so the teachers of his youth had said. He supposed, therefore, that his dismay on seeing the wreckage of the Enterprise was understandable. That didn’t make it any more welcome.

He directly proceeded to where he was most familiar: the seat in front of the science station. At least it had not disappeared as the captain’s chair had. Although the console appeared to be inactive and unresponsive to voice commands, Spock had programmed a disk while still on Luna to provide access to at least part of the remaining mainframe by rerouting some functions from the construction computer. He sat and inserted it, and immediately the familiar sounds and lights of the board came alive.

Of course, everyone prowling their way around turned to watch.

“Got her working again, Mister Spock?” Kirk asked.

“Negative, Cap—Commodore. Only a grade D overhaul would allow the analysis usually provided by this station. However, I can demonstrate to Representative Pren’felit some small portion of what the science station was designed to do, if he is interested.” He declined to specify his estimated percentage of computer capacity, as he had no impulse towards frivolity and the number was depressingly low.

Pren’felit asked intelligent questions that were not too elementary, and Spock spent some ten minutes explaining what he could, although with the computer and its tie-ins so diminished his explanations were not always accompanied by demonstration. Twice he was compelled to decline to answer on the grounds of security clearance. The Andorian backed down with good grace.

Eventually Pren’felit and Kirk went to stand in front of the forlorn space where the nav and helm consoles had been. Ciani came to take their place. “This isn’t what you’re used to, is it?” Ciani asked, leaning on the edge of the console, exactly where Kirk had often positioned himself during the mission. In the early years, Spock had taken an obscure pleasure from Kirk’s presence at his station, a reaction that had slowly metamorphosed into an awareness of Kirk’s physicality, of the subtle scent of a human male, of the way Kirk crossed his arms and stretched the fabric of his tunic sleeves with his muscles. Now Ciani’s dress uniform tunic moved to accommodate and accentuate her breasts. Spock experienced an illogical flare of resentment that he easily quelled.

“That is correct. The vessel is much changed.”

“I’ve never been on a starship before, and I’m not sure that I have now. But it must have been magnificent when you served here.”

Spock nodded and found that he appreciated her words, almost of sympathy over what had been lost.

“And he…” she nodded towards where Kirk, Pren’felit, his nephew and Randolph were clustered in conversation, “…must have been quite a captain. I wish I’d seen him at work.”

Spock swiveled in his chair to face her; the mechanism squeaked loudly as he did so, something it had never done when the ship had been maintained by the ever-efficient Commander Fraser.

“Indeed, James Kirk is the best starship commander that Starfleet has ever seen. No other vessel can match the numbers of successful first contact situations under his command. No other captain confronted the adversity he did: attacks by Romulans, Klingons, Tholians, even other Starfleet vessels. And yet the ship, and most of its crew, survived. The five year record of the Enterprise is
“You really admire him, don’t you? I mean, besides….”

“Understandably, Commander,” he said, ignoring her awkward reference to his relationship with Kirk. “I and many others were witness to his brilliance as a commander every day for almost five years. On a most practical level, James Kirk saved my life—” he remembered how he had been shot by a flintlock on Neural, of Vulcan, of how Kirk had fought for him in front of Captain Tracy on Omega IV “—several times.”

“That’s a good reason why I chose not to serve on starships,” she declared. “Administrative service is much safer than being out on the front lines of exploration and defense.”

He said lightly, “And quite necessary.”

“We also serve who only stand and push data padds,” she provided with a self-deprecating smile. “Now, since Jim is busy with the others, would you give me some additional details about a few things?”

“How may I help you?”

“An elaboration of some points you made to the representative. For example, the tie-in between the engines and the bridge. I’m going to be spending most of my time from now on working on the transwarp project with Jim, so maybe you could give me a practical understanding of how bridge and engine requirements mesh, especially during emergencies.”

The question was a pertinent one to which he had already given much thought, and Spock was happy to accommodate her request. He folded his hands in his lap and prepared to speak at length. The read-outs on the science console, mute and unorganized without the guiding control of the central computer, he ignored.

*****

Into the dark vastness of space Fahtima cast her light, illuminating it. She did not know if she could do what she and Hamza had planned. Always she had worked to suppress her abilities and blanket any evidence of what made her not-normal. Now, for the first time in her life, she stretched past the bounds of the Earth. It was like extending her hand to grab something on a shelf deep in a closet, when she didn’t know the shape of the container she was seeking and didn’t know where on the shelf it might be.

The Enterprise. The lives aboard her. Representative Pren’felit. A lesson that she and Hamza would teach to the Federation. There is power here that can hurt you even far off the Earth. Listen to us!

She skipped across the surface of the minds she encountered, evaluating and then rejecting them. Passengers aboard a shuttle taking off from Luna base. Sleeping workers on a construction housing unit spinning to provide artificial gravity, soon to rise to begin their work day in envirosuits. A woman on a shuttle-bike, her thoughts busy with the details of a message she was to deliver to her boss who owned a restaurant on the upper levels of Space Dock. A family in a rented and obsolete ship, chattering happily about the trip to Mars on which they were just embarking.

Fahtima paused over them, feeding on their excitement and the feeling of togetherness they had forged among the four of them. They made her smile as she lay on the bed in the Kensington Selene. They had saved for years to take the journey on their own, not on one of the big and
artificial commercial liners. The parents loved their two children dearly. She hoped they had a
good time.

Further on. The starship must be somewhere near….

It was Spock who pulled her in. One moment she was casting about in empty space, seeking, and
the next she was suddenly cascading through the portal of his mind, sliding first into his conscious
speech Engineer Scott frequently complained about the relays that functioned somewhat less
efficiently than his standards to his subconscious and then to a recent memory that hovered just this
side of conscious perception….

As he pulled his penis from Jim’s tight sheath, one last thrill of pleasure sang through him, and he
gasped as he came free. He collapsed without moving away, straight down onto Jim’s back. His
lover grunted as the air whooshed out of him.

“Jim,” Spock panted, and he managed to kiss the sweat-tacky skin beneath his lips. His arms went
round and under to grasp as much of Kirk to him as he could.

Minutes passed. His breathing and Jim’s gentle exhalations created a symphony of satisfaction
and ease—and exhaustion. Spock was almost asleep when Kirk mumbled something into the
pillow. It sounded like “I’ll have to go out with beautiful women to hockey games more often if this
is the result. Love you.” Spock took the song they had made with him into slumber.

Frantically Fahtima backpedaled out of the memory. She didn’t want to know any of it, not the
slide of Kirk’s soft skin under her fingertips, and not the buttery hot grasp of Kirk’s anal passage
around her penis, and not the wordless joy that filled her as she lifted her face to the stars and thrust
and thrust again as Kirk opened before her….

She panted, there on the bed where she would never join with anyone, in a cruel mockery of
arousal she would never be able to satisfy. Not like they had, together, and for an instant she really
hated Spock and his lover and how they copulated with such abandon and such trust.

The hatred, bright as a supernova for an instant, faded as quickly as it had burst into existence, but
the knowledge that it had been there stunned her—weakened her as the lovers had been weakened
after their physical ecstasy.

Her light was banked and she was only a woman in a hotel room. Just poor Fahtima, wanting to be
loved….

Fahtima the strong. Fahtima who would not be deterred. She had already decided that. And now
she knew where they were. Her eyes closed and she was outside, inside and around the Enterprise
and able to prevent herself from slipping into the pulsing enticement that was Commander Spock.
No, not for her. Instead, if she twisted her perception a little, like so, she could see the core of the
matter/antimatter engines and all the protective devices that existed to keep them from annihilating
those they served. As she and Hamza had known it would be on the Hood, it was the same here.

One small push of a few molecules had made the difference between an inactive explosive and one
that killed. What was required here was similar to what she had done in Paris, just moving
molecules. It was a little more complicated, and she’d have to actively maintain the new
configuration, but she could do it. She wanted to do it. Not for her the consolations of the flesh or
the reassurance of affection, so what was left? Serving Hamza, serving the goddess who meted out
justice and despair. The thread of her life had been spun and she knew its nature. Here, Fahtima
determined destiny.
First, into the layers of the protective bulkheads and the fields, examine their structures, see how easy it was to change and make the walls permeable. Laughable, how easy it was. A simple pull, a meager twist and it was done.

No one would suffer until the very end, and there was consolation in that. At least, so the references they had researched claimed. Tissue deterioration, when it finally began, would be swift. This attack was less spectacular than the explosive, but more insidious and thus more frightening in its way. Who could be safe from it?

Who could be safe from me, from Fahtima, from Lachesis? Your thread shall be so long and no longer. Even you, my almost-friend….

*****

“…therefore recommend the use of sonic circuits in the secondary implementation phase.”

Ciani nodded. “I’ll remember that. Thanks for the information, Commander.”

“I hope it will prove useful.” Spock had attempted to keep his lecture as non-technical as possible, but still he knew he had strayed into somewhat arcane territory, and he was unsure that the woman had understood all he presented. She was highly praised by Wesley and obviously was a competent individual, but she did not have a science background. Still, Jim was to be in charge of the project, and Spock had every confidence in his ability to assimilate technical material.

Kirk now stood over by the closed turbo doors. “I think we’ve mastered all the secrets the bridge has to offer for now,” he announced to them all. “Representative Pren’felit, would you be interested in auxiliary control next?”

In anticipation of the tour continuing elsewhere, Spock stood and began a systematic shutdown of his station. He had rarely relinquished the science console at end of shift without running a check of essential elements first, and it was second nature to him to key in the appropriate codes to begin an evaluation now. Besides, the results should satisfy his idly curious question as to how significantly the computer had been disabled.

The readouts should have flashed before his eyes in fewer than two seconds. The fact that they did not he ascribed to the ship’s debilitated condition. It was five seconds before the first numbers took form on the screen within his hooded viewer.

“Spock?” Kirk called from where everyone else was clustered and ready to leave.

“One moment, Commodore.” This was most curious. The Golding measurement was more than twice what it should be. While inconsequential when the ship was out of warp, Spock could think of no action on the part of the refit crew that would produce such a result. He manipulated the control to the side of the viewer and it was inoperative.

Seconds later Kirk was by his side. Spock sat and activated the viewscreen overhead, then he unfolded the keyboard from the base of the viewer. Kirk regarded him with serious eyes. “A problem?” he asked quietly.

“I am not certain…” Spock replied in an equally soft voice, although their efforts to shield their guests were undoubtedly ineffective. Golding data led him to examine the AG-8 quantity. Real concern swept through him as he saw it was equally skewed. There was something seriously wrong, but what? Unlikely as it seemed, was it possible that….

A moment later he had his answer, but he rejected the figure on the screen above them. There were
supposedly foolproof safeguards to prevent….

“What?” Kirk asked, also frowning at the numbers as they flashed by.

Spock did not speak. He ran a second test, his fingers flying over the keyboard. The results were the same. A third, more oblique approach took another five seconds but yielded figures just as ominous.

The chair squeaked again as Spock turned to look up at the impatiently-waiting Kirk.

“Commodore, we must evacuate immediately. The Whitman-Nu radiation levels have exceeded the recommended maximum by two hundred and seventy-two percent.”

Kirk’s eyes widened and his lips parted. In another man, Spock would have expected curses, but this was the former captain of the Enterprise confronted with an emergency. He could see the mantle of responsibility descend in an instant.

“Could the figures be distorted because of….” Kirk searched for a reasonable cause, “some damage caused by the refit? Because the computer isn’t at full capacity? How accurate is your data?”

Spock was shaking his head as Kirk spoke. “Accurate to ninety-four point five percent, with an uncertainty factor of three percent.”

“It’s real, then. How long have we been aboard?” Kirk snapped.

“Twenty-one minutes and thirty-seven seconds.”

“Too long already,” Kirk realized. “Especially for the Andorians.” As he spoke, he was reaching for the communicator on the belt under his tunic. “Kirk to Luna base. Kirk to Luna base.”

Their concern had been impossible to conceal, and by now everyone else was crowded behind Kirk; there was nothing Spock could do to soften the implications when Kirk was clearly calling for help. Ciani’s eyes widened with alarm, and Randolph’s classically wide forehead was furrowed. Pren’felit’s antennae rippled.

“What does this mean?” the Andorian asked.

Kirk didn’t answer him, but stared at the communicator as if it were a particularly obtuse ensign instead. No voice issued from it: only static.

Kirk closed the communicator, opened it again, slowly and carefully, and then repeated his call to base. When there was still no response, he caught Spock’s gaze, and a message passed between them. Jim knew as well as he did what this meant. Something was blocking transmission….

Deliberately, Kirk pressed the emergency recall button. It had been designed to work under the most harrowing of circumstances. Ten seconds passed as the anxious group waited in silence, but there was no prickle of a transporter lock taking hold.

“What’s happening?” Randolph demanded. “Why are you—”

Kirk rounded on the security personnel standing at the back of the group. “Ms. Goldthwaite, give me your communicator. Symon, yours, too.”

He handed the woman’s comm unit to Spock and took Symon’s himself. “Let’s try these.”
Spock had little hope that they would be effective—what were the chances that the commodore’s unit was the only one inoperable—but he snapped the unit open and called for base as Kirk did the same. The effort was useless.

“Commodore Kirk, I demand to know what issssss the problem….”

*****

Kirk closed the communicator with a flick of his wrist and an eerie feeling of déjà vu. He’d come to the bridge on a sort of pilgrimage to different and better days, and now he was thrust back in time and reminded that sometimes those days had been harrowing and dangerous. He hadn’t expected to be attacked on the shambles of his former life. And he had no time for reflection or they’d all be dead.

He turned to Spock. “We need a solution, fast. Alternative forms of communication? A way to shut down the rays? Some sort of protective shelter? Solutions, First Officer.” Without missing a beat he swung around to confront the group behind him.

“Somehow, extremely dangerous radiation is being emitted from the warp engines in the nacelles. It’s not ever supposed to happen given the extreme safeguards in place, but we’ve got to deal with it. We’ve got maybe thirty more minutes before the effects are irreversible for the Andorians and maybe another ten minutes after that for the rest of us.”

Ciani’s hand went to her mouth and her face was ashen. Randolph hurriedly asked, “Won’t Space Dock detect the radiation—what was it you called it? Whitman-Nu, you said. Won’t they detect it and know enough to beam us out of here?”

Kirk shook his head grimly. Whoever—and he had no doubt whatsoever that it was a who—whoever was doing this had planned well. Though he’d been under the impression that what was being done to them was theoretically impossible…. And he’d heard that before, recently.

“Whitman-Nu rays are deadly and detectable over a range of maybe half a kilometer. After that, they disintegrate and leave almost no measurable signature. While we’re on this ship, we’re in danger. But someone only half a kilometer away will have no idea we’re in trouble and won’t be affected by the radiation. And we’re not scheduled to check in for another hour.”

“Then we musssst get off the sssship.”

Kirk swung around to the science station. “Spock?”

The Vulcán’s fingers had been constantly busy, attempting to extract information from the limited resources of the crippled sensor array and computer. His lips were pursed when he began to report.

“The shuttlecraft were removed one week ago. We do not have control over our running lights from the bridge, so we cannot signal. We do not have the time nor the means to attempt to stop the radiation at its source. Environmental suits are a possibility, but there is no data for me to determine if they are still aboard and stored in the hangar deck.”

“No.” Kirk’s voice was hard and his tone definitive. “Too risky.”

“What do mean?” Randolph put in. “I say we should go. We’ve got to take our chances.”

“Mr. Randolph,” Spock said, “the commodore has good reasons for his decision.”

“What are they?”

“Major passages on this ship are exposed to vacuum. Construction materials block others. Under
Kirk finished for him. “And forty-five minutes is too long.” He swung back to the science station. “So the only option we’ve got is—”

Spock nodded. “The observation pod.”

“Is it still here? Can we get there in time?” Spock was already accessing data furiously.


The representative had been more or less given into his care, and he was not going to die on Kirk’s watch. “It’s a small pod,” he explained, “that we eject from the ship to gather information during ion storms. It’s got the best shielding as a result. It will cut the radiation to a minimal level, possibly protect us completely. And we can launch it to get away from the source of the radiation and catch somebody’s attention.”

“It is still here,” Spock reported. He rose and indicated his hooded viewer. “Commodore. This is our projected pathway.”

Kirk leaned over a schematic of the interior of the ship. The track Spock proposed was a bold line zigzagging down from the bridge, along the emergency serviceway of the supporting dorsal strut and then slashing through the top of the engineering hull to where the pod rested, nestled high on the port side. It was not direct, but not as bad as Kirk had anticipated. Time was of the essence; they couldn’t afford major detours, and he thought this was something they could do. But….

“The lower separation door,” he said. He straightened, thinking furiously. “It’s been closed.”

“Although it was not scheduled to be so for another few days, someone on this project is ahead of schedule.”

“What?” asked Randolph, looking from one to the other of them. “Can’t we open it?”

“What door?” Pren’felit demanded.

Kirk sat with a thump into the science chair and forced himself to answer, when everything in him urged him to speed. But these people were civilians and they wouldn’t obey orders as Ciani and the guards would. They needed an explanation.

“The separation door is for when the primary hull is separated from the engineering hull. There’re two of them, one at the base of the disk and the other at the base of the dorsal strut. And they’re designed so that they can’t be opened unless there’s someone on both sides of the door, though the controls aren’t directly opposite each other. They’re on separate decks. Those are all safety features.”

Spock was standing with his hand to his chin, a pose he rarely adopted that showed the level of his concern. Suddenly, he straightened.

“Commodore, I believe I could—”

Kirk knew what he was going to say before he completed the sentence, as the solution had just exploded with horrifying clarity in his own thoughts. He propelled himself out of the chair, leaving it spinning behind him. “No!”

“It is the only way,” Spock said. “My Vulcan constitution makes it possible.”
“There’s got to be another way. It’s too risky.”

“We have already expended three minutes and ten seconds discussing other possibilities, all of which have proven fruitless. This is the only option left to us that appears to have some chance of succeeding.”

“What option?” Randolph demanded angrily. “What are you two talking about?”

This was a nightmare, that’s what it was. Kirk touched his grief and despair. During five long years he had steeled himself to making hard decisions, to sending people he cared about into dangerous situations, to facing the prospect that McCoy or Uhura or Spock might die because of an order he gave as captain of the ship. But especially the first officer of the ship, whose unique physiology had been such an asset in so many life or death situations. Kirk had not used him sparingly; he couldn’t count the number of times his best weapon had been his not-human half-Vulcan friend, nor could he measure how much summoning the strength to use Spock had cost him.

But they were grounded now, right? He wouldn’t have to make those decisions anymore, right? And so he’d relaxed, let down his guard, and he had reveled in the freedom to love without the danger of loss.

He should have known better.

Spock was their best option, and Kirk did not want to send this man into the overwhelming danger he was proposing.

“You’ll die and we’ll still be trapped.”

“I will live and enable you and the rest of our party to proceed to safety.” There was nothing but earnest confidence in Spock’s expression. “Jim, it is logical.”

Logical and impossible.

“Damn your logic, Spock. You’re right. And probably our only chance.”

Exasperated, Randolph stepped between the two of them. “Listen, whatever you two are talking about, we’ve got to get moving. Commodore, what chance? What is it the commander says is logical?”

Kirk speared him with a glance. “Forgive us, Mr. Randolph, for taking the time to find a way to save you from a most unpleasant death. Let’s go.”

With fists clenched, he strode towards the turbolift. The rest of them crammed in after him and he grabbed the toggle. The lift would go to deck five and no further. After that, they would need to rely on his and Spock’s knowledge of the ship to get them to the massive closed door that stood between them and safety.

*****

They weren’t supposed to know what was happening to them.

Fahtima wrapped her arms around herself as she curled up on her side on the bedspread, and misery surrounded her determination. This was so wrong. They weren’t supposed to know.

Quick and painless, her uncle had said that day when she was eight and he’d prepared to kill Hamza’s pet dog. He’ll never know a thing. She had descended into the dog’s limbic mind as he
sat on his haunches, panting up at the father of his master, and she’d discovered that her uncle was right. First there was a totally primitive love and trust, then a searing flash of pain, and then there was simply nothing at all.

That’s how it was supposed to happen now.

The tissue degeneration was supposed to creep up on the people on the ship without notice or fear, until suddenly everyone on board had blinding headaches or disorientation or intestinal cramps or their skin began to slough off. But that wouldn’t last long. Maybe five minutes, their research had claimed, and then the victims would drop to the decks and die. It was the way Whitman-Nu radiation worked.

Five minutes wasn’t so very long to suffer. She’d been suffering for a lifetime.

She didn’t know starships, she had no technical degrees, and what she had learned she had picked up from e-books but most especially from the thoughts of a commander at San Francisco base who had worked on destroyer-class vessels. Spock wasn’t supposed to be able to track what had happened, but he had traced the one elevated measurement that had caught his eye until he came upon the truth. Painfully, with a lump constricting her throat, she had followed his reasoning and been astonished by the lightning working of his powerful intellect. So it was because of him that the others knew of their danger and would suffer fear as they grew nearer to their deaths.

Unless…what Spock and his commodore planned would work. She did not think it would, and she was glad of it. She saw the doubt in Spock’s mind despite his brave words and his resolve to succeed and save all the others, including his Jim. This way, his would be a quick and merciful end, before the others, and that was good. Little enough to console her on this dark afternoon.

Fahtima hovered in Symon’s perceptions, her perch as she was watching, as she was blocking communication and holding the safeguards around the engines in their new and unstable configuration. It hadn’t been as difficult to do as she had feared; what caused the tears to flow down her cheeks wasn’t effort but seeing their fear, their scrambling to save themselves, Kirk’s decisive quick wits and Spock’s insistent support.

Sad and beautiful. A knife to her heart just as she held the knife above theirs. The difference was that she would drive hers home.

She didn’t know how not to watch.

*****

“Look out!” someone cried from over his head, and Kirk ducked in close to the ladder rungs and held on tight. A split second later something whizzed past his head, struck him painfully on the shoulder, and then clanged on the half-deck that was still ten meters below him.

He swiftly glanced up to see that Spock was dangling from the ladder one-handed, grasping Neari’lon with his other arm. As Kirk watched, Spock managed to swing the Andorian in and towards the ladder, where the slighter being grabbed a rung and found his footing.

Kirk let out the breath he’d inhaled when he’d been struck. A quick look revealed a short gray ladder rung lying on the deck below. The ship’s maintenance crew would never have allowed the emergency access route to deteriorate; Commander Frazer and his people had taken pride in keeping the ship in perfect condition, to the delight of her captain. But now that the ship was no longer on active duty, nothing could be counted on.
They’d been more than lucky that Spock’s quick reflexes had caught Neari’lon. A fall of ten meters could have been fatal. And Kirk didn’t want to think that it could have been Pren’felit.

“Okay up there?” he called.

“Ready to proceed,” came Spock’s reassuringly calm voice.

Kirk tested the next rung gingerly, and then the next, but time was of the essence, and soon his pace quickened and he jumped to the landing area on deck seven from three steps up. The others followed more slowly. They’d only descended two decks and already Ciani and Randolph were panting. Mostly from exertion, but possibly also from fear.

He didn’t want to ask Spock how much time had elapsed, as that might panic the civilians. Too long, surely ten minutes had ticked by since Spock had made his discovery, and that left just twenty more for the Andorians. The Andorians, with their peculiar powers of attunement best exemplified by their antennae, were among the most vulnerable to this radiation. Humans in the middle of the pack, with Vulcans among the most resistant.

Which meant, if they failed to escape, that Spock would be the last of them to go. He’d see everybody else die.

Not this time, Kirk decided grimly. No way. They were getting out of here.

“Spock,” he ordered, “you take the point. If somebody falls, you’ve got the best chance of catching them. Everybody, hold on tight and don’t assume anything is strong enough to take your weight. Feet and hands, people.”

He reordered their caravan: Spock, himself, Ciani, Pren’felit, Goldthwaite, Randolph, Neari’lon, and finally Symon. The instinct to put a security guard protectively last in the group, though he stood a smaller chance of losing his grip than the others, was too strong for him to ignore.

“Faster this time,” he told Spock.

“Faster?” Ciani objected with a tremor to her voice. Definitely fear. “I don’t think I can.”

“There is no choice, Commander. You must try,” Spock said as he started to descend the next ladder.

Ciani wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her uniform and nodded, but after that Kirk was following Spock and couldn’t see her anymore. But he felt a swell of emotional approval for a woman terrified out of her wits and trying to conquer her fear. She hadn’t bargained for this when she’d asked to see a starship close up.

A short while later they came to the end of the vertical lift shaft that ran through the bulge in the disk. To get to the dorsal strut and its emergency evac-way they would have to go horizontally now, the way the lift often did, and it was with a sense of relief that Kirk left the last rung of the ladder and immediately started an uneven jog, following Spock down the narrow serviceway for the lift shaft. Less than a minute later he was running smoothly as the kinks worked out of his muscles, and he glanced behind to see everybody in a long line behind him, their expressions intent as they pushed themselves as fast as they could go.

But they hadn’t gone far when construction stopped them. The lift itself had been dismantled for maintenance. The sides that had been walls were propped across their passageway and up along it as well.
He didn’t take the time to gauge how much effort, time and strength would have been required for them to move the blockage. He simply swung around and ran back to the nearest access ladder that led out to a corridor.

“This way!” he shouted.

The corridor was free for twenty meters, when they were forced to detour through a suite of offices that had once been the administrative heart of the ship, and then through the far doorway to the hallway again. Another twenty meters on and the same thing happened, only this time the dangerously open deck was still gaping when they tried to emerge from an empty, eerily-echoing lab. No way they could continue by that route.

Kirk wildly looked around for an alternative. This had been…right, a chem lab, and so there had to be a crisis ventilation system…. If he remembered, they’d also run some extra power lines along it, so it had to be one of the larger units….

Spock was behind him by only a few seconds, and before Kirk had been able to get much of a grip, he managed to rip one corner of the access panel from high off the far wall. Spock had literally bent the metal with his fingertips as he pried at it, and Kirk jammed his hands into the small space and pulled.

“Damn it!” he cursed. Even the two of them…. But then Randolph added his efforts to theirs and the panel came loose, flying in their faces and knocking all three of them to the deck.

Spock was up in a moment, tearing at the edge of some rough material that had been embedded in the lab wall itself, now sticking out from the damaged entry to the conduit. Kirk blinked, not understanding what he was doing, until a thick, bluish gel with a pungent odor oozed out from under Spock’s fingers and dripped to the floor.

“Aerogel,” Spock told him briefly.

Closely resembling blue gelatin, it was the best insulating material ever discovered, and it had been used in deep space missions as long ago as the twenty-first century. The Enterprise had strategically-placed pockets of the gel in her bulkheads—and as special protection around certain labs.

“This is lucky,” Kirk said. “I didn’t know what you were going to use for protection. Let me help. Get plenty of it.”

Together they hastily scooped up handfuls and rolled it up in the blue wrapping that had held it tight against the lab walls. Kirk took one of the rolls and stuffed it high inside his sleeve, and Spock did the same with the other.

Randolph was doubtfully peering over their shoulders into the duct. “What are you doing? And is this big enough for us?” The duct was barely larger than half a meter square.

Kirk ignored his first question. “We can do it. Inch forward on your elbows.”

“I will go first,” Spock announced. He cocked his eyebrow at Kirk and bent his leg in anticipation of a leg-up, something the two of them had done so many times before. Despite the urgency, the very real danger, there was a glint in Spock’s eye that told Kirk he was remembering, too, maybe the time Kirk’s back had been a platform in the jail on Ekos and they’d both pretended they hadn’t been laughing inside….

He bent and ran his hands around his lover’s knee, the one, he knew with some chagrin, that was
already damaged. He heaved and all of Spock’s weight was in his hands…and then Spock had wriggled into the darkness and was gone. It made sense for him to be the trailblazer; there were bound to be some structures within the passageway, fans or filters, and Spock, with his strength, would be able to dismantle them and push them before him. But once again Kirk asked why it was always Spock with the strength, Spock with the physical differences and the courage to use them.

There was no time. “Let’s go,” Kirk demanded, “move it,” and one by one he lifted each of their party up into the shaft. They would have to crawl six, maybe seven meters until they emerged.

Ciani was the last one before him. She looked at Kirk with wild eyes. “I don’t know if I can do this,” she sobbed.

“Yes you can,” he said automatically.

“No, you don’t understand. I’ve got claustrophobia. It’s why I was never assigned starship duty. I —”

He had no time to offer her any sympathy. “Commander Ciani,” he hissed right in her face, “you’ve got only minutes left to live if you don’t do this. And you are not going to die while I’m in charge! I order you through this shaft. Now go!”

He bent and wrapped his arms around her legs and lifted. She weighed about a hundred pounds, he guessed, less than the young, light-boned Andorian.

“Go!” he ordered again, and she grabbed the edge of the conduit and hauled herself in. He heaved himself up and was right behind her.

The fit was incredibly tight; the sides pressed in against his shoulders and he didn’t know how Randolph had managed. Kirk shoved with his elbows and grunted when he smacked into Ciani’s motionless boots.

She was sobbing again, heavy, deep sobs that shook her body. He couldn’t see anything, but he automatically put his hands on her ankles, with the divided intentions of shaking some sense into her or communicating some of his own surety.

“Lori,” he said softly. He heard her catch her breath and hold it. “It’s all right. This is a short passage. You probably have only two or three body lengths in front of you to go. You can do this.”

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to be like this. It’s just….”

“I know,” he soothed. How many panicked ensigns had he helped hurdle the mountain of their fear? He knew when a direct order would work and when another tactic worked better.

Besides…. He’d been handling beautiful women for years.

Kirk ran his right hand higher up her leg, until under the cloth of her pants he felt flesh and not boot synth-leather. He gripped her tightly.

“I’m right behind you. Feel me? Here, I’ll help you and we’ll get right on through this.”

“I…I don’t know.”

“I do. You’re a strong woman, and you can do this. Flex your elbows. Go ahead. Just a little at a time and then you’ll be out of here.”
Kirk put his other hand on her leg and pushed, awkwardly, but she responded and moved forward.

“Close your eyes,” he told her. “Keep going.”

Ciani sobbed again, but she kept moving, though at a snail’s pace. Suddenly, her body gave a jerk and slid at least half a meter.

“Pardon me, Commander Ciani,” came Spock’s calm tones, muffled through the enclosed space. Kirk exhaled sharply in relief; he should have known Spock would come back for them when they didn’t appear right away. Ciani’s extended body separated the two of them. “Allow me to assist you. If you will continue to grasp my wrists….”

*****

Kirk’s legs were starting to ache by the time they were back on the ladders fifteen decks below the bridge and in the middle of the strut, and his hands were cramping from holding on tight to uncertain supports. He began to wonder if those were symptoms of their desperate flight to the secondary hull or if he was experiencing the first signs of radiation poisoning and damage to connective tissue. He moved rapidly, hand over hand, and looked up past Ciani to Pren’felit to try to gauge the representative’s health. Minutes counted. Already there would be damage, surely, but prompt medical treatment or just removing the Andorian from the continual bombardment of the rays would save his life. The dim, small passageway that they were climbing down, not more than two meters across, was filled with the sounds of everybody breathing heavily and an occasional grunt of effort.

Until….

A heavy thud whipped his attention to where Spock should be descending with his sure-footed speed, but instead Kirk saw his lover sprawled, lifelessly, on the landing five meters below.

Kirk abandoned the rungs and instead slid straight down the supports in a maneuver that burned his hands and set fire to the muscles in his calves but gave flight to the sudden fear that thudded in his chest. In a moment he was crouched next to the still form and pressing two fingers against the carotid artery, checking for a heartbeat.

Which was thunderous. Kirk slapped the deck in relief and began a systematic examination of Spock’s limbs, searching for broken bones. Spock had landed on his back but his legs were twisted to the side awkwardly.


Could Spock have simply lost his hold? It seemed unlikely….

Neari’lon was down now, too. “We can’t afford to wait!” he said, and even Kirk, not as familiar with Andorian emotional tones as he might have been, could detect the panic in his voice.

“We won’t get past the separation door without him,” Kirk said, knowing he had to be practical. “We need him.” He slapped at Spock’s cheek lightly, willing him to regain consciousness. “C’mom. C’mon.”

And as simply as that, Spock’s eyes flew open, though Kirk could tell from the glazed expression that he wasn’t yet totally conscious. Then he groaned loudly. Then his legs moved restlessly, and that was what brought him completely around. He jerked up to a sitting position.
“Take a minute,” Kirk urged, though he was counting the seconds.

“No,” Spock answered and then, with no help at all from those clustered around him, he heaved himself up to stand with legs spread wide to keep his balance. He staggered once and put out a hand, and Kirk grabbed his arm to provide support.

“Are you all right? Can you make it?”

Spock regarded him woozily. “It was…nothing. We must proceed.”

“Nothing?” Kirk spat out. “You dropped like a stone.”

“I will not again.”

There had always been times in their service together when Spock had forced him to accept his second-in-command’s judgment in place of his own, and this seemed to be one of those times. He trusted Spock, yes, with his life and the lives of all those trapped with them, but he needed information so he could use his weapon in the best possible way….

He stared at Spock for a long moment, and Spock did not look away, all while the seconds were ticking.

“All right.” There really wasn’t any other choice.

This time Kirk led the way and he put the still-shaky Spock at the very end of the line. None of them was able to help him, not on this ladder that stretched far over their heads, and down, just a few flights now, to the engineering hull.

But as he raced down the rungs, Kirk knew what had happened. Not a simple slip, which Spock would have admitted at once. Instead, he had offered no speculation at all, which meant he preferred to keep his conjectures to himself.

It must be what Versin had predicted: the periods of unconsciousness occurring randomly until one final event deepened and Spock never awakened at all.

“Damn it to Orion’s hells,” he muttered, though he didn’t know if he believed in hell or in heaven. A curse was as good as a prayer. But who was listening?

*****

She wasn’t really a woman anymore. She shouldn’t consider herself a sentient being. She was only the tool of Hamza. His right arm, his avenging hand.

Spock and the others were getting very close to the separation door. Fahtima knew, from her place within his perceptions, that Symon, who had served for seven years on the Lexington, had deduced what Kirk and Spock intended. He was convinced this mad dash through the ship was a fool’s errand, because there was no way Spock would survive to get to the other side. Symon, philosophical and phlegmatic, was preparing to die in the next fifteen minutes. But before him, Spock.

The way her lungs seemed to be paralyzed as she thought about his ending: that was a good indication she wasn’t as much Hamza’s tool as she should be. Perhaps she was too much a woman, despite her deformity. What might have been between her and Spock tore at her willpower, and the little she had shared with him seemed so inadequate to remember him by.
Yes, that was all that fueled her sudden decision to allow herself to slide into her almost-friend’s mind one last time, to savor it before it was destroyed. As she surrendered herself to Spock’s essence, she realized that this short pilgrimage was but a pale reflection of the time the two lovers had said good-bye more than a year ago—for the last time within the mental landscape they had fashioned. When Gri-Ta, that odd, gnarled woman Fahtima had encountered in Spock’s memories, had swept Spock and Kirk into a passionate and desperately sad moment to say farewell. That was true loss, nothing like her own petulant and selfish desire to have Spock continue to live when he could not. Spock and his Jim had known true separation….

So when Fahtima dipped into her victim’s memories, it was with the need to find not pain but joy: not a parting but a joining.

“Do you know how beautiful you are to me?” Kirk whispered. “Not only now, but always.”

Spock looked down on his lover’s classically formed, handsome features from where he straddled Starfleet’s newest commodore at the waist, and he made no effort to restrain his loving smile. But he did not contradict Jim, for he knew the words were heartfelt. Jim really did think he was beautiful, if not physically, then in some way that could not be defined by logical Vulcan thought but was instead created and defined by their union. The concept only yielded to the analysis of love.

Spock surrendered himself to the emotion as he smiled at Jim. Love. He allowed it to swell up from that deep place in himself where it lived, which was really all of him, his hands and legs and chest and brain and the heart that beat double time now that they were in bed together, again preparing for a sexual act. So when he sighed against Jim’s lips, “I love you,” his whole body hummed his affection and devotion.

Their kiss—open-mouthed, open-hearted—lasted a long time. Spock could feel their special melody coming to life between them. Not just their penises, which strained against each other as he pressed his weight on Jim, but the flicker of their tongues, the slide of Jim’s hand over his shoulder and then along his arm, and the way Spock felt as if he could not kiss this extraordinary man long enough to ever feel satisfied.

Jim Kirk was so many things to him. Friend, mate, family, leader who had earned his respect and whom he would gladly follow.

And now, here in this life they were composing, Jim would follow him, too.

Spock slowly pulled away from their kiss, letting their lips part with lingering reluctance, and he gazed into his love’s luminous eyes. The gateways to Jim’s soul now that they could not meld, they told of pleasure anticipated, of sorrow banked and denied, of Jim’s happiness that they were together, holding each other and sharing their bodies.

He kissed each rounded eyebrow. Then he picked up the tube of lubricant that he had packed in his small carry-all. He had not brought much on this unwelcome but necessary trip to Luna City, but he had taken care to include this aid to their love-making.

But Jim plucked the tube from his hands before he could uncap it. Spock’s penis felt heavy, needful. It arced out from his body and was at that stage before full erection that he found intensely erotic, because he knew that one touch from an attentive, grasping hand would straighten his slightly curved hardness with a rush of blood that would make him dizzy. He thought, “Touch me, Jim.”

Kirk smiled knowingly, and then he filled his hand with lube, and then he reached towards Spock’s
arousal…. Ah. Ah. Ahhhh. It was only when the thrill raced right through him that Spock groaned. He threw his head back and strained up, as if that motion would overcome his impulse to lunge into orgasm immediately.

He couldn’t stop himself from jerking forward, though, thrusting into mid-air because Kirk, wise in the ways of his lover’s body, had removed his hand immediately.

Spock panted and found enough control to postpone the ultimate gratification, a challenging exercise that was as much painful as it was pleasurable. The paradox was fascinating.

He looked at his lover again, sprawled out erotically for his delectation and waiting for what Spock would do next. He would have this man, all of him he could have, this commodore, this friend, this captivating human. Their affinity was far more than the intimate emotional closeness engendered by consensual sexual behavior; theirs was a union of the spirit, of lives. How could it be that their physical joining had never grown stale or tiresome or repetitious, no matter how often they reached for each other? Spock did not know the answer to that question, but he was profoundly grateful for the gifts this man gave to him, every day.

The impulse to say “I love you” came again, but the words already shivered between them, in the way Jim had captured his eyes and wouldn’t let them go, in his own hand upon Jim’s side. The words were unnecessary now, here, for they danced like music in this room on Luna City, in a way no less real than when they had joined their minds and experienced the emotion raw from the source.

Yes, Jim loved him, just as Spock cherished his forever captain.

Spock took the lubricant from Kirk’s loose grasp and squirted some onto his palm. Spock moved the lotion up to his fingertips and coated his middle finger.

“Let’s go flying,” Kirk husked. “Lift up so I can roll over.”

And then Jim’s rounded buttocks were presented to him and his finger slid in, testing at the muscle and then pushing far enough to encounter the interior warmth and the grasp that felt like a kind of kiss.

This was…. Spock stared at where his finger disappeared from sight, and a shiver of pure delight coursed its way from his shoulders all the way down to the base of his spine.

“Jim,” he said, and he reverently kissed the small of his lover’s back, where his own chenesi would have been but where only a dimpled softness appeared on Kirk. Nevertheless, his lips caressed the silken skin as he inserted a second finger and worked the lubricant around the loosening sphincter. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Making love with Jim, taking liberties with this body, sharing intimacies that they shared with no one else: intoxicating. He was drunk on this man.

“Now,” he decided aloud, and he straightened.

“Yes,” hissed Kirk.

Kirk raised his buttocks and spread his legs, and Spock moved so that the tip of his penis nestled just against the muscle. In another moment he would be inside....

Fahtima already knew where that would lead for her: into a spiral of frustration. Her arousal would disappear but not diminish, locked somewhere deep where it boiled, as it had with Hamza’s women, and staying now with Spock as he hurtled towards orgasm would only add to her anguish.
She pulled away hurriedly, and for one disorienting instant existed outside Spock’s memories and yet also in his conscious thoughts, for he was slowing from a run through the Enterprise’s hallways to a final standstill and gathering the resolve to do what must be done.

She must not go there with him to where Atropos, the Fate who inexorably cut the thread of life, waited for him with her knife. Hamza and his cause needed her. Good-bye, she whispered, thank you for your kindness, and she felt his startlement as he perceived her words and the deep sorrow behind them. Then she fled back to the unwitting Symon and tried not to think at all.

*****

Spock blinked in bafflement as for an instant he experienced the psychic caress of another mind, full of longing and regret. It had been so long since another’s thoughts had touched his own that he was unsure if…. Perhaps this was a hallucination, another manifestation of the inevitable decline predicted by Versin.

“Are you all right?” Kirk asked. They’d forced themselves down the ladders at a sprinter’s pace and had finally reached the base of the long turboshift that bisected the dorsal support of the ship. Then Kirk, without a word in response to Randolph’s shouted “This feels like a detour. Where are you taking us?” had led them all running along a straight hallway. Now they faced a heavy steel door inset into the outside bulkhead—and Spock’s destination. An airlock.

Spock shook off his abstraction and replied, “I am well.” He began to work at the airlock’s controls, where Kirk joined him.

“Good thing these have manual override,” Kirk muttered.

The door began to creak open and something inside Spock shivered. If he did not survive, none of the others would, either. He could accept his own death, but to cause others to die because of his failure…. And Jim. He had thought he would have more time with Jim.

“What…. What’s going on here?” Randolph demanded.

“Jim!” Ciani cried, horror in her voice. “You can’t—”

“This must be done,” Spock told the others. “Commodore, as soon as the separation door opens, go immediately to the pod. I will follow after you, but don’t wait for me to catch up.”

“Just make sure you do catch up.”

And now the airlock was a small cavern waiting to engulf him and extract the air around him. Spock took an extra few seconds to simply look at his lover, knowing he was being illogical because if he died, no memory of Kirk would remain impressed on his brain cells to do anyone any good, as his katra would fade into nothingness, but he needed to…. Kirk looked back. Their hands went out to each other and Spock grabbed hard at the fingers clutching at his. There wasn’t sorrow or anguish in Kirk’s eyes, only the glint of steel determination, as if he could will Spock to survive what he was about to do through sharing his own strength.

“You should have at least fifteen seconds of useful consciousness.”

“That is the human norm. I will have longer.”

“Don’t count on it. Don’t forget to not hold your breath. Have you thought of which handholds you’ll use to propel yourself across?”
Spock nodded. He’d plotted his route long minutes before. He was sure. “I must go.”

Kirk released him, then dug into his shirt and handed over the blue package they’d made in the chem lab from insulating jelly and its sheath. “Go. Wrap your hands up. See you on the other side.”

Kirk didn’t wait to see him disappear. He turned and began jogging in the opposite direction, back the way they’d come, towards the separation door controls. “This way!” he called to the others. “Hurry!”

*****

“Hurry!”

Because if he ran away from what might be happening, maybe he could outrun the reality.

No, Cadet Kirk, humans don’t explode when exposed to vacuum. Their bodies do swell up, though, more so after they lose consciousness. But the skin acts like a pressure suit, or think of it as a firm elastic bandage that prevents explosive destruction right away. The real culprit leading to death is the water vapor that forms in the soft tissues, you see. Gases come out of solution and form bigger and bigger bubbles that block the blood vessels. Eventually they become too large to overcome even if the victim is recovered.

“Jim!” called Ciani hysterically. She was pounding behind him for all she was worth. “Stop! Go back! You can’t leave him there!”

Oh yes he could. He hadn’t even had to order Spock, though he would have if he’d had to. Oh, no, Spock had gone willingly, and he hadn’t had to play the captain. Hadn’t had to explain a thing to his willing sacrificial lamb. His lover’s nimble intelligence had drawn the same conclusions he had. Just…barely…possible.

Class, observe the length of time different species will remain conscious in the vacuum of space. Assuming decompression is not explosive, Andorians almost instantly lose consciousness. Tellarites will last for approximately ten to fifteen seconds, the same as humans, while our friends the Vulcans manage to remain conscious for twenty to twenty-five seconds. I am speaking of the period of useful consciousness, that is, when a being can actually do something to try to save him or herself.

“Shut up!” Randolph yelled at Ciani. “Kirk knows what he’s doing.” A pause, filled only by the sounds of seven sets of shoes and boots stabbing against the innocent deck. “Don’t you, Jim?”

He knew…

…that Spock, unprotected, must have left the ship by now.

…that he had twenty-five seconds to maneuver himself through the dead and bitter vacuum from the airlock at the base of the dorsal support to the one at the forward edge of the engineering hull, close to the sensor array. A distance of perhaps thirty meters. And then he had to open the door, get inside, and have the strength to close it so it could begin to pressurize.

…that if Spock died they’d all die, too, so why was he wondering how he could live with himself if his lover’s final resting place was the utter cold of space?

There are several common fallacies concerning vacuum exposure, and you must rid yourselves of them if you are to function effectively on starships. Mister Kaczynski, attention, please. If you try to
Hold your breath, your lungs might explode. Your blood does not boil, but there have been several occasions when the saliva on a subject’s tongue has boiled away. You will not freeze immediately because heat does not transfer away from a body that quickly. Humans can manage exposure for up to ninety seconds before permanent injury occurs. Not many humans can be revived after those ninety seconds, two minutes on the outside, but of course they’ve long since lost consciousness by that point.

“Commodore,” Representative Pren’felit wheezed, “how much time isss left?”

Never time enough. He didn’t regret the choices he’d made in life, and now he was living on the razor’s edge as the adrenaline was singing in his veins. And he was horrified and ashamed that there was something about this life that he craved like a drug. He and Spock, they could save these people when nobody else would have been able to.

If Spock had the strength to make his way to the door controls after he emerged from the cycling airlock. If his skin hadn’t been crisped raw by the intense ultraviolet radiation of the sun undiminished by the filter of an atmosphere. If his limbs and fingers weren’t so swollen that he wasn’t able to operate the simple panel.

He could do it, Spock would survive. Let him survive: his ever resourceful, more-lives-than-a-cat lover.

The record for survival in a vacuum is three minutes and forty-two seconds, set by a Vulcan uranium miner whose suit was scraped open while prospecting on an asteroid. Of course, she lost consciousness after twenty-four seconds, but her co-workers were able to retrieve her at the three minute mark, and she was revived without significant harm. There is usually some blindness in victims of unexpected depressurization, and disfiguring swelling as well, but interestingly enough, both symptoms disappear within a short while when the victim is recovered in time.

Of course, our aim in Starfleet is to prevent such incidents from happening at all. Hopefully, none of you will ever require this information, but it is best to be well informed in the case of accidents. Moving on, you need to know the incidence of the common respiratory infection known as a “cold” when suit maintenance is inadequate. Mister Kirk, if you would read....

He didn’t know how to answer Pren’felit. That perfect time sense didn’t tick in his head as it did in his lover’s. About six or seven minutes. Long enough to get them through to the pod, barely. It was on the other side of the immense door that now separated the engineering hull from the dorsal support, across two short hallways.

Kirk turned a corner at a dead run and skidded to a halt. He yanked the protective cover off the door control panel. If Spock had made it to the other side, one deck down and thirty meters aft, they’d both be able to give the command. And the door would gape wide and he and Pren’felit and the others would run for safety. But if Spock wasn’t there…. Kirk’s fingers hovered over the datapad.

*****

The air hissed out of the chamber slowly as Spock first efficiently smeared his hands all over with the insulating jelly, then wrapped the blue strips around and around that. Touching metal long-exposed to the cold of space would freeze his flesh in an instant and render him useless to himself and the others.

He waited impatiently. The slower the depressurization, the less likely he would be subjected to that severe pain in the joints and abdomen that occurred during decompression sickness. A human
would not have survived, unprotected, the rate at which the air was leaving this chamber, and surely would not endure the even faster rate that he planned to program into the airlock on the other side, but he had made the calculations, and his hybrid body should manage.

The artificial gravity of the ship was not in force in this small compartment, so already he was floating a few centimeters above the deck. He began to exhale, and he closed his eyes to slits. Not only would his eyelids protect the delicate surfaces of his eyeballs, but if the exit from the ship were facing into the sun, the light could be blinding.

One. Two. Three.

The door swung open. He kicked against the doorjamb and rocketed away, having carefully aimed for a handhold that should be nine point six meters below him, almost at the seam of the ship. If he had miscalculated, he might go careening into free space or, almost as bad, bounce against the frigid structure of the ship and flash-freeze his limbs.

Already he felt the pressure of no air in his lungs. And his fingers were swelling, too, he could feel that under the wrappings. Only seven seconds expended. But he had calculated the angle of his trajectory correctly, and the hull loomed up in his vision. He spotted the handle through a protective squint, grabbed it, and swung in an arc as he stiffened his arm to absorb his momentum.

Nine seconds. A human would already be feeling consciousness slipping, but he should be able to go much longer.

Now he was pulling himself along a series of handholds that marched in a line towards the sensor array. He could feel the tension in his shoulder blades, in the pull of the muscles as he forced his arms to whip through the void. Grab, pull. Grab, pull. But not too much force or his momentum wouldn’t allow the grasp on the next handle that was so essential to keeping him more or less anchored to the ship.

His face burned just as his lungs did. He would have been able to hold his breath for much longer than a mere twenty-five seconds; it was emptying his lungs and engaging in physical exertion that was causing the fire in his chest and making him wonder how far his Vulcan constitution would really take him. The greased tips of his fingers were peeking out from their covering, swollen and crisped to a bright green as the ultraviolet radiation took its toll.

Fifteen seconds. Jim would have been floating lifelessly and without awareness by this time, but Spock could go on.

He squinted across the distance to the other airlock. Only ten meters to go, but he didn’t have the time to “walk” across as he’d planned. Spock launched himself with one calculated lunge.

Spock reached out one hand, grossly swollen and threatening to burst through the wrapping. His lungs were a burning heavy weight and the impulse to inhale was almost irresistible. Almost there…. 

He touched the handhold by the airlock, he tried to squeeze his fingers around it and there was surely enough room, for it had been designed for beings in bulky envirosuits, but too much water vapor had already accumulated in his soft tissue. His fingers were like steel rods. They would not bend….

*****

Kirk keyed in the code to which Spock should respond. He knew he was early; even by his most
optimistic estimates, Spock wouldn’t have been able to make it through the engineering hull yet. But he didn’t have anything else to do with his hands, and so he punched in the code he had memorized the week before he’d taken command of the Enterprise.

Of course there was no response yet. He hadn’t expected one.

The others had caught up with him by now. Pren’felit and Near’lon slumped to sit propped against a bulkhead. Near’lon’s head lolled forward limply.

“We’re not going to make it, are we?” Randolph said bleakly.

“There’s time yet,” Kirk asserted.

“Not for them.” Randolph went over to Pren’felit and squatted down before him. “I never did get a chance to interview you, Representative Pren’felit. How about if we give it a start right now?”

The Andorian’s lips pulled back in a ghastly smile. “Ssso that you die while plying your trade?” The typically thin voice was gravelly now.

Randolph nodded. “And you go out still trying to convince people of your political views.” He pulled a recorder from the bag slung around his shoulder and pressed a button. “It’ll all be right here when they find us.”

Kirk turned away from the sight—beings had different ways to express their courage and their core values—and activated the sequence again. C’mor, Spock.

*****

A second passed like an hour as Spock stared through slitted eyes in despair. His hand slid away from the support and scraped against the white hull of the ship, tracing a path away from where he desperately needed to be, pulling him with his stiffened limbs into the void. The aerogel had not been thick enough, the blue wrapping not tight enough. The seam of the airlock door that promised oxygen and pressure and a means to save seven other lives was literally half a meter away. Close enough for him to touch it—except that he couldn’t.

He’d known when he’d forced the decision on Kirk while they were on the bridge that this might happen. He had run with not as much hope as he wanted through the dismantled remnants of the ship where he had finally found fulfillment and—to his surprise—happiness in the exploration of his own self within the arms of his human lover.

Jim.

Since Versin had made his pronouncement weeks ago he had known his death might be near and there was almost nothing he could do about it. But this way? He had almost been cut down by a Klingon blaster, he’d almost been felled by a wild animal, he’d almost been caught by an explosion from an unknown enemy of the Federation. He and Jim had always cheated death before. Hope emerged from experience. He refused to give up.

Spock whipped his stone-heavy arms around his torso—

Twisted to give his body more spin—

Forced himself to bend at the waist to correct his trajectory—

Straightened and—
Scraped one booted foot against the hull, seeking, seeking—

There!

He jammed his left foot securely within the handhold as he felt the muscles strain when momentum was absorbed. Pain lanced through him. He managed to stifle the impulse to gasp as he jackknifed and, with the pounding of the flat of his almost unrecognizable hand, activated the emergency cycling of the mechanism.

Two seconds. That was how long it should take for the door to fly open, but he didn’t know if he had that long. Blood began to float away from his nose in droplets, he could feel the same thing happening to his ears, as if this one last effort had been too much.

His vision blurred and it seemed the weight of the entire universe pressed upon his chest. Even his hybrid body wasn’t going to last much longer. No more flying….

*****

Ciani was at Kirk’s elbow but he kept his eyes on the readout. “Maybe,” she offered hesitantly, “the original readings were wrong to begin with. Maybe there isn’t any Whitman-Nu radiation at all.”

“Spock doesn’t make mistakes like that.”

“Of course you have a high opinion of him but it’s possible that—”

For some reason her words angered him past all reason. He rounded on her and grabbed her shoulders, hard, pulling her up on her toes and probably hurting her. Emphasizing every word, he said, “He doesn’t make mistakes like that. He’s just put his life on the line for us, because of the evidence no one else in the entire fleet would have had the brains to interpret.” He released her, roughly, without regard to her balance or her dignity, and she rocked back on her heels.

It was her fear of him that broke through his anger and all the other emotions he was keeping in check. Chagrin washed over him. “I’m sorry,” he muttered, and he keyed in the sequence again. Of course, no response. The door to their left remained stubbornly closed.

A hand on his shoulder as she crept nearer behind him. “No, it’s all right. I’m the one who’s sorry for saying that. I can’t believe the…your courage. Spock for going out into space unprotected… and you for letting him. God, Jim.”

“It was the only way.”

“Forgive me. It’s just that, well, I don’t feel any different.”

He looked at her again, really looked at her. The tear streaks down her cheeks did nothing for her high-cheekboned beauty, and she’d gone incredibly pale, paler than the wisps of hair stuck moistly to the side of her face. But beneath the fear her eyes were guileless, and he knew that she was only trying to find some reassurance.

“And I hope you won’t feel any different. We’ll get away in time.” He didn’t mention the undoubted damage all of them had already sustained. If they survived this, they were going to be spending days with radiation scrubbers, decontam units, and possibly some reconstruction surgeons.

Ciani nodded towards the separation door. “How far do we need to go on the other side?”
“Not far. Maybe two minutes. Don’t worry.”

She gave him a trembling smile. “I’m…not. I—” Suddenly, her voice caught and she bit her lip, obviously fighting with tears. “I’m sorry for that little display back there. When I got so…afraid and couldn’t move. I guess I’m not much good as a Starfleet officer under emergency conditions.”

If she had been one of the young officers under his command, Kirk might have agreed with her. But she was a senior officer with years of experience, only not the kind of experience he had or that was needed now. He couldn’t blame her for reacting the way she did. “It’s all right,” he reassured.

She turned away and showed him her shaking shoulder, but she couldn’t disguise the tears that now flowed freely. A sort of easy sympathy welled up in Kirk, one he didn’t bother to analyze or deny, and he wrapped his arms around her in simple human comfort and understanding. She was such a small woman, it was easy to encircle her, to feel her feminine curves—so familiar and yet long unexperienced—lean back against him. “I’m sorry,” she hiccuped as she bent her face to her palms. “I’m sorry. Give me a minute. God, I hate being weak like this.”

“It’s okay. I don’t blame you.” He didn’t hold her emotions against her and he didn’t mind offering this comfort. But she couldn’t distract him from what he had to do, and so he twisted around again to key in the code. Again, nothing.

“You really think he’s going to be there, don’t you?” Ciani asked, her trembling voice muffled.

“If it’s possible, he will be. Spock has never let me down.”

Ciani slowly shook her head. “That’s not the way it works, you know. People let you down all the time.”

Kirk was too weary to deal with her or the emotions that she was trying to get him to admit, but he was spared having to answer when a retching sound came from the bulkhead. It was Near’lon, doubled over and vomiting.

There wasn’t anything anybody could do for him, but they clustered about him in fear and sympathy anyway, and Kirk went with the others. After the initial paroxysm, the Andorian sat up straight and heaved for breath but didn’t seem to have the strength for any words.

Pren’felit’s blue-veined hand laid weakly on his kinsman’s shoulder. “We will die sssoldier’sss deathssss,” he reassured the young one. “Thisss isss an attack and we are ssssoldiersss in a battle.” He looked up at Kirk from where it seemed he would fall over if not supported by the wall. “I have left my lasssst thoughtsss recorded in thisss man’sss machine. Would you like to add yoursss?”

Wordlessly, Kirk shook his head no. He couldn’t blame them for their despair and their fatalism. Even he was beginning to lose faith. The minutes were ticking away and he was starting one hell of a headache: a sign of the radiation damage that must be affecting his own body.

The Andorian laughed with no glee. “It isss sssso ssstupid. Of all that I sshould be thinking now assss I faccce my death, I am foolisssshly ssssorry that I elected not to be presssent at the arresssst of the Eternisssst agent in Luna City thisss afternoon. I had wanted to sssee the sssspecial forcessss in action ssstometime. Ssso foolissssh.” His voice trailed off and there was silence from all of them, as if they were all thinking of what they might have been doing if they had never boarded the Enterprise.

But then Kirk turned back to the controls, and before he reached them there was the telltale sound of activation…from the other side.
For an instant Kirk just stood there, staring, and relief washed over him. Spock hadn’t drifted off to
die in space and had somehow managed—despite whatever injuries he must have suffered—to
make his way to where they needed him to be.

His fingers flying, Kirk keyed in the responding sequence, and the door began to open.

Ciani was crying again, but this time from joy. She ran up to Kirk and pounded his back. “He
didn’t let you down! He didn’t!”

No. Spock never had and he never would.

“Come on,” she urged him with a hand on his arm.

“Goldthwaite, Symon, carry the Andorians,” he ordered.

“I’ll help,” Randolph said and between him and Symon they hoisted up a staggering Pren’felit
between them. Goldthwaite already had Neari’lon over her shoulder.

“Now,” Kirk said with jubilation singing inside, “let’s go.” He jogged along the blessedly clear
hallway.

*****

As lost to her body as she had been the past ghastly minutes, still Fahtima felt a chill run up her
arms as she lay on the bed in the hotel room. Seeing through Symon’s eyes and hearing through his
ears, she had witnessed what the Andorian had said. “The Eternist agent.” Who could that be but
Hamza? She must warn him!

But how could she? All their plans for the Hood had fallen into dust, and now what she’d tried to
do on the Enterprise was in pieces, too. Maybe she could follow them further, somehow enact the
scenario her cousin had laid out for her—but she didn’t want to. What brave beings. And her poor
Spock! Even now she did not know if he would make it all the way to safety.

And she had no time! Agents might be stalking Hamza, might be pounding at his door.

With a shrinking realization of how angry Hamza was going to be at her—why didn’t you follow
them to the pod? she could hear him accuse. Why didn’t you breech the hull of the pod? Why didn’t
you kill that Andorian for me?—Fahtima pulled herself out of her other existence, away from a life
soaring outside her body and back into her mangled, sexless shell of flesh. It didn’t matter that the
safeguards around the warp engines snapped back into their protective configuration without the
power of her will, and it didn’t matter that the communicator on Kirk’s belt would work now.
What mattered was Hamza.

It was hard to force her body to move after such intense motionless concentration, but soon she was
walking without effort, and then her red pants legs flowed as she almost-ran. Hamza’s room was on
another floor. He wouldn’t answer a comm call, she was sure of that, for fear that it would be her
trying to contact him. He hadn’t wanted any contact with her except for during their job with
Randy.

She ran out of the lift and past door after identical lime-green door. This way. Room 1011, she
remembered, ten stories down from the lobby of the hotel.

Fahtima pounded with both fists. “Hamza,” she cried, “let me in. I need to tell you something.”

She kept banging and calling, and after a long minute during which she wondered if she must
search for him elsewhere, Hamza finally appeared, frowning as he zipped up his pants. The fine brown skin of his chest glistened with perspiration, as if she’d caught him in a great effort. “What? You’re not supposed to be here.”

“Let me in,” Fahtima said urgently. Not too far away, a housekeeper was gathering towels from a cart. “I can’t tell you out here.”

“This had better be good,” he said, and he stood aside to give her entrance.

She walked in…and stopped. Two women were sitting demurely on the only bed in the room, a large one that from its disarranged covers, and from the sheets that imperfectly concealed the women’s unclothed bodies, had recently been the scene of a joining for three….

So. This was why Hamza had not wanted to be disturbed. A cold rage erupted from behind her eyes, drawing her fingers into fists and tightening her throat. This was what her beloved cousin had been doing while she had been his weapon of destruction! Though she knew she had no right to object, that he would be very, very angry at her censure, Fahtima didn’t care. She was asked to murder Spock and Randy and all the others, and Hamza pampered himself with pleasures of the flesh!

She advanced to the foot of the bed, glaring at the women with each step. They weren’t even beautiful. Not even pretty! How dare they share her cousin’s bed at all, but the fact that there were two of them made the betrayal so much worse. If it took two of them to gratify him—Would he ever be truly satisfied with one again? With just—her? Impossible, hidden dream!

“Don’t get angry, sister,” the blonde one said. “There’s plenty of room for one more.” The sheet slipped, deliberately, Fahtima was sure, to display one honey-nippled breast.

Fahtima choked in outrage and couldn’t find words. She didn’t want them….

_Down into the woman’s body, as she had done before surreptitiously, but this time she would inflict pain and not share pleasure. Easily Fahtima located the woman’s lungs and she squeezed._

“Aarrupppp,” the woman wheezed, wide-eyed, and her hand went to her chest.

_But better the heart. Hamza never had affairs of the heart, did he? He simply sought gratification of the body, and this misbegotten whore deserved no heart. Fahtima found the centered nexus of nerves and interposed one thought._

With a groan the woman fell back on the bed. Her face was blue already. Fahtima leaned over, fascinated, and watched her eyes roll up into her head.

“What the hell?” Hamza roared.

“Oh, my God!” the other woman screamed in genuine terror, her hands flying to cover her mouth.

Fahtima blinked and came back to herself. What was she doing? She released her hold on the heart muscle, on the lungs, and with a gurgle the woman on the bed began breathing again.

Fahtima turned away. She hadn’t known she could do that to a person’s body, and she hadn’t known she harbored quite so much vindictive emotion.

“It’s all right, honey, you’re fine,” she heard Hamza soothing behind her. “Just a little, uh, you’re fine.”
She wanted to stand there and wait, but she had no way of knowing when the agents would arrive. Fahtima whirled to find Hamza seated on the edge of the bed, with the blonde woman—devoid of her concealing sheet—in his arms and pressed to his chest, and with the other woman—equally nude—hovering on her knees anxiously behind them.

“Get them out of here,” she whispered, astonished at her audacity. She would pay for it later, she knew. “I’ve got something to tell you that’s very important.”

Hamza glared at her but after a war of wills that she lost—she dropped her eyes at his intensity after only a few seconds—he said to the others, “I think the mood’s gone. You two had better leave.”

It took a full five minutes but finally the two left, clutching a handful of credits Hamza gave them. The blonde skewered her with a look as she defiantly sauntered by, and the stray thought occurred to Fahtima that she might need to…protect herself in some way. Alter a memory? Yes.

And as easily as that, her hesitation in using her power for anything other than Hamza’s wishes was overcome, and by the time the two women had closed the door, they had forgotten all about the encounter with the athletic, handsome, hard-loving African man in room 1011.

“What the hell was that all about?” Hamza grabbed her blouse and pulled her towards him until they were face to face.

“Special forces,” she managed. “Some sort of special forces are coming to arrest you this afternoon.”

His eyes narrowed. “How do you know?”

“I….” She faltered, for telling the truth would be admitting her failure. But he would learn soon anyway. “Pren’felit. He said so, on the Enterprise. He said they were going to arrest an Eternist agent.”

“The Enterprise?” he asked, creases appearing on his brow. “But I thought he was on the Hood.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” she said wildly, tearing away from his loosened grasp. “You need to get out of here!”

She grabbed her cousin’s suitcase from the closet and plopped it on the bed. “Pack.”

But he was watching her with narrowed eyes. “I…don’t think so. If I did, where would I go? It would be hard to get off the Moon, it would be easy enough for them to watch all the outgoing flights. We’d need money to bribe somebody for a private passage from a private dock, and we don’t have much.”

“I’ll find it for you,” she asserted. “I’ll make it for you!”

“An Eternist agent?” he said, as if she hadn’t spoken at all. “No one would think of me that way. I’m a nobody.” He snorted. “An agent? Anton would laugh to hear that.”

He lifted his head. “Computer, activate video and present headlines from Luna City that have developed the last half hour.”

And there it was. A report that a man named Alonzo Farnsworth had been taken into custody a few minutes earlier, on suspicion of planning the sabotage of the water system on Luna City.

“What?” Fahtima asked stupidly.
“The people I work with have ideas, Tima. You don’t think I’m the only one in favor of pushing the politicians along, do you?” He advanced on her with anger and clenched fists. “Did you get him? Pren’felit? How come there isn’t a report about that?”

She closed her eyes in misery. “No,” she whispered. She’d known she would pay.

*****

How they expected him to sleep after the mauling the radiation specialists had put him through, Kirk didn’t know. The lights were low in this room at Luna Base hospital, but the door was wide open and the glare from the hallway spilled through to his bed, not to mention the noise of medical personnel rushing around, the sounds of machines being rolled along and, far down the hall, a big booming voice asking, “Where’s the deceased? I’m from Garden Memorial.”

Kirk closed his eyes.

But the thoughts that danced behind his lids made sleep impossible. Garden Memorial had arrived to take away the body of Neari’lon Shane Talin, the thirty-one-year old nephew of Pren’felit Shane Mena. They had made it to the pod, but….

“I think he’s dead, sir,” Goldthwaite reported after she’d eased the Andorian to the tiny floor space of the pod. The door had just clanged shut. Neari’lon’s mouth hung open, and before Kirk bent to check the vital signs, he was sure Goldthwaite was right.

He rolled over in the high hospital bed and punched the recalcitrant pillow a few times. Pren’felit had taken it hard. The ties of family were strong among Andorians, a lot stronger than among humans.

Though his own mother….

At first there had been silence on the other end of the line when the doctors had granted him a minute to call. He’d figured he’d better get in touch with her because the news had gone out over the vids. While he had not given his mom any thought at all when the ship was so far from Earth during the mission, he couldn’t ignore the ties of family when he was this close to home. He owed it to her.

“The report said you were all right.” Her voice was calm. “Is that true?”

He surveyed the scrubber that was strapped to his arm, that was circulating every milli-liter of blood in his body so that maybe, if he was lucky, the doctors would let him out of the hospital in three days.

“I’m fine, Mom. I wanted you to know and not worry.”

“I thought you’d be safe once you were off a ship,” she said caustically. “But I forgot how you’ve always attracted trouble.”

“It was an accident,” he said wearily, because of course nobody really knew and that was the official line. “Just bad timing.”

“So you say. And is Spock all right?”

A nurse walked into his room unannounced and came to his bedside. He stared up at her, the side of his face pillowed on one hand, and was too weary to move or respond to her. God, he was tired.
She checked the readouts on the monitor, and then she took his wrist, turning it to make sure the line was still firmly in place. Satisfied, she patted him gently and asked, “Is there anything I can get for you, Commodore Kirk?”

Yes. Some answers would help.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” she chided into his silence.

He swallowed thickly. “Too tired to sleep.”

“Perhaps a sleeping aid….”

“No,” he said quickly. “I’m all right.”

“The fatigue is a natural result of the radiation poisoning. You’ll feel better soon.” With nothing better to offer him, she left the room, but at least she half-closed the door behind her, creating an illusion of privacy.

He rolled over onto his back and rested his free hand over his forehead.

Four minutes after they reached the pod, Kirk was almost ready to launch it without the one passenger he wanted the most. “C’mon,” he muttered, straining to hear the slightest scrape against the hatch he’d been forced to close to provide maximum protection. He was standing, as they all were except for Pren‘felit, who was huddled in the observer’s seat, because there was so little room. The pod had been designed for one. He and Randolph had laid out Neari’lon’s body with reverence in the tiny anteroom that served as a docking bay.

Randolph and Ciani exchanged looks, and Kirk knew what they were thinking. They didn’t know for sure what his own crew had believed: that he would not put the life of his lover over other lives entrusted to him. When he judged it necessary to eject the pod, he would.

But he wasn’t to be put to the test. There was a muffled thump from the other side, Kirk swung the hatch open, and Spock stepped inside.

The first thing he said was, “Do not worry, Commodore. The blindness is passing already,” but Kirk had expected it and would have known anyway from the searching hands Spock had in front of him. He had found his way to the separation wall controls and then through the halls to the pod in darkness.

“You’re bleeding,” Ciani had said stupidly, as if she had never seen blood before. Maybe it had been green blood she hadn’t witnessed.

Kirk turned away from the still glistening runnels coming from his lover’s nose and his ears and activated the pod ejection system. “Hold on, everybody,” and he wrapped his arm around Spock’s waist and pulled him in; the way Spock sagged against him told its own story. With a thump the pod accelerated away from the ship, and in another second they were free of the Whitman-Nu radiation.

Except…. According to a stressed Captain Rajani anxious to show he was pushing the investigation, the radiation itself had unaccountably retreated within the safeguards earlier. About the time, he estimated, that they’d managed to get the separation door open. Now what the hell did that mean?

A shadow at the door caught his attention. A small figure with a heavy limp came inside, and he raised his head to regard Fahtima Gabon.
“Oh. I am sorry. I was looking for the room of Commander Spock.”

Kirk struggled to sit up with some dignity. “He’s two down the hall,” Kirk offered.

“And Randy,” she said hurriedly. “I want to see him as well.” She hovered, as if on the brink of flight, when she seemed to find some courage and labored to come a little closer. But not close enough for him to see her well. Her head was well wrapped and her face shielded with a pale yellow scarf, adding shadows to shadows. “I am so sorry to hear what happened to you, Commodore.”

“I’ll be all right.” Solicitude generally bored him; solicitude from this woman made him uncomfortable. Spock had mentioned that they’d met at the amphitheater.

“And I am sorry,” she said doggedly, as if determined to finish the litany, “for what happened to Commander Spock. He will recover?”

“He’ll be out of here before I am.” It was amazing, really, how much the Vulcan body could withstand. Even the swelling that he’d known must have occurred in the vacuum had mostly disappeared by the time Spock had reached them. And the radiation hadn’t made inroads on Spock’s mainly-Vulcan cells nearly as much as it had on the rest of them.

“I am happy to hear it.” Gabon backed away.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “What happened—”

“I wrenched my ankle,” she said. “A stupid accident. I will go to see Commander Spock now. And Randy, too, of course.” With a swish of her long skirt she was gone, and Kirk rested against the pillow gratefully.

He really needed to sleep, and he probably could now that weariness was finally overcoming him. He would awaken with a sharpened mind and a fresh perspective that might enable him to make some sense out of all that had happened. Komack might have denied his idea for bringing their attackers out of hiding, but it seemed to have happened anyway. What had happened today: it wasn’t coincidence. He was sure of it.
Kirk found his way up from the depths of sleep gradually, a skill he’d only recently re-acquired since command no longer demanded instant wakefulness. Something delightful was happening along the ridge of his spine, and he burrowed deeper into the pillow with a contented sigh.

Eventually the rhythmic scratching—for that is what his forebrain identified through the shrouds of sleep that he was reluctant to leave—moved higher up, and it transformed itself into a gentle kneading at exactly that spot at the base of his neck where tension accumulated. Ahhhh.

He let the knowing fingers go on for quite a while, but eventually he opened one eye.

“Either….” He paused, swallowed thickly, and tried again. “Either that is someone who I know and love, or one of the nurses around here is getting more familiar than he or she should.”

The expert hand that had been working at his tight neck muscles abruptly abandoned him, only to land with a firm caress on his sheet-and-blanket-covered buttocks. “And if you were to discover instead that it was Doctor McCoy who had arrived earlier than expected?”

Kirk turned over with a smile. “I’d be shocked and Patty Bronson would have something to complain about. Besides, you’re the only one who knows all my tension spots.”

Spock leaned down and lightly pressed a kiss to Kirk’s lips. He tasted good, with nothing of the scent of a hospital about him.

Spock broke their kiss and retreated enough to allow Kirk to look his fill at the man he’d been afraid, yesterday, he would never see again. The only indication of Spock’s daring walk in vacuum was the severe sunburn he sported; his face was as green as Kirk had ever seen it.

Kirk traced a line along the long nose, lightly, because the skin had to be raw and somewhat painful. “Hey, lover,” he said huskily, as a rush of thankfulness for life came over him, “it’s good to see you.”

He pulled Spock down to him and their lips met again, but this kiss was tender and heartfelt and lengthy, so that Kirk actually felt the faint stirrings of arousal, even in this inappropriate location. God, how he loved this man! Was there anything that Spock was not to him? Friend, chosen companion, perfect subordinate and yet matched equal, and a lover who so easily fanned desire. “And chess partner,” Kirk murmured as their lips parted. He ran his fingers through Spock’s glossy hair. “We’ve got to get back into some rhythm where we can play chess again.”

Spock straightened with a lifted eyebrow. “I would enjoy doing so, although that is an odd statement to make under these circumstances.” He pulled a chair up to the bedside and sat. “How are you feeling this morning?” His everyday blue science uniform proclaimed his own health better than any words.

Kirk sat up and evaluated. He didn’t ache so badly that he wanted to curl up and die, which was a distinct improvement. “Better,” he decided. “I guess we win this round.”

“But how many more rounds are there to be?” I am concerned.”

“We need to talk,” Kirk agreed. “Give me a minute.”
He carefully slid out of bed, aiming for the bathroom and forgetting that he had some equipment strapped to his arm. The weight on his wrist reminded him that he’d be tethered to the hospital for at least another few days.

A quick look around didn’t reveal what he was seeking. “Can’t a man get a decent change of clothes around here? Where’d you get your uniform? Has our luggage been transferred over?”

“I will see what I can find, but you are well aware that controlling the clothing a patient wears is one way for hospital personnel to control the patient as well.”

“Bones wouldn’t be happy to know you understand him so well.”

Spock sniffed. “If you do not tell him, I will not.”

Kirk emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later with clean teeth, brushed hair, and a sonics-cleansed body, but Spock’s search had only produced a fresh set of blue pajamas, which Kirk despised. He had wanted his uniform, but it seemed that access was not being granted. So in the middle of the room he unabashedly pulled off what they’d put him in the previous night without retreating to the privacy of the sanitary facilities. Spock watched him with faint amusement and didn’t move to help him when he struggled to get the sleeve opened and then closed over the IV.

Kirk perched on the side of the bed and ignored the signals his body gave him to just lie down instead. At least his thoughts were more ordered this morning than they’d been last night, when he remembered being defeatist and not very productive. “I suppose you’ve been released?”

Spock settled into a chair facing the side of the bed and nodded. “Captain Rajani will debrief me later this morning, and after that I will return to Paris. If the doctors allow it, I imagine you will be giving your deposition this afternoon.”

“I need to get out of here,” Kirk fretted. “I feel fine.”

“Then you have remarkable powers of recuperation. The lingering effects of the radiation poisoning must be addressed.”

“I know. I’ll stay for my own good, but I need a long-distance comm unit and some more contact with Rajani at least.”

“I will see that you are provided with a communications device before I leave.”

Kirk regarded his bare toes. “Good. And let’s see if we can round up a sharp youngster from the base, too, some hotshot ensign for recording duty and admin help over the next few days. I’m going to be busy.” He looked up and asked the question that had followed him into sleep and lay heavily on his mind now. “How long did it take?”

Spock did not pretend to misunderstand him. “Twenty-eight seconds from airlock to airlock.”

Kirk inhaled sharply. “That’s past the estimates for Vulcans.”

“Indeed. I am not certain I was conscious for that entire time. At least, I have no memory of actually entering the far airlock, although I must have done so. I do know that I had planned on setting an accelerated pressurization but did not.”

Kirk didn’t want to think about what had almost happened. Two seconds? Three? Just a beat of his heart.
“How long were you unconscious?”

“How long?” he replied. “How long?”

“Counting the three seconds that I do not remember, one minute and thirty-seven seconds.”

The temptation was to dwell on it, how close they all had come to dying unexplained and useless deaths, for suppose Spock had taken much longer to revive? But they had other things to discuss this early morning hour, and so Kirk wisely decided to allow the images that Spock had conjured up with his dry recital of the facts—a limp body barely breathing, collapsed—to slide into memory.

He tried to cross his legs Indian style only to discover that his joints wouldn’t allow that, so he stretched his legs and leaned back instead. “I suppose,” he said, “that you’re here to explain that little incident on the ladder to me.”

“I am not. I do not know when I will see you in the near future, and so I came to assure myself of your well-being and to say good-bye.”

“And to cop a feel while I was sleeping.”

That brought an amused light to his lover’s eyes. “You were wide awake and could have stopped my incursions at any time with a word.”

“I enjoyed being awakened that way. Unexpected.”

“I know.”

“But that doesn’t answer my question, does it?”

Spock looked at his hands. “You know as well as I do what occurred.”

“What Versin said might happen. Because your telepathic centers aren’t being stimulated. It’s the second time. The second time that you said might not ever happen.”

Spock’s eyes challenged him. “I know what you are about to say.”

Kirk was determined. “And I’m going to say it. We can’t ignore this, Spock. I want you to go to Vulcan like Versin suggested. To Golgotharen.”

“I will not.”

“Why not?”

“As I stated before, there is no solution to my condition. Versin has no specific treatment plan. I decline to be his patient.”

“So you’d rather die here on Earth?”

“I will not die, Jim.”

“Everybody dies, Spock, it’s just a question of when, and if you don’t mind I’d like to postpone the prospect for you as long as I can.”

“You assume that Versin will be able to cure me. I estimate the probability against that as seven—”
“Damn it, Spock, I’m serious.” Kirk slid off the bed and looked at the most stubborn man of his acquaintance. “It’s logical for you to seek out help. Why are you so resistant? These are your people. You can’t be dropping into unconsciousness when you least expect it.”

Spock wouldn’t meet his gaze. “It is not when I least expect it.”

Kirk blinked. “It isn’t? You think you can predict when it will happen?”

“I do. The occurrence seems to be linked to a state of high emotion.”


“Negative high emotion.” Spock regarded him with a trace of a curve to his lips. “Otherwise, I would retreat into unconsciousness when we indulge in sexual activity.”

That didn’t help. Why didn’t Spock see what was so obvious to him? He had to get help, and Versin, as off-putting as the man was, was their best possibility.

Before he could get up steam for more arguing, Spock forestalled him with an unexpected comment. “However, there is another aspect of my experience that I believe I should mention.”

Kirk folded his arms belligerently. He didn’t want Spock to think he was off the hook. “And that is….”

“I do not know if this was real or imagined, but it is possible I perceived another mind. Immediately before I entered the first airlock.”


But Spock was shaking his head. “It was merely a…fleeting impression of regret. It easily could have been a projection of my own emotional state, and as you know I had recently fallen.”

“You aren’t in the habit of projecting your emotions, Spock. Did it feel like another Vulcan? A Deltan? Any other race you’ve ever melded with?”

“The contact was too transitory for me to make a determination. As I said, I am unsure if it was real at all. However, given the nature of our suppositions concerning the attack in Paris, I am reporting the incident to you as a superior officer.”

“And in the debriefing later.”

“Of course. However, I cannot elaborate on the incident any more than I have already done to you.”

“But it doesn’t make a difference, Spock, not when we’re talking about you and Golgotharen. It’s your life we’re talking about.”

Spock rose in one supple movement. His hands immediately went behind his back; that, Kirk knew, was not a good sign.

“Yes, it is my life we are talking about. You must respect my decision, Jim.”

Kirk ran distracted fingers through his hair. He hadn’t wanted the conversation to go down this path. “Of course I respect it, but I don’t see the logic of it.”

They stood there, confronting each other, at odds, and Kirk tried to marshal his arguments. But he
wouldn’t be able to express them this day, because the door to his room swung open and a nurse advanced.

“Good morning, Commodore, Commander,” he said correctly but implacably, in the way of all medical personnel who know that the power is on their side. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but it’s time for the commodore’s cell purification treatment. If you’ll come this way to the treatment room, please.”

Kirk gave in with poor grace. “Before breakfast you want to irradiate me?”

“You’ve already been irradiated, sir. We’re trying to reverse the damage.”

“I know, I know,” he acknowledged. “Lieutenant, give us a minute here.”

The young man might have objected, but especially in a military hospital there had to be at least the illusion that rank was respected, and so he lifted a shoulder and retreated with an “I’ll wait outside, sir.” Kirk and Spock were left alone with their disagreement.

It wasn’t the first time they’d held opposing points of view, for Spock had certainly never been hesitant to express his opinion on the ship. But this disagreement was personal, and the issue at stake was desperately important to Kirk. However, now wasn’t the time to pursue it. He looked at his handsome lover and was sorry for many reasons that he wouldn’t be leaving the hospital any time soon.

“So. Will you be going home tonight?”

“I don’t think so. Without you there….”

“They said another two or three days before I’m released.”

“We will stay in touch.”

“Yes.” Kirk leaned in for a kiss that was affectionately returned. “Don’t think that this is the end of this conversation,” he softly warned against Spock’s lingering lips. Spock’s shoulders under his hands were, he knew, very strong. This was the best of beings within his embrace, a being who would not be swayed against his better judgment. Although why his better judgment was so darned illogical sometimes, Kirk didn’t know.

Spock wryly observed him. “I would be disappointed in you if you didn’t try. But this is an argument you will not win.”

“We’ll see.” Kirk knew when it was time to suspend operations. “Take care of yourself, Commander.”

Spock was militarily correct. “I will do so, Commodore.”

He was almost at the door when Kirk called after him. “Spock?”

Spock turned around and cocked an eyebrow. “Yes, Jim?”

“Thanks. For everything.”

“You are most welcome. I will not forget to send the long range communication device and the ensign from the base.”

Then he was gone.
The Singapore subway, or MRT as the locals called it, had been recently updated, though Fahtima hardly noticed the amenities: the muted noise of the car running above the tracks, or the brightly lit stations, or the comfortable, padded seat. She had found the station near her hotel and descended from street level to the Chua Chu Kang line, paid her fare by swiping the universal debit card provided by the *News* for business trips, and taken a seat at the very end of the train. Now she stared out at the darkness, her forehead resting on the cold glass, as it was intermittently broken by darker lines when the train whooshed by supporting pillars. Sometimes a blue light appeared in the blurred reality that rushed by her.

She would have another fifteen minutes before she reached her destination along the Marsiling line. The interview that Randy had arranged with a well-known member of the Eternist governing committee was now her responsibility since he was still at Luna City hospital being treated. His intention had been to run the interviews with Pren’felit and with Yeo Swee Chiow side by side in the premiere Saturday issue, to present different points of view on the controversial Utarf-Pren’felit proposal before the General Assembly. She didn’t know if the interview with Pren’felit was going to take place, as last she had heard Randy was to be released tomorrow, but the Andorian was still ill from his incursion on the *Enterprise*. Hamza had taken great pleasure in that news.

Fahtima shifted in her seat so she could stretch out her left leg. She was wearing a long black dress today, so nobody who might be observing her could see more than her ankle. She remembered the Eternist priest from the village, who had always been urging the girls and women to dress modestly. Well, she did dress modestly, but not because of anything he had ever said. She had taken the priest’s measure from the beginning and not trusted any of his words, not when she had seen beneath them to intentions. She had so much to hide that covering her body had always been second nature to her.

Her toes still throbbed from where Hamza had stomped on them in his rage, after she’d given him a halting but detailed account of what had happened on the ship. She had made no example that caught the world’s attention and terrified the humans who dared to consort with aliens. The news that had trickled out of Luna talked of a minor accident and injuries, one unfortunate death, but nothing else. Hamza’s grand plan of a series of mysterious incidents that would throw humans into a fearful frenzy had suffered a severe setback, and she’d disappointed him greatly. But already she was planning how that would change. She would take care of Pren’felit.

As she would take care of Commander Spock. Fahtima formed a small smile that reflected in the subway window; the contrary meanings of the term “to take care of” in Standard were deliciously ironic.

Although the attack had failed, it had revealed to her where her loyalty truly rested. As hard as it had been for her, as ultimately unsuccessful as she had been, she had tried to do as Hamza asked. And she would do so in the future. But not, she had finally realized, at the total expense of her own self. Just one tiny piece of herself she demanded that she retain. So that meant she had to find a way to protect Spock. She could not kill him.

On Luna, after Hamza had thrown her out of his room with a snarl and one last slap, she had leaned against the hallway wall and tried to stifle her tears. Another guest had come along and she had tried to hide her face, but her distress had been obvious, and the woman had asked, kindly, “Are you all right? Can I do anything for you?” One woman to another. She had probably believed Fahtima was caught in a lovers’ quarrel.

Her aching feet had taken her out to the public transportation system that crisscrossed the city on
the Moon, and she’d ended up at the base hospital. A presentation of her credentials with the News got her in, and her affiliation with Randy was, after all, genuine.

She had stood for a full five minutes outside what she thought was Spock’s room, not knowing if she were gathering the courage to go in or not. Seeing Kirk instead of his Vulcan lover had been a shock; she must have been disoriented to have made such an elementary mistake, to have mistaken one for the other.

She had hurried away. What need had she to enter one half-Vulcan’s physical presence? She had but to open her thoughts to know that he was well, that he was sleeping, that his siren mind that threatened to wreck her on the rocks of her good intentions was as it had always been.

The subway rolled on under the surface of the land, and Fahtima made her plans.

*****

If the lesson about the limitations of power hadn’t been hammered into Kirk when he was a cadet, or when he served as a lowly junior officer, or when he was the right arm to his captain as first officer, or when he encountered problems he could not solve even with the might of a starship at his command, it surely had been pounded into him on this frustrating day.

Kirk swung off the transporter pad without a glance at the operator. It was 9:02 p.m. local San Francisco time according to the clock on the wall, past the time when the everyday after-work crowd had flocked home using the metro transporter system. He had been the only person materializing, which suited his mood exactly. So did the clouds that hung heavily over the city, warning of rain but not quite following through on the threat yet.

The night was warm in advance of the storm, and some people were taking advantage of the weather by congregating outside their homes to chat—people with not much to worry them, people who were friendly and genuinely interested in their neighbors, and people who noticed first his uniform and then his face with some surprise. It was impossible not to acknowledge their ingenuous greetings in some way, so Kirk forced his expression into some semblance of pleasantness as he strode along. Shortly, the meteorologists said, this weather would disappear for the year and even California would feel the bite of winter. This oncoming storm was the precursor of many cool, bleak days to come, with lots of rain. December was traditionally the city’s coldest month, and almost its wettest. That suited Kirk’s mood, too.

He aimed an insincere smile at two teenagers sitting side by side on some steps—had he ever been that young or that enthralled with a girl?—and soldiered on with his arms swinging perhaps a bit too aggressively. His thoughts seemed to fall into the rhythm of his slapping boots. He had been stupid—stu-pid, stu-pid, stu-pid—to think that he would have any input at all in furthering the investigation of what had happened on the Enterprise. That had been made very clear to him today.

His job was to supervise the transwarp project, and any ideas he might have about what had actually happened to him were surely already being considered by the people appointed to investigate the event: the team headed by the blinkered Commodore Beldon and the task force composed mostly of politicians—the one that he and Spock were supposed to assume had a competent staff. Yes, thank you for the reports you’ve developed and sent from Luna Base hospital, we’ll add them to the other material from debriefing.

“Anyway, it’s an open question whether this incident is connected with Paris,” Komack had growled. “Don’t you have some real work in the transwarp office to do, or is that material over your head?”

His promotion to commodore, it seemed, had only served to strip him of the ability to act. His
hands were tied as effectively as if his wrists were bound. There had been no presentation of the facts by his competent staff, no succinct summing up around a briefing room table by his experienced first officer, and no opportunity to gather further information by any action he might have initiated himself. Since four o’clock that afternoon, Kirk had been missing the *Enterprise* and the life he had lived there with a pain that was anything but imaginary; it lodged just under his solar plexus.

Kirk paused on a corner before crossing a street and stared up at the cloudy sky without really seeing it. Maybe his mother was right. He was accustomed to exercising far more power and getting far more done than he ever would in the uninteresting-to-a-nonscientist assignment that Komack had vindictively pigeon-holed him into. For a moment Kirk considered the ambitious career path his mother would approve, the one that would take him into the admiralty in a few years and, according to her idealistic predictions, have him replace Nogura as commander-in-chief when the old man retired. There were things he could do to try to make all that happen….

But he never would. His path lay outwards, towards the unknown stars and all they harbored, not spiraling inward toward the center of power. Nogura with all his authority, Kirk knew, was more of a prisoner than he was under Bob Wesley and the office of Strategic Procurement and Design. There were years to pass before he might consider the CinC’s office as a goal.

He came back to reality as one cold drop of rain fell on his nose, and he had to quietly allow himself a small chuckle. Those were grandiose visions his mom had for him, and the notion that he could surely orchestrate them was ludicrous. And he plain didn’t want to. He just wanted to get home and in out of the rain. Well, and solve the most pressing problems of the Federation if he could.

He recommenced his walk with less anger, amused self-deprecation, and definitely some urgency, since the raindrops that now fell on the pavement and marred his comfortable everyday uniform were plopping down larger and colder and more frequently. When he’d left his hospital room early that morning, he’d gone straight to work without stopping at the house, and after a fourteen hour day, he was more than ready to change into something else.

The house was dark as he keyed in the entry code. He hadn’t expected Spock to be there but had entertained the faint hope that his warm, sensible lover would be anyway. The mood he was in now…. A fast and satisfying fuck would have helped dissipate his uneasy frame of mind, and then they would have talked over pizza and beer—he would have ordered some delivered from the pizzeria Bones had found. Spock would have raised his eyebrow at him, several times, and helped to put everything into perspective.

Kirk let himself in and the lights brightened automatically to an empty dwelling place. It was not to be.

Just to make sure, when he stepped inside he called, “Spock?” No one answered him, as he’d expected, but that didn’t help the stray thought that seemed to leap from his musings: If Spock went to Golgotharen, there would be silence for quite a while. And if Versin couldn’t help Spock, no one would ever answer his call.

He closed the door behind him with too much force.

It seemed he was to have no peace that night, for no sooner had he tramped upstairs and thrown off his uniform tunic than the computer announced, “*There is a visitor at the front door.*”

Kirk sat on the edge of the bed to pull off his right boot and cursed with feeling.
“Computer, identify visitor.”

“Sarah Kirk.”

His mother? At this time of night? Kirk sighed and instructed the intercom on. “Mom, how are you?”

“Getting wet, son.”

“I’ll be downstairs in a minute.” He told the computer to let her in and went over with a long stride to the bureau where he’d unpacked some of his casual clothing. There wasn’t much to choose from but he didn’t give a damn. He threw on a pair of black pants of heavy cotton and a knit shirt with a collar, found a pair of black shoes, visited the bathroom, and made his way to the first floor.

His mother had already made herself at home in the kitchen, he saw, because now she was sitting at the dining room table, her leg propped up on a chair, with a steaming cup of something in front of her. Kirk kissed her cheek and saw that she was drinking tea. “Mind if I join you?”

“Go ahead, it’s your house. Quite a nice one you’ve got here, too.”

“Thanks. Glad you like it.”

Once confronted by the food processor, he realized that he was hungry and his fantasy of beer and pizza had been prompted by his growling stomach. His desire to get Spock into bed was as simply motivated. Sex was a great tension reliever, especially if the person you were rolling around with understood, the way Spock always seemed to. Kirk ordered a double-decker turkey sandwich with Swiss cheese on rye along with whatever fruit had been stocked into stasis earlier, partly because he wanted to eat and partly because he wanted to see how well the household engineer that Unifalawa had hired for them had managed. The fruit was fragrant strawberries and pears, the sandwich fine, except that he’d forgotten to program in a request for mayonnaise. He shrugged and took the plate and a cup of decaffeinated coffee to the table, where he belatedly realized he should have offered something to his mother.

“Can I get you anything to eat, Mom?”

She was amused and shook her head. “No, you go ahead. I ate earlier this evening with Carlo Venturi on the wharf.”

He bit into the sandwich, chewed and swallowed. “So that’s what brings you to town. Is he still trying to sell you the Monterey Times?”

“That and a piece of his time, too,” she said complacently. “I don’t have much interest in either prospect, but he is a good friend.”

“How’d you get here? Did he drive you? You didn’t walk from the station, did you?” He didn’t see how she could have. No matter how assiduously she might have pursued physical therapy, it had still been only a little more than a week since he’d seen her last.

“No, I don’t think I could manage much walking yet. Carlo did drop me off here, but I intend to take a taxi to my hotel. I didn’t know how prepared you might be for overnight visitors.”

Kirk took another bite and carefully did not mention the guest bedroom that was perfectly capable of hosting her for the evening if she’d wanted to stay. When he and Spock had agreed that they should have some arrangements for guests, they’d both been thinking of McCoy, not Sarah Kirk. But it didn’t matter. There was no way his mother would stay away from her overnight bag. She
had always dressed neatly and with great propriety, and it would take a major story she was covering for her to appear at the breakfast table in the same clothing she’d worn the night before.

She was surveying him with quizzical concern, and it suddenly occurred to him that she was here because she was worried about him. The thought warmed him. Her next comment confirmed it.

“How are you doing, Jim?”

“I’m fine, Mom.”

“Are you completely recovered?”

“As well as can be expected,” he said lightly. “I go in on Saturday for a treatment, another one on Monday, and then I should be as good as new.”

“It’s so strange, that your ship should protect you for all those years out in space, and then such a major accident should occur when you’re onboard for a visit.”

He shrugged and said, “These things happen.”

“You were lucky that our understanding of how to counteract radiation poisoning has advanced so far,” she said with an edge to her voice. “Twenty years ago you wouldn’t have been so fortunate. Your father had a good friend, Lieutenant Steve Caltano, who died from radiation, but I imagine today he would have survived. I was concerned when I heard you were at the base for so long. Four days, Jim. It must have been a really severe case.”

Really three and a half days, and Whitman-Nu radiation was a bit different from the standard kind that the news outlets had reported had leaked from around the engine’s shielding, but he wasn’t going to contradict her. The procedures had been boring and sometimes painful, and he’d rather not remember them. “Not so bad. McCoy came up the second day and helped devise the protocols for everybody’s treatment, since he’s more or less an expert on the subject.”

“An expert because he served on the Enterprise and was forced to develop a knowledge of radiation poisoning?”

“Something like that. It was good to see him even under the circumstances. He’s still at the base hospital, treating the others, especially the representative. I was released before most of the rest of them.”

“Yes, I know. I tried to contact Ralph Randolph and was told he was still in Luna City.”

“He’ll get out tomorrow, I think.”

“Yes, so I was told.” Sarah examined the clear glass tabletop, the shining silver table supports and the matching gray and black upholstered chairs. “I like this set. Where did you get it?”

He told her about Unifalawa, how he hadn’t seen the furniture until the day he’d moved in, and then he offered her a tour, more because he didn’t know what else to say to fill the silence that was sure to emerge between them than because he really wanted to show her around. He was tired and if he couldn’t have his lover, he wanted silence and the chance to brood a little. He resisted the urge to check the time; he could hardly throw his own mother out into the rain. At least not until he’d called for a cab.

“Only the ground floor,” she said, motioning towards the staircase. “I’ll wait until I have two good legs again before I go upstairs.”
Sarah hoisted herself up and slowly followed him through the three major ground floor rooms, and she had ready comments for all she saw. The artwork he and Spock had picked up from the Arcturan Artists’ Colony especially caught her eye, and she stood before the big bold abstract that they’d put in the entranceway. “Now that,” she claimed, “is an artist with an imagination.” He wondered what she would say if she ever saw the small glass sculpture they’d also chosen from the colony: the delicate hyacinths that represented all the potential of his relationship with Spock now rested on a shelf of their bed’s headboard, still encased in the force field that they’d kept it within on the ship. When they’d packed it up at the end of the mission, Spock had insisted on keeping the field intact, because, he’d said, straight-faced, “You never know how vigorously we will be moving while in the act of intercourse, and I would regret it if this piece were to be broken.”

Sarah nodded approval of the kitchen, though she frowned at the refrigeration unit, claiming it was too large for just two men, and barely glanced at his office. He could tell she was tiring by the time they adjourned to the living room, where she took one of the cinnamon-colored, wing-backed chairs. He offered to get her some more tea.

“No,” she shook her head. “Sit and let’s talk a little.”

He angled himself into the embrace of the sofa. “What about?”

“I’d like to talk about what happened on the Enterprise.”

“It’s over, Mom, and I’m fine. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Yes, I know. But there is still something to report and write about, isn’t there?” She gazed at him levelly.

He should have known. Maybe she really had been concerned about his health and the danger he’d been in, but it seemed that his mom would be a newspaperwoman first and foremost above all other concerns. She had come to San Francisco in search of a story.

Sarah went on when he didn’t answer. “I haven’t been in the business as long as I have not to know when something is going on. Something is being suppressed. That accident on your ship wasn’t really an accident.”

He remained where he was, ostensibly relaxed but dismayed to know that he was dissembling in front of his own mother. “What makes you think that?”

“For one thing, what you just said. It’s a classic line from someone trying to think of a better answer. And for another thing, well, let’s say that I’ve still got a nose for when things aren’t quite right. And you’re involved. That alone should be signal enough to me that there’s more than meets the eye here.”

Kirk spread his hands in carefully-assumed innocence. “I don’t know.” Although he did, of course. It wouldn’t do the Federation or anyone else any good to highlight the events that had almost killed the very-visible Pren’felit, or reveal that advanced technology had once again been unexpectedly circumvented, and he’d reluctantly agreed with the official decision to call the incident an accident —when he knew in his bones that it was not. Randolph had been too tied up with treatment to file a report; by the time he did, the official viewpoint would be already entrenched, and the public would have transferred their attention to another sensation. No, the canny reporter would negotiate his silence for a bigger scoop later on and was probably doing that even now.

Sarah looked down her nose at him. “Don’t think you can lie to me, James Kirk.”
Time to make things clear. He sat up straight. “You would prefer that I violate my oath and divulge classified information?”

“Ah, then there is classified information involved.”

“Which you will not have access to and you will not print,” he said pointedly. “Totally putting aside the moral implications here, can you imagine how this would look? The mother of a Starfleet commodore printing a scoop on any other news organization? You’re the one so concerned about my career. Well, that would put a complete stop to any advancement you have planned for me, if I were stupid enough to say anything to you and you were unwise enough to print what you speculate about.”

By the time he was finished with his small speech he was up and on his feet and pacing halfway across the room. He reached the breakfast bar that separated the living area from the kitchen, whirled about and caught it behind him with his clenched fingers. Then he stopped himself before another word erupted. He wasn’t in charge here. He couldn’t play the captain and order anything.

“Mom.” He spread his hands in supplication. “Do you see what I mean?”

Sarah subsided against the cushions in apparent defeat. “I do. I did think it was worth a try, though. There are ways to disguise your source—”

He snorted his disbelief at that one.

“—or ways to trade information for other information. It’s a shame,” she said wistfully. “I imagine this would be first page news anywhere, and Kirk Communications could use the boost.”

Kirk shook his head. “Not this time.”

“All right. I do understand.”

He returned to the sofa but didn’t sit, instead looking down at her, dwarfed in the big chair that Unifalawa had bought for men. “Is the business doing okay?”

“Quite well, actually. Don’t worry, I won’t be asking you to support me any time in the near future. And when I go, you’ll be inheriting something of value.”

“Mom, you won’t be going anywhere for a long time.”

“Let’s hope so. If I don’t get caught up in the dangerous life you lead. Listen, why don’t you call me a cab? I’m tired and I think you are, too.”

“You’ve got that right. It’s been a long day. Where are you staying?”

He instructed the computer to make the call and settled across from her again. “Before you go, there’s something I need to mention to you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not another announcement. One a month is all I can take from you.”

“There isn’t going to be a wedding.”

Sarah regarded him sharply. “Well. I can’t say that I’m surprised. I didn’t think it would last and I was wondering why your friend wasn’t here. Are you going to live here all by yourself?”

He should have known that she would place that interpretation on his carelessly chosen words. Had he and his mother ever been on the same wavelength, or had his cherished childhood and
adolescent memories played him false? He remembered that they had formed an effective, encouraging family unit, even after, maybe especially after his father had died, for at least all the shouting between his parents had ended. He’d appreciated all she’d done for him and Sam, working long hours in the home-based office, and he remembered that she had given him excellent advice: about girls, about choosing classes, about his decision to apply to Starfleet. She hadn’t stood in his way and she had always supported him.

The years apart, when he had scarcely had time to visit her for more than a day or two at a time, had really changed her. Or at least changed the dynamics between them.

He was up on his feet again, though he tried to smother his indignation and present it as amusement instead. “I didn’t mean Spock walked out on me. We’re still together. It’s just that we decided we won’t get married. Right now.”

“It seems to me the only excuse for you two being together is being married,” she argued. “What’s the sense, otherwise? It will look terrible, like that Ralph Randolph and his lover. If it’s finally entered your dense head that you need to plot your career carefully, one of the worst things you can do is seem to be a person who can’t make a commitment. Look at the other men in the higher echelons of Starfleet. I have, because I thought my observations might help you. Almost every one of them is in a marriage of some sort. Your friend Bob Wesley, he married one of his crewmembers, right? And Admiral Nogura himself, he recently married his long time administrative assistant in a two year contract. And Admiral Komack, who used to be your sector commander, he’s been with the same woman for years.”

“And you think presenting a good front for Starfleet, doing what everybody else is doing, is a reason for getting married, for committing to one person for the rest of your life?” he asked incredulously.

“Or for the term of the contract, yes. It’s old-fashioned now to get a lifelong contract, you know, most people don’t, it’s so much harder to get a divorce from those. A year or two contract, maybe five years if you’re infatuated, that’s all that’s necessary. Casual sexual liaisons might be all well and good when you’re younger, but now that you’re a man of power—”

Thank God he was prevented from responding to what had to be one of the most ridiculous tirades he’d ever endured—his mom sure had changed her tune from when she’d argued against them in Iowa—by the sound of the front door opening. He twisted around to see Spock, soaking wet with his hair spiked and straggly and his clothing clinging to his body in miserable folds, emerging from the torrent outside.

“Spock!” He strode across the room to where his lover was standing with one brow raised and one hand still on the knob. In a message for his mother, Kirk grabbed him around the waist and gave him an awkward, one-armed hug.

“You have now transferred some of the rain to yourself,” Spock said with great aplomb as he closed the door on the storm. “I thank you for your efforts, but you make a somewhat inadequate towel.”

Kirk laughed and backed away as Spock continued, “Good evening, Sarah. I am sorry I was not here when you arrived. Welcome to our home.”

“Why, thank you, Spock, though it seems you’ve arrived just in time to see me go. We’re waiting for a taxi.”

“Do we have an umbrella?” Spock asked, and Kirk realized he was addressing him.
By the time he had rummaged in the hall closet and found one, Spock had exchanged a few more words with his mother and disappeared upstairs. He was still limping, Kirk noticed with a frown.

And then the cab arrived and Kirk escorted his mother down the steps with the force field umbrella doing a good job of keeping them dry, though his loafers were soaked before he got her into the aircar.

“Take care of yourself, Jim,” she said as she settled in the automated vehicle.

“You do the same, Mom. Come and visit us sometime, when all you want to do is see us,” he said to make sure his point was known. “And call first next time.”

She nodded. “When I can make it up to your second floor…and when I can dance at your wedding.”

He suddenly grinned at her. “You really are impossible, you know.”

“Oh, stop handing out compliments and get in out of the rain. Go, now.”

He watched the cab rumble along the street through the downpour until it zoomed up into the air lanes.

Spock was in the kitchen when he let himself back in and slipped off his shoes in the entrance hall. Then he pulled off his socks and left them where they fell. Bare-footed, he made his way up behind where Spock was busy at the processor and pressed as close to his lover as he could. He arms went around the slender waist and squeezed, while he gratefully rested his cheek against Spock’s back and sighed. Tension through the day had accumulated and then exploded into real discomfort with his mother’s visit, but now here was some relief. Spock felt warm and alive, calm, collected, and sexy all at once. He was nothing like the idiots who had truncated his power by removing him from the far-reaching arm of a starship, and he was certainly nothing like Sarah Kirk. Just…Spock. Exactly what Kirk wanted.

Spock stopped what he was doing and rested his hands over Kirk’s. They stood like that for more than a minute, swaying a little, enough to really feel each other’s solid presence and soaking up in silence what they needed.

Finally Kirk spoke. “I didn’t expect to see you tonight. What brings you home? It must be, what, seven-thirty in the morning in Paris.”

“Correct.” Spock returned to scooping up some powder into a mug and Kirk allowed him to slide out of their contact with each other. “And I will need to leave in less than ninety minutes. But I had something I felt was of some importance I wished to communicate.”

Kirk remembered what his mother had said. Another announcement wasn’t what he was after either. Just some privacy with his lover….

But as Kirk moved to lean against a countertop, he noticed that Spock looked tired, which was unusual enough in itself for him to frown. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I am.” Spock added boiling water to the mug and stirred. “I have simply not allowed myself much sleep lately. The pace of the investigation has accelerated, although it has not yielded many results yet.”

“Has your leg been bothering you?”
“Not to any great degree.” He took a long drink. Although he’d changed into dry clothes, Spock must have been cold from his sodden trip from the transporter station. They hadn’t considered the weather when they’d concluded the walk wasn’t very far.

Kirk led the way to the living room and settled on the couch again. Spock sat next to him to his right and, with his elbows on his knees, he sipped at his beverage, some sort of energy drink that Kirk had occasionally seen him consume on the ship. Or maybe it was a “comfort food,” one that had connotations of security and love.

He reached out and rested his flat palm against Spock’s back, just above the chenesi, then began to gently rub his knuckles along the bumps of his lover’s spine.

“That feels good,” Spock said simply, and he stretched beneath Kirk’s loving hand, curving his backbone with an audible crack.

“Whoa. You really have been working too hard bent over a computer,” Kirk commented. He continued with his kneading, enjoying the feel of Spock’s flesh beneath his hand, enjoying the fact that he was doing something good for the body he loved. Spock could get weary or stressed, too.

This time it was Spock who endured the touch for long minutes, as Kirk strayed up and down, across and over, taking his cue about where to go next from the way Spock moved and his small inhalations. The drink, only half-consumed, was forgotten, though after a while Spock put it on the floor to the side.

“We’ve really got to get a table here,” Kirk murmured.

“Yes,” Spock said quietly, and then there was only the sound of breathing and of Kirk scratching up beneath the three layers of dry shirts—a navy blue sweater, a uniform tunic, and undershirt. For more than a year, Spock had been subject to the cold, but right now his skin felt warm and comfortable. Kirk could feel the tension bleeding out, not only from his own taut body, but from Spock’s, too.

Eventually, Spock exhaled audibly. “I do not wish to disturb this most pleasing mood with a conversation.”

“Then don’t,” Kirk said, and he tugged on Spock’s sweater until he fell back against the sofa cushion and, not coincidentally, on Kirk’s outstretched arm. He curved his hand over his lover’s shoulder as Spock settled within his embrace.

Kirk sighed in sheer pleasure. This wasn’t what he had fantasized—grappling with Spock in bed, finding a temporary satisfaction in sex—but just sitting here quietly, together, was damn good.

“I think I know what you might want,” Spock said quietly, after the antique clock that decorated the wall before them had ticked over several minutes.

“Something more than this? I don’t think so.”

“A fireplace. In a situation like this, I believe it is traditional for the individuals involved to be staring into a fire.”

“Maybe we could get one installed.”

“An illogical purchase given typical San Francisco weather.”

“But logical if you want one.”
“There is much that I want that I cannot have.”

The comforting security of the past minutes fell in pieces to the floor. Yes. What they wanted, they couldn’t have. Waking up in the morning and reaching for the meld. A part of Spock always present through the bond. And maybe…Spock himself. He might not have Spock at all.

“Jim, I have been thinking over what you said during our last conversation about my condition.”

Kirk ran his fingers up through the short strands of hair. He wouldn’t push any more, it would be counterproductive. “And?”

“I believe that I have not fully explained myself to you.”

“And you wish to do so.”

“Correct.” Spock sat up straight and turned to regard him. Kirk’s embrace fell away. “There are elements of the experience at Golgotharen of which you are undoubtedly unaware.”

“Tell me, then.”

“Golgotharen is the ‘boogie-man’ of Vulcan culture. If it existed on Earth, tales would be told of it at night to frighten children. For it deals with diseases of the mind and, as you know, the mind has taken precedence over the body on Vulcan since the time of Surak.”

“Go on.”

“At one time it was located as far from population centers as it was possible to place it, deep in the desert of the southern hemisphere. Now, ever since Vulcan achieved space flight, it is an orbital facility off planet. This is necessary because there can be no mental interference, so to speak, in what the healers do to their patients. Also, the anguish experienced by some of the patients projects quite far and would be disturbing to those in the area who could not block adequately.”

“But what the healers manage to do, it helps.”

“Sometimes. But you make an incorrect supposition. The anguish experienced is most often a result of the treatment, not necessarily of the original condition.”

Kirk stared. Spock nodded.

“Mental aberrations among Vulcans are rare and quite difficult to cure. The Golgotharen healers are the most powerful telepaths in the population, and what these healers do for most cases is to break down the individual’s shields and then rebuild the psychic pathways from the inside out.” Spock shook his head in a small indication of frustration. “It is difficult to describe using Standard terms, but I believe that explanation conveys the essence of the experience.”

“But….” Kirk chose his words carefully. As disturbed as he was by this news, he reminded himself that his ultimate goal was life. Spock’s life. “You’ve never been afraid of pain before.”

“I wish to avoid pain as much as anyone, but it is not that which repels me. I said ‘from the inside out.’ Jim, do you remember the intimacy we shared in our deepest melds?”

Soberly, because he feared what Spock was going to reveal, Kirk replied, “You know I do.” He barely touched his lover’s arm, then withdrew. “The best experiences of my life.”

“And of mine. I…deeply regret the loss of that merging with you. But even those experiences
cannot be compared to what a well-matched, bonded couple will experience after years of the bond growing between them. We would have had such a deep closeness in time. What is forced upon a helpless patient at Golgotharen is similar to this mature intimacy, and yet horribly different. It is an unbelievable invasion of self that seeks not to merge and appreciate, but to change at a basic level.”

Kirk was repelled by the image Spock painted, and he remembered the powerful contact that had been forced on him by Versin. “And you think that’s what would happen to you at Golgotharen?”

“This is the course of treatment typically followed at the facility. Other, lesser maladies can be treated by healers with different gifts at other locations.”

Kirk struggled with what he had to say. “But even that, Spock, even that would be worth it if you’re cured. Even if you just live. We can stay like this, the way we are, together, but there won’t be any ‘us’ if you keep dropping unconscious and—”

“There is more to consider, Jim. I mention the deep intimacy forced by the healer because the patient is totally within his or her hands. Not only the patient’s body. Not only the patient’s mind. Their personality, their…for want of a better term, their essence.

“What kind of trust can we…can I give to any healer who has worked for years under Versin’s tutelage? You have already witnessed the prejudices that Versin harbors against us. He is master healer, and surely his influence has been deep. Do you think a Golgotharen healer would—” Spock paused as he obviously searched for the right words. “Even if I were to trust the healer with a fundamental dissolution of my personality and then its rebuilding, how can I trust him or her to have the expertise to re-establish my hybrid psyche? I am not like other Vulcans. My experiences have been different, yes, and my understanding of the universe is different as well, but most of all, I am who I am, and that is not someone these healers have encountered before.”

Spock stared over his clasped hands. “How will they know what to do with the non-conforming, atypical elements of my personality? I have attempted to live my life as a Vulcan, it is true, but there can be no denying that I am not…completely Vulcan. And my bondmate, the bondmate whom I once sheltered…he is completely human.”

Kirk remembered what Versin had said. That he and Spock could only ever have a travesty of a bond, and that he, a mere human, couldn’t provide the full mental joining that Spock really needed. He’d dismissed the words as obviously untrue; in their melds, he’d always believed that they had been completely open to one another, and their bond, if given the chance to grow, would have been the same. Wouldn’t it have?

“Spock…."

Spock suddenly stood and walked rapidly across the room, facing into the kitchen as Kirk had done when he’d been arguing with his mother. “What will the healers do with me, Jim? With us? With our bond,” Spock’s voice paused after the one syllable, “if it can be found?” He reached out to place one hand flat on the breakfast bar, as if steadying himself.

“It seems to me that the risk of going to Golgotharen is at least as great as the risk of staying here on Earth. Except under the most grave circumstances, I dare not take the chance that a Golgotharen healer will be able to cure me while at the same time understanding my unique psyche.” He swiveled on his heel to confront Kirk, and his drawn face reflected the intensity of his words. “If by some turn of fortune I emerge from treatment, will it be as the man you know? As the person with whom you once desired to share a bond?”

Kirk spread his hands in frustration. “But these are people with expertise, with good intentions,
“Do you know how many people are actually cured at the facility, Jim?”

Mutely, Kirk shook his head.

“I do. I have spent much of my free time the past few days researching what I can find about Golgotharen. They have a success rate of forty-two percent. Of those they cannot cure, thirty-five percent return to home care, but the remaining individuals have been so damaged by the attempt at the cure that they are permanently disabled.”

“Disabled,” Kirk echoed. This conversation was a nightmare. Golgotharen: the place of suffering. Kirk couldn’t believe that he’d been urging Spock to retreat there with so little knowledge of what it actually meant.

“And those who have been so injured,” Spock continued inexorably, “are changed. It is as if the life has been drained from them, although that is a fanciful description and the technical truth is that the healer has damaged the neural pathways of the brain in the treatment process. There is a disengagement between mind and intention, between expression and thought. The damaged individuals are sequestered in a community that is at the same location in the southern desert where Gol began more than a thousand years ago.”

He took a few steps closer. “They are no longer engaged in the life-long pursuit of all Vulcans, which is to follow the path of Surak and control our strong and potentially violent emotions, because there are no remaining emotions with which to grapple. That is the potential result of the treatment, Jim, a change in personality so complete that it is similar to a lobotomy for a human. These Vulcans do not interact with their environment. It is ironic, is it not? That those who are considered the most mentally-ill are those who live the life of a perfect Vulcan—at least according to those who would take Surak’s teachings to that extreme.

“Do not ask this of me, Jim. The risks are too great. I would need to be presented with incontrovertible evidence that I am on the brink of death before I would put myself into the hands of a Golgotharen healer. I, the half-breed Vulcan whom no one understands…except you.”

It took Kirk only an instant to cross the distance between them, but he stopped short of an embrace. “I won’t ask it of you. I do understand.”

Relief momentarily softened his Vulcan’s features.

“But you’ve got to understand me, too,” Kirk inexorably continued. “Everything you’ve said, what you’ve learned about Golgotharen, it’s…horrifying. But it’s a chance. And it might be one we’ve got to take.”

Spock reached for Kirk’s clenched fingers and pulled him forward with their hands clasped between them. “I will not go,” Spock said simply.

Kirk was just as resolute. “Unless you have incontrovertible evidence.”

“Yes. If I have that. Jim, if it is any reassurance, I have scheduled an appointment with Sluman and T’Braggia. I will obtain the best care I can while here on Earth. And there is one other element to consider.”

“What’s that?”

“The incident that occurred on the Enterprise. If I actually did feel the touch of another’s
thoughts…"

Kirk finished for him. “Then you might be improving. Going to Golgotharen might not be necessary.”

“This is my hope.”

Kirk looked at him hard. “Spock, that’s an awfully slim supposition to rest your whole life on. My life, too.”

“We have gambled on less in the past, have we not?”

How could he resist that hope? Kirk grabbed his lover in a hug and held on tight. “Damn it. You’d better be right.” Whatever gods were listening, let Spock be right. Let the fates turn their way.

Twenty-seven minutes later, Spock left the house to walk back, with an umbrella, to the transporter station, and from there to return to Paris. Kirk was left with empty, echoing rooms, a barren bed he avoided, and too much to think about. He spent the night on the navy blue couch, dozing and having bad dreams.
Friends

A week after he had resolved not to try to force Spock to Golgotharen, Kirk looked at the view outside from his desk and wearily rubbed his eyes. An early December evening was gently falling on the backyard, bathing the few trees with muted light of violet and pink. He didn’t know what kind of trees they were, and he didn’t much care. He’d only been to the back of the house twice. The long strip of grass leading to the wooden fence was faded green and brown, but Kirk wasn’t seeing the scene. He was contemplating, instead, how truly difficult quantum mechanics as it related to warp drive propulsion was. Zefram Cochrane, he decided, really had been a genius.

The transwar project had needed a coordinator, but he wasn’t the man for the job and everybody knew it. Everybody knew that he’d been stuck there by Komack because of their mutual dislike…and Komack’s superior authority. It rankled. The public nature of it rankled. But much worse was the knowledge that he’d been shunted away out of the mainstream, where he could effect no action for the greater good, action that was, in his opinion, desperately needed.

He focused again the computer screen. It didn’t matter that he was a round peg in a square hole, he wasn’t going to let the project suffer just because he’d specialized in command and not physics. There was no way the daytime hours would yield the time for him to learn what he felt, in all good conscience, he should know, so when he came home to Fortuna Street—interesting, how quickly it had become home—he hit the books. When he wasn’t immersed in pushing their private investigation of the events in Paris and on the Enterprise.

Even tonight he studied, when Spock was here. He’d arrived not an hour ago from his visit with Sluman and T’Braggia with no good news to report. No overtly bad news, though, either. Kirk was giving him some time alone upstairs before he suggested dinner.

Once he was deeply immersed in his equations again, the feminine voice he was coming to hate announced, “There is a visitor at the front door.” Odd, how on the Enterprise he had been on call day and night and he’d rarely resented his availability, but here on Earth he somehow felt that, well, a man’s home was his castle.

Instead of asking the computer who was there, he decided he needed a break and a stretch of the legs, so he got up and ambled to the door. He opened it to find Leonard McCoy standing on the top step.

Kirk reached out to shake his friend’s hand. “Bones! What brings you here?” McCoy’s grip was warm and as sincere as ever, and Kirk was glad to see the doctor’s honest face.

“Patty’s gone to visit her mother, and that apartment got mighty big and lonely. Got time for a visitor?”

Kirk stepped back to let him in but asked, mock-suspiciously, “A visitor or a doctor? I’ve had enough poking and prodding for a while.” He had been cleared by the radiation specialists, and while he was grateful for the expertise that had literally saved his life and allowed him to return to it as if nothing had happened, his time spent at the San Francisco base as an out-patient had been as tedious and occasionally as painful as his stay in the Luna base hospital.

McCoy waved his hand in airy disregard of Kirk’s concerns. “Now, would I pull a medscanner on you without warning?”

“Yes.”
“Not this time. I’m looking for a man’s night out. You interested?”

That roused Kirk’s interest, though he said, “I’m not sure. There are some things I need to get done to—”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” McCoy said as he caught Kirk’s arm and pulled him into the living room. “All work and no play makes for a very dull Starfleet officer. Archimedes didn’t make his great geometric discovery while he was laboring over a scroll, did he? Nope, he did it while taking a bath. Then he ran through the town, naked, shouting ‘Eureka!’”

Kirk smiled. “And how long have you had that one saved up?”

“Thought it up on the way over here. I figured I might need some ammunition.”

“You should have called before you came and I would have told you—”

“—that you couldn’t get out. I did call. I called your office to make sure you’d be here. I don’t want excuses, I want to get out.”

McCoy could be persistent when he wanted to be. Kirk shook his head. “What do you have in mind?”

“Oh, dinner, drinks, whatever occurs to us, anything except another shift on the fourth floor. I’m ready right now, but, uh, you might want to change.” He pointedly surveyed Kirk, who was wearing the same sweatshirt and pants he’d donned on moving-in day. “You do have something else in your wardrobe besides that and uniforms, don’t you?”

Kirk made a face and started for the stairway. “Why don’t you come upstairs and ask Spock if he’ll come along.”

“Spock’s here?” McCoy asked in not-quite-genuine surprise. “I thought he was still holed up in Paris.”

Kirk paused on the first step to answer. “Most of the time he is. But he had to come to San Francisco today, so he’s staying over ’til tomorrow to do research here. Something to do with metallurgy.”

“That’s the fellow I’m living with, Bones.”

“So he’s upstairs with his nose in a computer.”

“While I’m downstairs trying to teach myself advanced quantum mechanics as it relates to warp drive propulsion. Like a fish out of water. It’s a hell of a life we lead, Bones.” That last comment came out sounding more sincere than flippant, which wasn’t what he’d intended and revealed more of his discontent than he wanted it to.

McCoy, of course, caught on, but he was too wise to say so. “Then you both need a night out. C’mon, help me to convince that blue-stocking Vulcan that we can cure what ails him.”

“Blue-stocking?” Kirk asked as he led the doctor upstairs.

“Stodgy. Old-fashioned. Straight-laced.”

“That’s the fellow I’m living with, Bones.”

“So? You’ve got strange tastes, Jim Kirk, I’ve known it from the first time we met at that starbase hospital….”
When they invaded Spock’s inner sanctum, he swiveled in his chair to confront them before either he or McCoy could say a thing. Of course, Kirk expected that Spock had heard every word that he and the doctor had exchanged already; it wasn’t only the excellent hearing that the gracefully pointed ears provided, but also the alert, multi-track mind that could process conversations from downstairs along with whatever was flashing on the computer screen.

“Good evening, Doctor McCoy. Jim, I have encountered some interesting data concerning the first firing of the transwarp prototype that I have sent to your terminal. It highlights—”

“A little light reading, Spock?” McCoy asked with hands on hips. He looked, Kirk thought, like a man who would definitely not take “no” for an answer.

“A diversion from the frustrations of dealing with Commodore Beldon and his narrow-minded approach to the investigation.”

And his lover looked…like a man who needed a diversion. Spock had assured him, by comm line from Paris this morning, that there had been no other incidents of sudden loss of consciousness, and Kirk believed him. He hadn’t gone with Spock to the healer’s office, not wanting to be overly-solicitous and not having the time to leave his own work anyway. But the visit had not gone well, Kirk could tell. Spock had told him almost nothing about what the healers had said, but there had been a line of tension between his eyes when he’d arrived and then swept upstairs. Maybe time alone, space of his own, wasn’t what Spock needed at all. Maybe what he needed was….

“…a night out on the town. Come on, you and Jim can’t stay cooped up all the time.”

And maybe that’s what Kirk needed, too. A sudden shift of his perspective changed his mood in an instant. It hadn’t occurred to him to treat San Francisco like a shore leave destination, and he’d felt no need to get out, had encountered no restlessness of that sort, anyway. He and Spock hadn’t been together as often as either of them wanted to be, and going out with Bones would sacrifice some of their hours just with each other, but suddenly it sounded like a good idea.

He ducked into their bedroom, changed into a pair of navy blue pleated pants and a long-sleeved shirt, brushed his teeth and threw on some cologne, grabbed Spock’s jacket that had been carelessly draped over the foot of the bed, and was back in the office before Spock had admitted that McCoy was right, although he was in time to hear, “…a bath. Then he ran through the town, naked, shouting ‘Eureka!’”

“That old tale is of dubious authenticity, McCoy.”

“But it’s more likely that you’ll make the scientific breakthrough of the century when you’re occupied with something else. It’s the way we process things. Aren’t I right, Jim?”

“That’s the way it works with humans. I’m not so sure about Spock; he’s made enough breakthroughs that he should know how he thinks. But it doesn’t matter. Let’s get going. The night is getting older and so are we.”

“Where in Orion did you come up with that old saw?”

“My mother. Spock, are you coming along?”

Kirk was sure he was going to say “no,” and he mentally assembled some arguments to get his lover away from all that was on his mind. If that were possible. But instead Spock swiveled his chair again until he was fully facing Kirk, and he most definitely looked him over: from Kirk’s eyes to his chest, then to linger quite obviously on his groin, down to his feet—and then up again.
By the time Spock had finished his perusal, Kirk couldn’t keep himself from smiling. And Spock’s eyes were alight, too. Yeah, that was what Kirk wanted to see.

“I believe,” Spock said smoothly as he stood up, “that an evening spent with friends would not be objectionable.”

“You didn’t just look at Jim like he was a friend!” McCoy observed with a leer.

“There are some relationships that defy categorization, as my Vulcan ancestors knew. But I am surprised at you, McCoy. I believe it is conventional human wisdom that the best lovers are also friends. If you will excuse me, I will change my clothing and join you momentarily.”

Kirk was still smiling as he led the way downstairs again, but McCoy asked, “What did he mean, what the ancient Vulcans knew?”

And so Kirk found himself discussing the meaning of the Vulcan word t’hy’la: friend, brother, lover.

“Huh,” was McCoy’s comment. Then, “If another man ever looked at me like that, I’d be running in the opposite direction. Even Spock. Especially Spock.”

“Sometimes,” Kirk answered with complete sincerity, “it pays to stand still.”

As they left the house, he silently handed Spock his jacket, which he shrugged on without comment over his sweater. It was only about six-thirty, but the sun had set more than an hour before. Kirk had left his office in mid-afternoon for a dull and unproductive meeting, and he’d been able to reach home earlier than he usually did. There were plenty of people walking past them on their way home to a meal.

He breathed in deeply of the pleasantly brisk air and felt something tight inside start to expand. This was going to be a good evening.

“I get first choice,” Kirk announced.

“Because you outrank us?” McCoy queried.

“Because I want a drink and I know a good place to get one.”

“Lead on, Macduff.”

“Lay on,” Kirk and Spock corrected in unison from either side of the doctor.

“God help me,” McCoy muttered. Then, more loudly, “Do you two practice?”

Memory more than fifteen years old wasn’t quite as reliable as Kirk had wanted, but after a few wrong turns he led the others to a favorite spot from his cadet days. Tucked in at one end of the touristy wharf area, a neighborhood sports bar sat on a corner in a working class neighborhood. The neon sign flashed The Scoreboard.

“No hockey, I promise,” he pledged to Spock. They found a booth with a view of several big screens, off to the side of the elevated bar where more serious drinking would probably begin in a few hours. They punched in their orders for drinks, and within a few minutes a waitress who was eighty if she was a day and who sported a wide, sincere smile that matched her wide, sincere hips brought them over expertly balanced on a tray. McCoy had a Singapore Sling—“Bones, that’s a kid’s drink. You’ll get sick drinking much of that”—Kirk had his standard Jameson whiskey, and
Spock unbent enough to order a glass of porter.

Kirk settled comfortably into his chair and stretched his legs out under the table. He picked up his drink and held it up for a toast that the others matched.

“To friends,” he said, and they all drank. The liquid went down smooth and easy—excellent liquor—and he allowed himself to relax a little more.

A few minutes after that, the lacrosse game that had been showing on the biggest screen in their view switched over to a college cheerleading competition. McCoy sat up straight and made no secret of staring at the young flesh displayed. “Well, imagine that.”

“I thought this was a sports bar,” Spock questioned. “In what way is this event considered a sport?”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” McCoy shushed him. “Jim, that’s the University of Iowa competing. You might have gone there if you hadn’t attended the Academy.”

“Against Emory University from Georgia. Five credits says Iowa wins.”

“You’re on.” They watched in contented silence for a while, and then McCoy drawled, “Jim, you’ve still got an eye for the ladies. That gal over there on the left, the redhead. I’d give her a ten any day.”

Kirk considered. “You always did love the ladies in red, Bones. No more than an eight.”

Spock shook his head. “Reprehensible conversation, gentlemen.”

“Not hurting anybody,” Kirk shot back. “I wouldn’t say it if Penda or your Irina were here. This is a men’s night out.”

“Yeah, why don’t you give us a rating, Spock? How about that gal...no, how about that fellow in the front. There he is, lifting up the tiny blonde girl. I mean, young woman. What rating would you give him?”

Kirk smothered a grin in his glass. After initial doubts, McCoy had made a fine adjustment to their relationship. He remembered a conversation he and Spock had had quite a while ago, after viewing what amounted to a sex show on the planet of Fal-T III. Spock had admitted then, somewhat shyly, that the men in the show had caught his interest more than the women had.

Spock was definite. “I am not in the habit of evaluating individuals—”

“I know, I know, according to their looks. But if you had to...”

“A six. The individual behind him, however, would warrant a nine.”

McCoy gawked. “You like tall, dark-haired guys? I thought you liked short, uh, average-sized blondes, that’s why I pointed him out.”

“I do not ‘like’ any physical type in particular, McCoy. It is the complete individual involved who captures one’s attention.”

Kirk leaned across the table to address the doctor. “Besides, Bones, of course a Vulcan would see things differently. Different cultures have different ideas of what’s an ideal type. It makes sense for Spock to like tall, dark-haired guys.”

“Oh, yeah? Then why has he hooked up with you?”
Kirk regarded Spock next to him with a twinkle in his eye. “Yeah, why have you?”

“I would like to point out that I am not petite, female, or blonde.”

“He’s got you there, Jim.”

“ Doesn’t answer the question, though.”

“You are fishing for compliments.”

“I’ll take ’em any day of the week.”

Spock appeared to consider deeply. “I believe that my long-range ambitions will be best served by an intimate association with a higher ranking officer, and you were the only one on the Enterprise. And you?”

“My thirst for adventure,” Kirk supplied promptly. “Women were old hat. Humans bored me. You’re male and were the only non-human available on the ship. It seemed logical.” He smiled a self-satisfied smile and waggled his eyebrows, enjoying himself immensely.

“You two slay me,” McCoy put in from across the table. “I need another drink. Waitress!”

They stayed less than an hour at The Scoreboard, long enough for a second round of drinks but not long enough to know whether Emory beat Iowa in the cheerleading standings. McCoy promised to find out the next day and collect his winnings.

“My choice next,” he announced, and he led the way through the gloom to the nearby transporter station, which deposited them in a glitzy neighborhood distinguished by small shops, busy restaurants, and a steady stream of people strolling along the sidewalk.

“Here it is,” McCoy announced after a ten minute walk through the throng, and he pulled open a door to Austin’s Antique Shop. Auctions every Wednesday night at 8 p.m.

Kirk didn’t need to ask his ever-reliable Vulcan what time it was. “He’s planned this all along,” he said to Spock as McCoy forged eagerly ahead of them. “I bet it’s why he suggested we go out.”

“Undoubtedly. Shall we humor him?”

“How about just for the time being? We can razz him later.”

Spock cocked his head as they were swept along by people moving to where several rows of chairs had been set up. “You are very fond of McCoy.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t torment him.”

“You do not torment me, although you are fond of me.”

“Lover, that’s different and you know it. Don’t play dumb.”

Spock gave him an affronted look. “It would never occur to me.”

“Right. And Harry Mudd loves Stella, too.”

McCoy was after an antique metal Coca-Cola sign that wouldn’t come up for bidding for at least another thirty minutes. “For Patty,” he said without a blink of embarrassment, talking across Spock from where they sat in the last row of the crowd in order to confide this fascinating information to
Kirk. “Her great, great, however many greats grandfather made a ton of money in the stock in the
twentieth century, and the family’s had an attachment ever since.”

Kirk refrained from commenting. Instead, he leaned back and crossed his legs at the ankles,
preparing to enjoy the show. Just for the evening, he wanted to shove everything else into the
background: his constant worry about Spock, his growing discontent with his ground posting, his
concern that the investigation wasn’t taking the attack on the Enterprise seriously, his horrifying
suspicion that he, or worse, Spock, might be targets causing not-so-random death and destruction.
He’d thought about all of it until the pathways in his brain were worn out with his thinking, but he
couldn’t do a thing about his conclusions.

He wasn’t going to think about any of it now. The auction was in full swing already, with the
auctioneer holding up a pair of etched goblets, inscribed, as far as Kirk could tell, with the UFP
flag. Bidding began low and went up in small, slow increments. The auctioneer, in Kirk’s opinion,
was annoying and ill-suited for wringing bids from the crowd.

McCoy was clapping as the final bid for the goblets was reached at last. He’d been working part-
time at the San Francisco base hospital, though his primary assignment was training medical
personnel going out into deep space. What Bones hadn’t known during the mission, he’d taught
himself or devised solutions to on the spot, and already his innovative healing of the Horta was
being taught at the Academy. That was what was needed out on the frontier: creativity and the
courage to use it.

Courage. That thought led him to a flash of worry over Spock that he firmly pushed away. It was
enough that Spock was here with them tonight, sitting next to him so closely that their arms
brushed warmly against one another. If he wanted to, he could reach out and rest his hand on his
lover’s knee. He wouldn’t do that, because he didn’t believe in public demonstrations of affection
—well, at least he didn’t with his Vulcan—but he could if he wanted to.

Spock twisted and looked at him with an eyebrow raised, as if he’d spoken out loud and Spock
hadn’t quite caught his words.

“Nothing,” Kirk said, sotto voce. Even so, an elderly woman with blue-gray hair from the row in
front of them shushed him. He chuckled and subsided to actually witness the auction.

There wasn’t any competition for the cut-out sign that Bones wanted, which seemed to disappoint
him. “I was willing to get into a bidding war for this,” he said as they eventually left the auction
that was still going on behind them. Then it took a while for him to make payment and give
directions for shipment. Kirk waited as patiently as he could, but he was beginning to get distinctly
hungry.

“Let’s get a move on, Bones.”

“Okay, okay, just another minute.” McCoy directed the shop to send the sign to his apartment well
wrapped up, since he wanted it to be a surprise.

“Spock, your turn,” McCoy said as they finally stood outside in the cool night air.

“I believe I will defer my choice until after dinner,” Spock said thoughtfully. “Jim, will you choose
a restaurant?”

Twenty minutes later they were seated at Leon’s, an unpretentious but solid restaurant with interior
brick walls, low-level lighting, and tables with red-checked tablecloths. They lingered over drinks
—he had Jameson’s again, though he upgraded to the fifteen year variety—before they ordered,
and their excellent waiter left them alone to quietly converse.

A night out was as good as one of the backrubs that Spock had taken to giving him, because Kirk felt good. Loose. He didn’t know what the future would bring, so they’d better fully enjoy the present. Carpe diem. Seize the day. That had always been his intention, to live with gusto, but the motto held more poignancy now.

They were halfway through dessert when Kirk saw McCoy, who was facing towards the street entrance, look up in recognition.

“Well, see who’s here. That’s a coincidence.”

He craned around to find Lori Ciani—whom he’d left in the transwarp office too few hours ago—coming towards them along with another woman he didn’t recognize.

The meeting couldn’t be avoided without awkwardness, and Kirk stood to greet them both. It had been apparent since Luna City that Lori thought highly of him in a personal way: he couldn’t miss the unmistakable signs of interest though she was keeping them low key. And while he could enjoy her company over meetings and the occasional lunch, treating her as he would any friend of either sex, he was made vaguely uneasy by the knowledge that she did indeed conform in appearance to most of the women he’d found attractive in the past. That he found attractive now. As Spock had said: petite and blonde. And most definitely female. He remembered how she had felt within his arms on the ship, when he’d held her from human compassion and the uncertainty of whether any of them would live, and he remembered the warm curves of a woman’s body. It disturbed him that he recalled those moments so vividly, but he told himself it meant nothing.

Kirk made sure that he displayed no more warmth towards her than the others did, perhaps because the habits of a lifetime tempted him to behave differently. After greetings, introductions, a few random comments, and only one awkward pause Lori said, properly, “I see you’re about finished with your dinner and we’ve just arrived. We’ll leave you to your coffee, gentlemen.”

“Have a good night,” he called after her retreating form and the delicious movement of her hips that seemed to be demanding his attention. The hostess took the two women into an adjoining room out of their sight, and the three men resumed their seats.

“Wow,” McCoy said. “The only other time I’ve seen her was in the hospital bed on Luna. She sure does dress up nice.”

There wasn’t anything that Kirk wanted to add to that, though he glanced at Spock for a reaction. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, because Spock had no cause for complaint. Kirk went back to his crème brulée.

When they emerged from the restaurant, a fine wind had blown up, and the distinct tang of salt-laden moisture filled Kirk’s nostrils, reminding him of other forays he’d made when he’d been a cadet. There was one time, he remembered, when he’d been part of a group of boisterous male almost-officers who’d come to Leon’s, and they’d had to practically pour themselves into a cab when it was time to return to campus. Now…. Well, he had a hint of a buzz and he liked it.

“What next?” he asked, rubbing his hands together in anticipation and also to warm them. Spock’s nose was red again and McCoy’s shoulders were huddled in against the chilly breeze, but Kirk loved it. Cool weather revitalized him.

“I believe it is my opportunity to choose. If it is not too late in the evening?”
Both Kirk and McCoy scoffed at that, and so Spock hailed an aircab.

“You in the middle, Mr. Iceberg,” McCoy directed, and they all piled in. Spock said to the automated system, “Palo Alto, sector eight, grid forty-two.”

“Ohho, Palo Alto. Spock-boy, where y’all taking us?”

Kirk laughed softly at his old friend and softly accused “Hillbilly doctor.” McCoy airily ignored him.

“I discovered this location when I was engaged in some research at the Stanford University labs one summer.”

“That’s right, you didn’t go home between terms, did you?” McCoy asked ingenuously.

“I don’t think he would have been welcome, Bones.”

“I know that, that’s why I said what I did.”

“As I was saying, I discovered this location some years ago, but I have it on reliable information that it is still operational.”


“A planetarium?”

“A late night lecture at the university?”

“A strip joint?” To Kirk’s snort of disbelief, the doctor added, “Well, a man can hope, can’t he?”

It was a jazz club that they entered fifteen minutes later, up on the twentieth floor of a modern office building that Kirk would never have guessed hosted such a place. The headline entertainers, a vocalist and three instrumentalists behind her, were about to begin the first show.

“This,” Kirk said as he slid into one of the chairs around a small round table, “is going to take some explaining. How did you find it?”

“Did you think me entirely dedicated to my studies even in the off-term? I assure you, I was anxious to experience more of Earth culture than I was able to within the walls of the Academy.”

“And?”

“And a chance met acquaintance from the lab mentioned that he had come here with his girlfriend, where they had quite enjoyed themselves.”

“I didn’t know you liked scat singing,” McCoy put in.

Spock tilted his head as he considered. “I do not know whether ‘like’ is the correct term. The apparent randomness of meaningless syllables is quite fascinating.”

“You’re always trying to deduce the pattern,” Kirk guessed.

“When the idea is just to sit back and enjoy yourself, let the music flow over you,” said McCoy. “Like life. Like booze. Gentlemen, can I buy a round?”
“Sure,” Kirk said easily from where he was slouched in his chair, his hands folded contently across his stomach. “The same.”

“Jim, you’re too predictable. You’re going to start boring this fellow over here. He’ll head out for greener, more interesting pastures, and then where will you be?”

“Crying in my beer,” Kirk said promptly.

“Well, at least that would be a different drink. How about you, Spock?”

“I would be turning around.”

“What?”

“I would be turning around from my greener pastures,” Spock explained patiently to McCoy. “Any decision to leave Jim would not be a wise one.”

“Because you’re ambitious and he’s good for your career?”

Spock flicked Kirk a glance from the corner of his eyes. “I would add that he is also a very acceptable lover.”

Kirk chuckled loudly enough to attract the attention of several people from the tables around them. Spock had come a long way from the uptight Vulcan who had been so reticent that it had taken a full year before Kirk had felt they’d had a complete and honest personal conversation.

McCoy passed a hand across his mouth. “Now I’ve heard everything. Jim, you’ll never be able to live that compliment down.”

“I’ll be able to live ‘up’ to it, though,” he said impishly.

McCoy groaned. “When I said ‘How about you,’ I meant what would you like to drink, Spock. As you very well know.”

“Thank you, McCoy, I will have guava juice.”

“Good, well, at least that’s settled.”

Kirk did indeed let the music wash over him, and he greatly enjoyed himself. The entire evening had been hours out of time that he’d needed. He missed, he realized, not only the ship, not just the power he’d had there to effect change, but also the simple friendships that McCoy especially had represented.

He watched the light and shadows play over McCoy’s face as the doctor viewed the show. McCoy was not a connoisseur of music, so far as he knew, but it seemed he was enjoying the singing in particular. During some parts of the songs, his finger tapped on the table. He seemed happy.

The clock passed midnight and then proceeded well into the new day. The musicians left the stage for a break and McCoy waved to the waiter for their check. Spock excused himself to visit the rest room, and Kirk leaned over to his friend.

“Just why,” he asked quietly, “did you want to go out tonight? Not with me. With Spock.” He was remembering how McCoy hadn’t called beforehand, how he’d known they were both in the house, how he’d never been a good actor when faking surprise or any other honest emotion.

“Am I that obvious?”
“No. But I know you pretty well.”

“I hope Spock doesn’t.” He passed his fingers across the surface of the table. “Healer Sluman contacted me this afternoon. After Spock’s appointment.”

Kirk drew back, not liking the sound of that at all. “What about patient confidentiality?”

“Vulcans don’t see such things the same way we do. If it’s logical,” he shrugged, “they do it. Jim, Sluman’s spooked. He told me about the two episodes of unconsciousness that Spock’s had, and he sent me the results of that test Healer Versin did a while ago. It doesn’t look good, but Sluman doesn’t know what else to do for him. He mentioned the Golgotharen Institute as a possibility.”

“And he called you to enlist your aid?”

McCoy nodded. “But you notice, I haven’t said a word.”

“Will you?”

“Nope. I did my research. Jim, what those Vulcans call healing and what I call healing are two different things. Taking a person’s mind apart and then putting it back together again, and not always getting it right…. The risks that Spock in particular would take to go there…. I can’t countenance it.”

“Me, neither.”

“Have you two seriously discussed it?”

“We have.”

“And?”

“I don’t want to lose him, Bones.” He couldn’t help the hitch in his voice as he said it: a product of the booze…and more. He turned the imagined desolation into anger. “Damnit, we’ve already lost too much.”

McCoy didn’t answer, and for a minute Kirk sat there running his finger around and around the wet ring his glass had left on the table. Abruptly he asked McCoy. “So why did you want to go out tonight, if you weren’t going to try to persuade us to do anything?”

The doctor shrugged. “No reason. Just wanted to spend some time with the two of you.”

As if to thumb his nose at the very suggestion that he would not be the best of friends to Jim Kirk and Spock of Vulcan. The tumultuous mix of feelings that this thought inspired couldn’t ever be expressed out loud to Leonard McCoy, medical doctor and finest of companions, but it didn’t matter. Kirk looked at McCoy in gratitude, and McCoy nodded without any words.

Spock appeared at the same time as the waiter, and minutes later they were out in the fresh air getting into one of the cabs lined up along the curb. It took twenty quiet, companionable minutes before they landed in the safe parking zone near their house. Kirk raised his hand in farewell as McCoy flew away home to his Patty, who, Kirk was pretty sure, hadn’t visited her mother that night at all.

“Lights remain off,” Spock instructed as they let themselves in, and they walked up to the bedroom in silence and darkness. Suddenly Kirk was very tired and wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep. He stripped off his briefs in the bathroom, used the facilities, didn’t bother to brush his
teeth, and headed for bed. Spock was already there, wearing one of the nightshirts Kirk had bought him many months before.

“Hey,” Kirk said softly as he moved into his lover’s embrace. Rested his head against Spock’s chest. Closed his eyes. Relaxed. The soft susurration of breathing filled his ears as Spock inhaled and exhaled, but the heart that was still beating was too far away to hear directly.

“That was an enjoyable evening,” Spock offered into the quiet.

“Uh-huh. I’m glad we went.”

“I noticed your discomfort in the restaurant.”

“With Lori?”

“Correct. You do not need to fear my reaction to your friendships, Jim. I understand that we must have lives apart from each other.”

“She’s just a friend.”

“I know.”

Kirk disengaged from their closeness so he could prop up on his elbows and look down at his lover. He could barely see the outline of the strong profile, the glimmer of his eyes in the dim light. “Not like you’re a friend. Not the same thing at all.”

Spock reached up and rested his hand against Kirk’s cheek. “I know, Beloved.”

Kirk kissed him. “You’re getting awfully sentimental for a Vulcan…but I think I like it when you call me that. Good-night, Spock.”

“Good-night, Jim.”

They slept.
Where did nightmares spring from? What caused the anger that so enraged her Hamza? Why did human beings kill each other, rape each other, take delight in inflicting pain?

Fahtima had always known the answers to these questions. She sometimes believed she had been born with every venal act a person could commit already screaming through her delicate, child’s soul, and that was what had kept her mute for so long. The horror of it. The intimate knowledge of evil. She saw everything. She saw the dark pit within each person that civilization sought to plank over, so that no one fell into wickedness.

Ah, but there was so much wickedness in the world.

The women in the village, her aunt and cousins, had lived as if they were different from the men. The men, they claimed, were prey to the dark impulses and the unrestrained actions that were driven by hormones and a personal acquaintance with the devil, but women, they asserted with superior airs, had no such shaded side.

Fahtima knew better. As she knew the man next door who was the postmaster and kept child pornography on his computer the better to inspire him when real opportunity came, so she also knew the woman across the road who secretly delighted in imposing pain on her children, her husband, even by stepping on the tail of her cat. Women were no different from men, not at their core.

She had always been afraid to peer too closely at herself, at her perverted, twisted, denied secret place. Afraid she would be pulled down into it. Until today. She knew no other way to accomplish the task she had set herself than to acknowledge fully what she was doing and admit where it fit within her self. Not the Fahtima who showed a careful face to the world. Not the Fahtima who chose her words, her clothing, and her gestures to minimize her interaction with observers. No. The Fahtima turned inside out, with the evil in her exposed to the light.

Pren’felit tried to scream again.

He must not! If he were heard, she would be discovered. So she stopped him with a thought, by tightening his vocal cords and preventing the contraction of his lungs. She pressed hard with her thought, so that he knew he could make no loud sound, and the Andorian subsided with a weak gurgle against the rickety wooden chair where she had put him. His head lolled to one side against a naked, narrow shoulder, and he seemed startlingly blue in the glare that was stabbed onto the scene by the unshielded lighting strip overhead. One of his antennae was broken off at the base; it lay on the floor by his feet.

He looked horrible with his eyes purple-rimmed and wide, his mouth agape.

He looked curiously beautiful and compelling, and she could not take her eyes off him.

How can I think that? What is beautiful about his suffering?

Fahtima forced herself to turn away, but she could not turn away from herself and what she was doing.

This was what drove them, those who had surrendered to the hidden place within. The power to destroy was uncomplicated and basic, and it was base, too. So much more elementally satisfying than the power to create. This was what Hamza expected of her to match his own throbbing
impulses. She had run away from the possibility of the deaths on the Enterprise because she hadn’t been ready to accept this part of herself. This awful reality. Amazing, how this drive to hurt had always somehow been in her, her entire life, and how she had successfully suppressed it for so long. If she hadn’t impulsively reacted against the woman in Hamza’s bed, she might not have realized she could have access to the anger.

I shouldn’t do this. I will never live with myself if I do. I can reject the ways of Hamza while there is still time. How can I inflict such pain and still claim to have any human soul at all?

When she had killed all those people in Friendship Hall, even when she had attacked those on the starship, her actions hadn’t been direct. A slight alteration of inanimate molecules and her intentions were accomplished. Now, with Pren’felit Shane Mena—she plucked his full name from his quivering thoughts without effort—she would inflict the punishment directly. With nothing between her and her victim. No excuses.

Fahtima closed her eyes and concentrated on not giving in to her nausea. She had planned this for days before and after her trip to Singapore, and she knew exactly what she must do. The fact that it was difficult should not be a deterrent. She’d expected it to be hard. Didn’t great tasks require great resolution and great courage? If she was going to truly explore what a personal murder meant, to open herself to it fully and take on every repercussion of it, she must go on as she’d planned.

With eyes wide open, Fahtima walked around the Andorian to examine the back of his long exposed neck. He tried to follow her movements by swiveling his head, but he couldn’t turn that far around because of how she had him fastened. Just to make sure she didn’t get distracted and release the control that pinned him where he was, she had wrapped a simple rope that she’d found on the shelves of the garage around and around his body and the chair, and then she’d tied it tight. She’d done the same for his feet as he had glared at her. His antennae had twitched. Now the remaining one was absolutely straight in his pain and, as she looked at it closely, it was shuddering.

Andorians and their antennae: they were special organs. Andorians could track each other by them. Pren’felit’s sister and two cousins and another nephew slept in the apartments above them. If she was going to be safe, she needed to destroy both his antenna. One was left.

It quivered like a delicate flower being pelted by rain, or perhaps blown by the wind, and she felt the need to touch that flower. One fingertip caressed the concave knob at the top. So soft. Alive and silky, like a defenseless petal. She gently rimmed all around it, and then she abruptly gave into the impulse to poke her finger into the center.

Pren’felit jerked and moaned, and an unaccustomed thrill raced across her shoulders and chest. Tingling…. Startled, Fahtima snatched her finger back and stared at it as if it were as alien as the being in her power. She had never felt anything like that before…at least not within her own body. This was the same feeling the women had experienced as they lay under Hamza and what Spock had known as his lover tongue his way across the throbbing chenesi. It was…sexual.

I am not a sexual being. This is not for me. I shouldn’t go down this path.

For a moment her attention faltered, and Pren’felit hissed and with a heroic heave he managed to jerk the chair half a meter across the hard concrete of the oil-splotched floor. In automatic fear she reached out mentally and held his muscles fast, and again there was that small, physical thrill, almost like a feather dusting across her skin. Because he was struggling, and she had the strength and the will to keep him still. Her will was pitted against his, and hers prevailed.

Is this what I need for arousal? To dominate another person and glory in my power over him? The way Hamza does?
If that was the case, she was glad she had never expressed any sexuality. Her mouth tasted sour with the first hint of bile.

Slowly she forced herself to take the tender antenna stalk between her fingers. It felt like nothing so much as a child’s finger, warm and yielding, or perhaps a fleshy fruit like an orange. She already knew what was within, what would squirt out. She squeezed at the base, compressing the tissue with a crunch that she had to admit—totally truthfully admit—was as satisfying as it was sickening. She swallowed thickly and pinched the delicate organ flat until it hung limply from the Andorian’s head. Blue blood oozed out.

With determined effort, Fahtima twisted and then pulled hard.

It fell off onto the floor, and she staggered against the aircar as she allowed the agony coursing through her victim’s body to wash over her. Such…terrifying…pain. Loud pants filled the garage, and they weren’t only coming from Pren’felit. She was trying hard to fill her lungs against the outrage she’d committed.

…crippling me…worse than ripping off a human’s penis…what is this human doing to me? Why? Why?

With an effort she pulled herself out of his thoughts and his body, and the pain throbbed in a ghost image almost as disturbing. Fahtima pushed against the ‘car’s front end to enable her to stand upright again.

She couldn’t help but discern the scream that wanted to catapult from his trembling mouth, and she did not have the will to completely stop it. It was a small kindness to allow him to express himself.

“Nooooo,” Pren’felit keened in a long, low wail of anguish, and she was perversely glad that she’d let him emit the sound, because it pulsed right through her, skewering her with guilt and shame. Wasn’t that a natural consequence of what she was doing? She had to experience it all or she wouldn’t be true to herself.

Yes. This was who she was. What she had become, anyway. Since she had done what Hamza had asked her to do, surely this was but the next step in her personal evolution. Fahtima exposed. Fahtima the base.

I am wrong. I am more than the sum of my impulses. Imagine the day after this torture, when my regrets will be a cascade longer than the Nile. I should stop now and release him. Wipe his memory and no one will ever know who did this to him. I will know that I stopped before I did the worst.

The worst was what Hamza demanded of her, and she would give it to him.

She walked around to face Pren’felit again, though his chin was resting on his chest and he didn’t see her. His gasping filled the small space of this garage where the representative’s personal aircar was kept. She’d forced him out of the luxurious apartment on the seventh floor of the building in Paris where he lived, and down to the basement where only his Federation-provided chauffeur had ventured before. It had been so easy to do with this new skill she’d discovered. Not simply changing a person’s memories or perceptions but actually controlling them in real time.

Amazing her, Pren’felit spoke. Without being able to lift his head, he whispered, “Why are you doing thisss?”

He wouldn’t understand—
Do I really understand?

—and so it was useless to answer him. Because Hamza hated him. Because she loved Hamza.

“If you are going to kill me, do it now!”

He was right. There was no sense in delaying and she took no pleasure—or too much pleasure—from this torture.

Fahtima wiped her hands along the long purple dress she wore, grabbed the fabric with her fingers and kept them there. Then, mentally, she reached to where his heart was: different from a human’s, more to the left, with an unaccustomed rhythm to which she accommodated herself. Thump, thum, thum, thump. Thump, thum thum, thump. Thump, thum, thum, th….

She leaned on it, hard, and the Andorian heart stopped. It gave a few wayward pulses, she could feel it as clearly as if she were holding the thing, blue-bloody, in her hand. In her mind she put her other hand over it and squeezed….

Pren’felit raised his disfigured, antennae-less head to look her straight in the eye. He knew he was living his last seconds and tried to say something, but she refused to go within to perceive his words that would be forever unexpressed.

Pren’felit died…and she remembered at the last minute her promise to herself to experience it all, and so she opened herself up to him and his passing…. He knew he was living his last seconds and tried to say something, but she refused to go within to perceive his words that would be forever unexpressed.

His spirit slipped from his body with the hint of something large and undefined that she could not glimpse, and then there was something else, like a lingering afterglow, that spiraled ’round and ’round until finally it darted towards her—

Touched her hidden spaces—

Shouted—

You!

“Ahhhh!” She rocked back as if she’d been struck by a man’s hand, and though she could have spread her legs to keep her balance, instead she gave up trying and fell in a heap to the floor.

Forever accused.

She registered the cold and unyielding hardness of plasti-crete. She was alone again. Pren’felit was dead.

For a long time she didn’t think at all. She felt different, as if some part of her had been emptied, or as if Pren’felit’s consciousness had stolen something from her.

The minutes passed and nothing occurred to absolve her. She knew she must get up and leave this place that stank of death more than motor oil. She’d have to remove traces of her fingerprints as well. Eventually the Federation representative would be missed and the body would be found. Hamza’s tool must be far away from here when that happened.

At least she had done what she had resolved to do. That gave her some hope, for her plan was only half accomplished. Spock was next.

Fahtima rolled over onto her side to aid in her standing, but she stopped before moving further.
There, a few centimeters from her eyes, was one of the broken-off antenna of Representative Pren’felit. Blue blood streamed from the root.

She gagged, closed her eyes, and thought of Hamza.

He would be pleased. She would bring the thing with her to show him what she’d done for love.

*****

Where do dreams spring from? How had he known that this was what he wanted: belonging and acceptance? What quirk of fate had granted him this much-desired life with his lover when other people were not so fulfilled, not so content, not so—he could use the word, despite all that had happened and all that would happen—happy?

Spock lay in bed after awakening and lazily contemplated questions for which he had no answers. The sounds of a shower running told him where Jim had gone, and so he rolled over and appropriated the pillow his bedmate had used and stuffed it under his head. It was very seldom that he allowed himself such moments of idleness, but he had learned to enjoy them, perhaps because of the lassitude that followed sexual activity. He respected the discipline that his teachers on Vulcan had taught him, and that discipline had shaped his life. Now he knew another way as well.

Jim started humming in the bathroom, a sound that would become a pleasant tenor if he allowed himself to move into song, and Spock drifted with the sound, half-awake, half-asleep.

As often happened when he was not specifically engaged otherwise, Spock began to think about the transwarp drive project on which Jim was working so assiduously, despite his utter irritation. There was something about the underlying assumptions of the prototype that had bothered Spock since he had first read the abstract, but he could not precisely say what. The initial tests of the drive, mounted on a ten ton skipper and then later on a one hundred ton PT vessel, had both been successful, and of course there were many competent engineers and scientists assigned to the effort. The feeling Spock had was akin to what Jim had once described as “an itch between my shoulder blades that I can’t reach.” Now that they shared physical intimacy, Spock would happily scratch any itch anywhere on Jim’s body, but that was not the point. Rather, Spock had conceived the instant impression that the prototype would not work, and since then he had been attempting to find the data to justify this wholly unusual—for him—intuitive leap.

And while he was considering Professor Kramer’s footnote, a conclusion about the Melbourne factory that manufactured terrain blasting explosives, such as had been used in Paris, blossomed fully grown in his mind.

Spock sat upright and was on his feet a moment later, limping only a little even without the support of the brace. He made his way to his office while thinking so hard that he barely saw where he was going.

Ten minutes later his concentration was interrupted when loving fingers threaded through his hair; Kirk had come up from behind. His fingertips grazed both Spock’s eartips.

“A breakthrough?”

Jim usually understood and rarely accused him of working too hard or at odd hours; Spock’s devotion to the pursuit of knowledge was a basic part of who he was. He leaned away from the screen with a sense of real satisfaction, careful not to dislodge Kirk’s hold on him. The fingers stroked him gently, creating a sensation that was most pleasurable to the sensual being he allowed himself to be with Jim.
“Indeed. I believe I may have devised a way of tracking the explosive material used from Australia.”

“Bones was right, then.”

Spock swiveled about and regarded Kirk, who was fully clothed in his uniform, with a raised brow.

“About scientific breakthroughs coming when you let yourself think about something else.”

“I hope not, or the good doctor will be forever pestering me to indulge in alcoholic evenings with him. The timing of this revelation is mere coincidence.”

“If you say so. Will Beldon and the rest of the team believe you?”

“Commodore Beldon is not totally intransigent, Jim. And if he is in this case, I am sure Commander Giotto will understand and pursue these conclusions.” Then, switching topics, “You are dressed earlier than I expected this morning.”

“I thought we could have breakfast at this nice little café I’ve found. It’s on the way to headquarters along the cable car line that Bones told me about.”

“Outdoors?” Spock asked, as he well knew Kirk’s propensity for exhilarating weather.

“No, it’s too cool even for me to sit out this morning. Wanna go?”

Spock nodded and left to shower and change while Kirk, humming lightly, went downstairs to the kitchen, where he would undoubtedly make himself a before-breakfast cup of coffee. Spock shook his head as he finished his quick ablutions in the bathroom and then headed for his closet. Humans and their coffee. He was more than pleased at Kirk’s cheerful mood. It seemed that an evening with friends did have positive results. He wondered how McCoy was this morning, recalled that he was now sharing living space with Lieutenant Patricia Bronson, and shied away from further imaginings.

Several uniforms were hanging neatly in his closet. In his temporary quarters in St. Denis, a suburb of Paris where many Starfleet personnel were housed, he used the clothing provided by the ‘fleet replicator, but woven cloth was far superior, and he was pleased to be able to wear such uniforms when he could. He had heard rumors that ‘fleet was considering a change in the style of uniforms, but he discounted such a possibility. Why change what obviously worked well? It would not be logical. Besides, after so many years devoted to the work of the Federation and Starfleet while wearing science blue, the tunic felt like a second skin to him. It would be difficult to adjust to a new style or color, but of course Spock would wear whatever he was required to wear. If, he told himself soberly as he pulled on his pants and boots while he sat on the edge of the bed, he lived that long. He stood and shrugged into an undershirt and his everyday tunic, then smoothed the wrinkles by pulling on the hems. A swipe of the comb through his hair and he was ready to join Jim, whose mouth would undoubtedly taste of humans’ favorite morning beverage.

Kirk was waiting for him in the entranceway, and Spock confirmed his supposition with a quick and casual kiss before he opened the hall closet for his jacket. Jim smiled at him without words and led the way outside.

They set a brisk pace through the early morning cool air. Most of the street was still in shadow, as the sun was too low on the horizon to reach them yet, but the very tops of the houses were painted a brilliant yellow. They walked along a path at the bottom of an urban canyon.

The distinctive *clang* of a cable car bell rang not too far in the distance. The jazz of the streets, he’d
heard it called, and, indeed, there was a cable car bell-ringing contest held in the new Union Square each year. He’d attended once, in his second year at the Academy, and he had been impressed with the innovative and rhythmic sounds that various men and women had been able to get from a simple bell.

San Francisco was a suitable city for a Vulcan to appreciate, Spock reflected as they drew closer to the car stop, as it had been reconstructed after the third world war with a deliberate eye towards tradition. The very presence of the cable cars, which on any planet could not be considered the most energy-efficient mode of transportation, attested to the pre-war flavor of the city. The influx of tourists, many of whom visited the public areas of Starfleet headquarters, were reward to the city planners who had wanted to re-establish San Francisco’s reputation for not only hospitality, but a somewhat eclectic view of life as well.

They arrived at the corner as a cable car was coming to a stop for passengers. Although there were a few seats still available inside—it was early enough that they were beating the worst of the morning rush hour—Spock was not surprised when Kirk elected to stand and hang onto a pole outside instead. Spock resigned himself to the rush of wind.

“Okay with you?” Kirk asked.

Spock nodded. “How far away is this café you mentioned?” The bell rang—once, as the conductor communicated to the gripman that the car was starting its trip to the next stop—and they smoothly started forward.

“About ten minutes,” Kirk said; he was obviously reveling in this chance to share what he’d found while Spock had been away. The sun shone full on his features and he did not turn away from it, and Spock allowed himself to be enchanted with this vision of his companion. Jim loved the sunlight, something that he’d confided to Spock in the early days of their sexual relationship, and he loved mountains, too. Now, it seemed as if Jim was lifting his face to the caressing rays of Earth’s star, unafraid of what it would reveal of the inner man.

Spock was not naïve, and he knew Kirk very well, including his faults. But he had rested within this man’s thoughts, and he had seen Kirk’s soul. There resided not only the dark impulses that seemed to be the heritage of any sentient being, but determination, a desire to effect change for the greater good, and compassion—along with a boundless enthusiasm and the smile that had invaded and then shaped his dreams.

Once Spock had conjured up a grassy meadow ringed by mountains in one of their melds, with the sun shining brightly overhead, just for Jim’s pleasure. They had spent a long time there, enjoying the setting and each other’s company. Spock intensely wished that he could do that for his mate again. Kirk deserved always to be bathed in sunlight.

Kirk glanced over at him, as if Spock had spoken and he hadn’t quite caught the words. When Spock simply shook his head, Kirk asked, “Did you ride the cars much when you were a cadet?”

“A few times.”

“Once I rode all night. It was after I’d broken up with one of my girlfriends. I had a final the next day and she knew it; she deliberately messed with my mind.” He shook his head in not-so-fond memory. “I knew I’d go crazy if I tried to study in the dorm, so I took my portacomp and a few books with me and rode through the city all night, studying. It worked.”

“You passed the examination with a superior grade.”
“Well, passed, anyway. It was organic chemistry in the third year, and you know that’s not one of my specialties.”

“My experiences with the cable cars were considerably less emotional. One of my human cousins once visited while I was attending the Academy, and I took—”

“One of your human cousins? You’ve never mentioned them.”

“I speak too casually. A second cousin. Amanda has a brother, my Uncle Frank, who is much older than she is. By twenty-one years. His wife bore two children, Henry and Olivia. Olivia and her husband had two children, while Henry never had any. I was visited by Hank Grayson Chantall, and he and I spent a few days touring the city, which he had never been in before.”

“How come you haven’t visited that side of your family now that we’re stationed on Earth?”

“To my knowledge, no one is on the planet at this time, and at any rate I have not formed close relationships with any of them. Hank and his sister Amelia correspond with me perhaps once a year.”

“So Hank came out all those years ago to see what you were like?”

Spock cocked his head, remembering the oddity of being claimed as a relation by someone he did not know. “He is a worthy individual, I believe, and I enjoyed the weekend we shared together. I imagine he has changed as much as I have over the intervening years. It would be interesting to meet him again. He is now on Wolf IV, organizing a labor union of steelworkers there.”

Kirk did a genuine double-take. “He’s a labor organizer?”

“That is what I just said, Jim,” Spock returned with some amusement. “Why would you doubt me?”

Kirk shrugged easily, as an animal in the wild might shake out his magnificent coat or a horse might toss his head. Spock was charmed with him all over again, as he had been that first year of their cautious courtship, when he had become so aware of his captain’s body, his physicality.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s strange enough to imagine you with a second cousin named ‘Hank,’ which is an anachronistic and really informal sort of name, not to mention having him working in the rough and tumble arena of labor relations. But it’s also odd to find out that I’ve got another side of your family that I’ll need to make a case to, besides your mom and dad. We need to contact them, soon.”

“Yes,” Spock agreed. “However, other things have been occupying us, I believe.”

The cable car bell rang to indicate they were approaching an intersection at which they would take on more passengers, and when they boarded Spock was forced to move around the pole he and Kirk had been hanging onto. The sun beamed into his eyes, and he blinked. The inner eyelids that had been giving him trouble slipped over his eyes, but then, to his relief, after a few moments of clouded vision the membranes retracted.

The car began climbing one of the hills for which San Francisco was famous, and Spock surveyed the scene, their fellow passengers, and wondered if their breakfast stop was close by. Jim’s estimates were not always accurate, and if—

Forgive me, my friend.
In an instinctive reaction he looked around, half-convinced that the voice he had just “heard” in his head must have been vocalized.

“What?” Kirk asked.

“I…” He hesitated to speak of it aloud, but the impression of another presence had been so strong…. “It has happened again. What occurred on the Enterprise. Though it has ceased now.”

“Telepathic contact?”

Spock nodded.

Kirk looked as if he wanted to grab Spock in a hug right then and there. “That’s great! We need to tell Sluman about this as soon as we can. Twice already. Something good is happening.”

Spock was not so certain. Deep regret that was not his still seemed to permeate his mind. But he wouldn’t tell Kirk about it here, in this most public place, with other individuals listening in on every word they said.

Kirk, of course, understood his silence. He glanced ahead. “We’re almost there. Wait a minute.”

The car crested the hill and then started down, and at the base it came to a halt with a protest of its brakes. Kirk jumped off and started for the sidewalk. Spock began to follow him, being careful still of his sore knee, but he found the final step to the asphalt surface of the street to be strangely difficult. He felt off-balance as his booted foot hit the pavement with a jarring thud.

Jim was turning around, his expression showing alarm as Spock continued his slow-motion slide to the ground. He could not help himself. Something…someone was reaching inside him, penetrating to a part of him he had thought forever lost, stabbing at him the way a snake stabs at its prey. Someone was sinking her teeth into his soul….

I am so sorry. This is the only way. One small thrust here, see? I take what already threatens and make it real. But I will make you forget. Your people will care for you always, and I will never need to act against you again. Fare well.

Spock hit the street painfully, slamming hard on his knee, and his head bounced before he settled onto his side, but he scarcely noticed. He was holding onto consciousness with all the strength he possessed. Blackness threatened, and Spock knew he would not awaken this time if he succumbed. The previous two times had been warnings; this attack…it was real.

A black boot came within his diminishing range of vision. Jim. Then a knee, and as if from far away, a desperate call.

“Spock!”

Hands upon his shoulders. Effort that rolled him over onto his back. He struggled to keep his eyes open but knew they were closing even as Jim should be coming into his view. Spock did not want to take Jim’s devastated face with him into eternity; he didn’t want eternity at all. But it didn’t matter: his eyes would not open and he realized with horror and deep regret that consciousness was fading. So much he had wanted to do, so much to learn and to say, so much time he had wanted to share with Jim. Now, no chance. No more.

Good-bye.
The lights in the sickbay of the Caduceus are dim, one of the many ways this place of silence and hope, of pain and effort is different from McCoy’s sickbay on the Enterprise. Luminance is focused on the medical bed, and the rest of the room is washed with shadows. Where I sit, there is shadow. Where Spock lies, there is light, even if it is weak and muted.

I try not to read too much into that metaphor. Hope can be dangerous.

I shift in the chair, unable to find a comfortable way to sit and prop the small reader on my lap while still getting a good view of him. It’s my turn for the watch, and I’ve chosen the midnight hours, the hours when life is weakest and closest to darkness. Of course, that’s just another metaphor. Though it might be 0300 on this ship hurtling through the void, somewhere else it is high noon and a sun is shining.

Hold on, my friend.

The watch is more for me than for him. He’s surrounded by the very latest medical equipment on this ship that is one of Starfleet’s state-of-the-art emergency medical shuttles. The life signs indicator over the bed is totally different from what I’m used to. Smaller, with rotating displays that are uniquely calibrated for him and his odd readings. I am grateful for it. He almost had a stroke yesterday, and only the beeping warning from the display alerted Dr. Ho in time to avert it. I won’t be able to tell if he’s about to go into cardiac arrest or have a brain seizure: the machines will do that. Nevertheless, one of us is always with Spock. Either me, or Ho, or Technician Alvarado.

I stand, hefting the reader in the crook of my arm, and take a step closer. I watch his chest, loosely covered with a pale blue sheet, for that reassuring but shallow rise and fall. There, he’s taken a breath. There, he’s released it. If I hadn’t already watched him breathe a hundred times, a thousand, I might not notice these smallest of movements.

Another step closer, then another, so now I am pressed up against the railing of the bed. Both rails are up for safety. He had convulsions two days ago and thrashed about, removing some of the tubing and damaging the intravenous feeding line. But for now he is deathly still. Very still. I search his face. He’s paler than he usually is. There are tiny cracks spreading from the corners of his lips. I put the reader on the chair and then reach for a towelette that Alvarado said I could use to add moisture to his skin. For some reason, he’s really drying out. Once a day, the tech gives Spock a moisturizing bath, but he needs more.

I daub at his skin, feeling the warmth of it against my finger through the thin cloth. All the pores seem very prominent. There’s that little scar up high on his cheek; I’ve never asked him where it came from and I wonder if I’ll ever have that chance. I run the cloth lightly across his lips, then down the length of his nose and to each side of it. Then up along the sweep of his ears to the tips, which are so dry that the skin is flaking off in tiny pieces.

Nobody can explain to me why this is happening. Spock’s case is unique. But the wound in his mind is affecting his body in many ways.

I’ve already forwarded to the healers my suspicions about how this happened. It’s too much of a coincidence that first Spock felt the touch of another’s thoughts and then he collapsed to the street. Especially when added to our speculations about the perpetrators of the attack on Federation Day having powers beyond those of most mortal beings. Too much of a fluke for me. Before the
Caduceus left Earth orbit, I talked to Beldon about it, too, to supplement my report. He’s not unintelligent, even if not especially insightful.

I can’t think of a reason why whoever might have already killed all those people would be after Spock in particular. But if I’m right, and if by some chance Spock survives the treatment on Golgotharen and comes back to me…. Will he be safe on Earth? Or will this nightmare happen again? The thought gnaws at me.

I fill myself up with the sight of him. He doesn’t move even by the flutter of an eyelash, though a few times that has happened. Sluman told us at the base hospital that he couldn’t hear us and that he couldn’t process the input of his senses. Bones wasn’t so sure, and so every once in a while I speak. Not now, though. I’m tired and discouraged and filled with fear and longing, and standing here clutching the side rail, I cannot form words.

The mood passes. I force it to pass. Nothing good will come from my pain and anger and the inclination to clench my fists against fate. What has brought us to this moment? I’m about to let him go. Not much longer now.

No, nothing good will come from wallowing in negative emotions. The Vulcans have it right.

I retreat to the chair and pick up the reader again. Time to try to return to my other duty. It’s a nine day trip we’re on, four days each way with one day for the transfer, and though Wesley, and behind him Komack, gave me emergency leave, my responsibilities extend beyond the personal. They always have. So every twelve hours this ship receives an updated link from the Strategic Procurement and Design: Transwarp Project office. The captain of this small, specialized, and oh-so-essential vessel, Lieutenant Marberry, makes the short trip from the bridge to where the sickbay is slung in the ship’s bloated underbelly. It’s a courtesy to a superior officer, I suppose, for him to take care of the updates himself. But there are only three crew on this ship besides the medical personnel. We’re a small group, all of us focused on one mission.

This update from the office includes short personal messages, as some of them have. Bob sends his best, though I notice that this time only his name is appended and not Jeanine’s, the young wife I still haven’t met. And there’s the one line of encouragement from Lori. She hopes I’ll be back soon with Spock well.

I stare at the screen. There isn’t much chance of that, is there? I wonder if she knows that.

The rhythm of the engines throbbing up through the soles of my boots shifts, and I know that the ship is preparing for approach to Vulcan. Only a few more hours until we’re there and I hand Spock over to Versin. To Golgotharen. Spock told me that he didn’t fear pain; I fear it for him. I’ve already endured one sub-space conversation with the master healer. He’s not surprised that Spock is to be his patient. “As I had suggested,” he said. “I will assign him to a most skilled assistant, who has had positive results with some difficult cases. We await you.” I’m trying hard not to let my resentment of him or this unnamed assistant swell up. Not that it matters, as I won’t even see them. The protocol is for the ship to settle at an auxiliary docking arm that juts far out from the station, as far from the actual facility as they can manage, and once the healers have taken possession of the mobile stretcher, we’ll lift off and the arm will slowly start to retract. Spock will be taken in. Their word for admission translates to something close to “engulf.”

The healers at Golgotharen are not to be disturbed. Their work is delicate. No visitors are allowed, ever. Either patients emerge from the facility in their right minds or they don’t.

I run my hand over my face, though nothing helps the awful pit of guilt throbbing in my gut. God
help me, I’ve committed him.

Suddenly I rise and carelessly put the reader on the floor. If I have only a few hours until he is gone, I’m not going to waste them on administrative duties. I’ll stand here and keep watch.

Still breathing. Short eyelashes resting against his face. Skin dry and flaky. Hair shorter than he usually wears it, with his bangs covering only half his fine, high forehead; he must have gotten a haircut in Paris right before he beamed to San Francisco.

Still the man I signed a lease with….

Versin was not magnanimous. In our short conversation, he told me that since Spock was not bonded, all reports from the healers on his condition would be sent to the head of his clan. I objected. We had been bonded. For short, luminous days, we had been, though I had barely been able to detect it. No, Versin said. What was is not the same as what is, and there are no formal ties between you. Healers’ reports will go to the clan. Your emotional attachment to our patient is not reason enough to change our procedures, logically arrived at and implemented.

Damn Vulcans for all its hidebound ways and its inflexible approach to life. Though I’ll always believe it was basic Vulcan intolerance that jettisoned Spock from the planet. How glad I am that he found his way to Starfleet.

“I’m going to see Sarek and Amanda, Spock,” I say, and my voice is hoarse from disuse. I clear my throat. “I’ve got to let them know how you are. I’ll…” I am on the brink of saying something stupid like “I’ll give them your love,” but I know so little of the interaction between my lover and his parents, only that one meeting on the ship and then whatever I’ve been able to glean from our long-ago melds and occasional conversations. I swallow. “I’ll try to say the right things to them.” And make sure they send me every report, every word they receive from Golgotharen.

Just then the door behind me slides open, and Alvarado walks in. He nods at me and says, “Commodore.” He’s a small man with quick movements and a competent demeanor. I suspect he has a quick smile, too, but there hasn’t been anything for us to smile about on this trip. He’s wearing one of those blue short jackets that medics in the fleet seem to prefer; it’s not really regulation. Me, I feel most comfortable—or is it comforted?—in my everyday uniform: gold tunic and black pants and boots that are a reminder not only of my duty. I think I cling to this uniform the way I’ve been clinging to the reader and the reports from the office through these last long four days.

I’m not good at this. Not good at being uncertain and impotent. I need to be able to do something.

“He’s the same,” I report as I back away from the biobed and let the tech do whatever it is he’s here to do. He injects something into one of the lines going into Spock’s veins and then observes his readings. I don’t see any change at all. He directs the computer to present the FV measurement, and one particular scale comes up on the display. I can see that the numbers are slowly falling.

“Good,” he says. “Doctor Ho wanted the commander to have a little extra help for the transition this morning. We don’t want a problem as we’re transferring him.”

We stand there for a while, on the same side of the bed, bearing witness to that slow slide of the reading I don’t understand. Alvarado adjusts a dial and then the thump thump thump of Spock’s heartbeat is audible.

“That’s good,” he says again, and it’s obvious he’s encouraging me. “He’s more or less
stabilized. For now, anyway.” He gestures vaguely towards the bridge. “They’ll get us there in time. I’m sure the Vulcans will be able to help Commander Spock. He’s one of them, after all.”

I don’t have anything to say to that.

“Uh, Commodore.”

I look away from the motionless form of my lover. “Yes?”

“I suppose you and the commander are….”

He leaves the sentence unfinished, dangling, and I am reminded again that there are no words in either Vulcan or Standard to precisely describe my relationship with Spock.

“Yes.” Then again, “Yes.”

I could have stayed on Earth, because I have contributed nothing to Spock’s welfare on this trip. I would have been a far more effective transwarp coordinator on site and not reviewing reports so many light years away. But… I have needs. I decided to fulfill them, and Wesley granted my leave. I do have rights… But not really. I have only the right to send Spock where he feared to go.

Alvarado leaves without any more words, and I grip the bed rail again. Spock and I amended our medical directives a long time ago, and I was granted the duty of making decisions for him if he couldn’t make them for himself. That document was created a good year before we acknowledged the place we held in each other’s hearts. We had been friends.

For three days at the San Francisco Base hospital I avoided making the one big decision, until McCoy cornered me late on the evening of the third night. “He’s failing and you know it,” Bones had said bluntly. “Sluman says he has maybe a week. You’ve got to send him to Vulcan.”

“Not Vulcan,” I’d said abruptly. “Golgotharen.”

The place of suffering.

“Vulcan, Golgotharen, whatever you want to call it,” Bones had said. “We can’t help him here and there’s a chance that Versin can. Come on, Jim. Do what you’ve got to do.”

Incontrovertible evidence.

I look down at the face of the one I love and will probably never see again. The odds are not for us. The healers will not know what to do with this priceless, matchless soul.

The engines throb again, decelerating as the ship approaches the Eridani system. I reach out and stroke my lover’s curled fingers, then I force them open and lace our hands together. So warm. I remember the first time he touched me.

Forgive me, my friend.
Trapped

PART THREE
_Atropos: The Inexorable One_

Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,
roll darkling down the torrent of his fate?

--Samuel Johnson, Vanity of Human Wishes

Trapped.
Hurt.
Weight presses down from above, crushing….
The walls with the images of the gods have fallen in on him,
An avalanche of history, of difference.

Trapped.
He hurts and wants to cry out but he can’t.
Weight over him, he must hold it up, keep it away but it is crushing him….
Taking his mouth and forcing it into a round circle of anguish, frozen in cannot-be-expressed
horror.
No!
The voices of the gods, no, the calling of all the lost souls, no, the deadly sound of warp engines
imploding…. They quicken.
Destruction lives with him.

Trapped.
Hurts.
…flat. Not flat. Flat.
Where he was once large, as expansive as the universe, now he is pounded flat like a two-
dimensional construct as first presented in Teacher Setal’s class.
No substance.
No texture.
No knowledge.
Confined.
Imprisoned.
Punished for who he is.
Who he is not.
He cannot get out.
He cannot expand.
Only endure.

Trapped.
Hurts.

Trapped.
Hurt.

Help…
…me.
In the control room of the *Caduceus*, Lieutenant Marberry made final preparation to enter Earth orbit, and his fingers flicked across the board with assured grace. The last run out to Vulcan had been easy. The passengers they’d carried had been no trouble. One remained unconscious, after all, and the other had kept to himself. It was a shame to see two famous men reduced by the weakness of the body. Marberry wished that he could get the business of docking the ship and turning it over to maintenance done quickly. He wanted to meet up with his friends to see the football game that afternoon, but he doubted it would happen. He was stuck.

Commodore Kirk closed the clasp of his carry-on and glanced around the space where he had lived for the last nine days, but he didn’t really see anything. Then he walked out into the ship’s corridor. His mouth was a straight line. His hands were tight. The people who worked in the transwarp office were waiting for him to arrive and make decisions, sign documents, lead them with his vision. He’d slept poorly the last three ship-nights, but he didn’t care. He could force his body to go on even when he was exhausted. Kirk hoped, though, that he could sleep later that evening when he got home.

Leonard McCoy waited in the Starfleet main transporter station, where Kirk would materialize in a few minutes. He didn’t expect Jim to say much to him, and he didn’t think he’d have much to say to Jim. But he was between patients, between meetings. Healing was necessary for more than the body, and he knew Jim. His friend wouldn’t give himself an outlet for feeling. McCoy hoped that he could help. He tried to imagine what Jim must be going through. He imagined Patty—suddenly indispensable Patty—somewhere far away, dying, and he shied away from the image. Besides, he had just been getting to the point where he could tolerate that green-blooded excuse for a scientist.

Angry.
ANGRY!
Why can’t he get OUT?
Why can’t he remember
his name
his mother’s face.
Mother?
touch…her…
…someone.
Find…
himself.
Self?
The walls are falling again, far far away, like the crashing, irregular beat of a heart, and he wants to snarl like an animal. But he doesn’t know why.

Why
is he here?
Where is here?
Who is he?

Oh. No.
No.
The pressure from outside again.
No escape
Curl in upon himself and hide.
Hide.
Hide anger.
Why is this happening?
Hide despair.
Why is this happening?
just hide. Until he is one
pinprick of
...
of...
one pinprick.
angry.
all that’s left.

*****

In the gathering room on the fourth level of Golgotharen, the healers seated around the table were
in agreement: the case of Spock Xtmprsqzntwlfb was most challenging. For two full cintels they
had attempted to make contact with his psychic self using the standard procedures, attempting to
breach shields and rebuild the pathways from the inside out, but they had been unsuccessful. The
typical physical reactions had been observed, and while it was true that the body had been stressed,
no meld had been established. Then T’Kah, the healer in charge of Spock’s case and one of
Versin’s most gifted assistants, had utilized her experimental methods. Three times extreme means
had been needed to bring the body back from expiration, but again there had been no true contact.

Now it seemed as if the patient’s body was failing as a result of the onslaught of attempted therapy.
Of those who had been subjected to T’Kah’s experimentation, sixty-seven percent died after only
the first session, so this result was not unexpected. It was possible that Spock’s physical strength to
endure T’Kah’s efforts sprang from his hybrid nature. Nevertheless, T’Kah could not proceed or
she would kill him. The patient still lived, and so they must devise a different protocol.

One healer at the meeting, Deverans, wondered to himself if it was indeed strength of body that
sustained the patient. He had been intrigued by Spock’s history: the man had defied his powerful
father and left the planet against the wishes of the clan. He had made a contribution to the larger
Federation while living among humans and within a primarily human institution, yet still he
remained faithful to Surak’s tenets. Deverans pondered the strength of will that must have taken.
The courage. He had never tested whether he had such courage. But then, he had always known he
had the gifts of a healer, one of several ways he was stamped as different among his people. He
was honored to be serving at Golgotharen, where he was the youngest on staff. This was where his
skills were needed.

The oldest healer stirred and suggested that it was possible the mind had already died. That would
be one explanation for why they had been unsuccessful.

Deverans shifted in his seat and opened his hand on the table, indicating his wish to speak. T’Kah
allowed him to do so. He pointed out that according to the record the subject had been mind-blind
for more than one Terran year and seven months, or ninety-six cintels. During that time, the subject
had experienced mental communication with at least one individual, the alien woman Gri-Ta.
Several times. And she had facilitated what appeared to be a meld with the patient’s bond partner.
Neither of the contacts was Vulcan. The patient was idiosyncratic in many particulars. So perhaps
it was not a question of how. It might be a question of whom.

T’Kah made a note on the padd before her and commended Deverans for logical thinking. You
make a good diagnostician because you notice details, she said. However, it is obvious that the hippocampus linkages have deteriorated to a significant extent. Contact, even by the patient’s bond partner, was not possible while they were co-habiting on Earth.

The bond partner, Deverans said, was psi-null and human. And the bond had been very new when destroyed.

Silence.

I believe the best approach is therapy specifically addressed to the linkages, the oldest healer proposed. Surgery could be scheduled for tomorrow at first light.

I concur, T’Kah said. The patient’s physical condition will not permit such an invasive procedure if we wait much longer.

The risk is too great, Deverans said.

And greater if we sit and do nothing, T’Kah pointed out with finality. I will inform the patient’s clan.

They all rose at the signal from the oldest one. Deverans intoned the oath with the others, and then he was the first to leave. Perhaps there would be a breakthrough. He did not think the odds favored it, though. He experienced regret, for he would have liked to have talked with this Spock of his experiences in the wider universe.

*****

There is just enough room
in this small space
for me.
For me.
For me and for you.
I had not known that you were here.
But I do not think
I have ever been here before.
Interesting.
It is good to have you with me, beloved.
I have forgotten
who I am,
but I pledge I
will not forget you.
At least, not until I am crushed completely by my burden.
I estimate that this will happen soon
as my energy fades; I am tired of holding it up.
See? My hands tremble.
Empirical evidence of the inevitable. Entropy does happen.

Yes, I said that to see you smile.

I will spend the time sitting next to you
trying to control my negative emotions because I cannot remember your name, either.
Does it matter? We are who we are.
Beloved, I long to be with you and
I do not understand why sitting next to you is not enough.

I am very tired.

*****

Bones, said the simple, audio-only comm unit on his desk, so McCoy knew who was calling. Only one person ever called him Bones.

What is it, Jim? he asked. He closed the screen he’d been working on. Jim wouldn’t be calling him in the middle of the day unless it was important. McCoy’s mouth suddenly went dry.

I just got a message from Vulcan. From Sarek. Forwarded from Golgotharen.

And? McCoy prompted.

Kirk’s voice was calm. They’ve operated on him. At least, I think it’s done already. Probably a few hours ago.

Surgery? What did they do?

Basically, brain surgery. Something about the lower lateral ventricles.

Jesus, McCoy swore. Will you send the notice to me?

It’s already at your terminal.

McCoy was busy punching buttons and the screen flared to life with Vulcan symbols. Damn, he couldn’t read that stuff even if Jim could. He fumbled for a translation. When the silence between them continued, he said,

Jim?

Yeah?

How about dinner tonight? You could come over to our apartment. I’ll order out for Ethiopian food. Patty likes that, too.

I don’t think so, Kirk said quietly. You don’t need to play nursemaid for me. Besides, I’ve got a lot of work to do here.

You’ve been staying late too often, McCoy said to the lifeless grid. A change will do you good. Come on over around eight o’clock.

Bones, I wouldn’t exactly be good company.

Am I asking for good company? Besides, we might have some good news by then.

There was a long pause. I hope so.

Me, too. These particular healers are the best at what they do, Jim. It’s like the Mayo Clinic here on Earth.

I don’t need a pep talk, Bones.
No, but you do need to eat sometime tonight.

All right. Twenty hundred hours. Thanks.

Don’t mention it. Uh, when you hear anything more….

You know I’m depending on Sarek for news. Even so, the healers don’t seem to believe in frequent updates. Too emotional, maybe. But I’ll let you know if I hear anything. Kirk out.

McCoy flicked the connection closed and turned to the Standard translation on his screen.

*****

Are you ready? the beloved asks.

Never, he-who-does-not-know-himself says,
and always.
I rest in you and you in me.

Slowly the beloved stands and looks at him. Separate now.
Soft affection shines in his eyes
—and black ibatha wood, one of the strongest natural substances on the planet.
It is what they share:
Strength.

Do not go, he-who-does-not-know says, though he wants to implore, with fingers outstretched

The beloved says, you will never forget me.
Try not to forget me.
Try.

And then he walks away,
taking everything with him.

It is dark.
Cold.
Lonely, without even an I.
He-who-does-not shivers and bends under the weight
of his unhappiness.
But for now he endures.

*****

The healers were pleased in their subdued way, for the procedure was a definite success. Spock Xtmprsqntwlfb’s case was another example of how the mental processes affected the physical being. Versin himself had presided and put the linkages right, and immediately the body had improved. T’Kah could try again.

Yes, this time the hint of an aura could be detected. Spock’s mind was no longer impermeable, as she could perceive some evidence that a consciousness still existed. Whether personality had been fundamentally altered as a result of treatment was unknown, because she could not reach the flickering of the mind despite her most determined attempt to do so. She broke off her efforts at the deferential touch of one of her assistants, who indicated with a nod the readings that showed the patient’s body could not endure more. T’Kah performed the withdrawal exercise and then left the patient to the team who would stabilize the physical.
Later that day, T’Kah sat next to the patient’s bedside, her hands in her lap, and she thought. T’Kah was a good person. Like most of the healers at Golgotharen, she had a passion for her work, and she gained satisfaction when her cases fell within an acceptable range of success. She had devised her protocols to help those most severely afflicted, and she had seen the survival rate of that disadvantaged group rise from twelve point two percent to twenty point one percent. A significant improvement.

She wanted to help this strange half-Vulcan who was so still before her. Since the surgery, Spock’s body had curved onto its side, into a fetal position, with his hands tucked in under his chin. She found this unusual body arrangement somewhat disturbing. There were many things about this patient that were unusual, including his choice of bond partner. Versin had said that his condition was due to a disruption of the psychic pathways caused by the male human, and others on the team agreed with him. T’Kah tended to agree with him as well; it was doubtful that a human could supply what a Vulcan mind, particularly a male Vulcan mind, needed. Bondings were most complex, and it was possible that Spock’s attempts at union with the human had warped his *denisma*. But she reminded herself that Spock’s was a genuinely different case: he was not pureblood, he was hybrid. She wished she had been able to examine him at a baseline, normal function. T’Kah experienced the smallest uncurling of frustration because her efforts had so far been fruitless and because she did not know how else to proceed.

Enough. She rose from the bedside. She would set aside some time to contemplate possibilities later this day.

*****

not
much
longer.
impossible!
to
continue
good-bye
good-bye
good-bye although i hear

an indistinct voice
feel
a touch through a sandstorm
almost see
eyes that glitter with both knowledge and pain
and i remember
red
and how it felt to be
…
to be…
Just to be
i am drowning at last
and i do not call for help
all is lost
all is gone
i cannot
cannot
cannot
Consultation with Master Healer Versin had yielded fruit for T’Kah. At his suggestion she called Deverans to the discussion room on level five, which was where the most difficult cases were sent. Deverans came promptly. He wore a short-sleeved white shirt and a pair of light blue pants, different from the robes that most of the other healers wore, but he had once told T’Kah that he preferred the freedom of movement over tradition.

Deverans was not yet fifty tevuns, but his was a precocious talent that Versin had seen fit to nourish. T’Kah approved of him and his fresh perspective, his desire to try new approaches. Even healers could learn.

And Deverans, Versin had reminded her, was one of the few: the unusual Vulcan whose mind and body called for a joining to his own gender. His bond partner, who had died of a respiratory disease, had been male. Circumstances had operated in their favor, that such a one was available here to work on Spock’s case.

I want you to assist me, she said. I have recalled that Spock’s former bond partner is male. Before that union, he was divorced in the kali-fee from a Vulcan female. I am a Vulcan female. It is possible that a male of your unusual proclivities would be more successful in reaching him than I.

He bowed before her, signifying acquiescence, but then he mentioned that Gri-Ta, the alien who had helped Spock survive the pon farr, had been female.

Gender differences in her species might not parallel our own or the humans, T’Kah said. Regardless, will you try?

They walked to the far alcove where Spock’s body was being nourished, kept clean, and monitored. But when they arrived, the healer who had duty for the entire floor was already there.

It is most peculiar, Secreif said, motioning to the displays that measured physical well-being. There has been deterioration. Some of the readings indicate that death is imminent. Others remain at acceptable levels.

Have you consulted the records from the starship on which he served? T’Kah asked.

I have, my lady, said the healer. There is no precedent.

What is your conclusion?

I believe he is dying. Unless some contact can be made, all must accept the inevitable. Cor yhr mahr.

T’Kah allowed herself regret, for here was another one of their patients who would never contribute his katra to the Hall of Ancient Thought. Perhaps it was for the best, as it was unclear whether he would mesh with the other old souls there who were pure Vulcan. But when she looked at Deverans’s square-jawed, honest face, it was alight with possibilities. What? she asked him, not seeing anything but defeat for them.

Apparently Deverans was one of those unique individuals who was able to grasp opportunity in the most dire of circumstances. This one is not like our other patients. Though he fails, he is fighting it. See? Why else the reading for man’txh? There is a chance here.

I see no opportunity, T’Kah said flatly.
When life nears death, barriers fall, do they not? I may be able to catch him then.

But he fights, as you say. The fall to relinquish his katra to the void may be protracted.

And that will be his salvation. Because he fights, the moments at the brink may be long enough that I can initiate contact.

Very well, she agreed. But your timing must be impeccable. If you are an instant too late, his katra will be gone. You take on a difficult task.

I serve the house of Golgotharen, the place of opportunity for those who have no other choices, Deverans recited part of the oath all of them had taken. If his is a long journey, I will take it with him, a shadow by his side.

We will rearrange your schedule for the nighttime hours and establish a procedure for you to be contacted during the day as well. You must know when he is very close.

Yes, my lady.

I honor your diligence, she said with a small bow of her head, and then T’Kah withdrew. There was nothing more she could do.

*****

The Emergency Medical workers came to the branch office of The Galactic News within minutes of being called and told that a woman had fallen down a flight of stairs and possibly broken her neck. They arrived to find the patient, Fahtima Gabon, sprawled on the hard tile floor of a back lobby, hovered over by a man who identified himself as her cousin, Hamza Machar. The man was upset and very worried; he told the workers he had been conversing with the woman when she said she had forgotten something, turned to get it, and tripped. The paramedics saw no evidence that disputed that tale; no one else had witnessed the accident.

They could not know that Hamza had been angrier than he had ever been in his life. He’d had plans for Pren’felit! The murder of the Andorian was going to be the centerpiece for his next act of mass destruction, and this one would not be botched. When Fahtima had told him what she’d done, that the representative had been killed at her hands, when she’d pressed the shriveled antenna into his hand, he’d been speechless with rage. She had scurried out of the office they shared in Phoenix for The News and tried to run from the building. He had caught her and held her shoulders within his heavy grip at the top of the stairway. He shook her. How dare she? How dare she? And then he’d pulled his hand back and slapped her with all his strength. She’d lost her balance and fallen, and as she had hurtled from one step to another Hamza had seen all his schemes for power and glory and setting the universe right upended. If Fahtima died….

And so he was all caring, all solicitude. The paramedics sympathized with his panic-stricken concern. Will she be all right? he asked. One of the women shook her head. They didn’t know.

*****

More than three weeks had passed since Commodore Kirk—Jim, he had asked her to call him outside of duty hours—had returned from his trip to Vulcan. The traditional Earth mid-winter holidays had come and gone, and a new year had begun. At first Lori had asked him almost every day if he had any news, but it soon became apparent that he knew nothing. So she stopped her kindly-meant inquiries and stayed silent. She felt for him. Such a strong man, and it seemed to her seeking eyes that he felt his lover’s absence keenly.
Lori tried to concentrate on the schedule shining on the screen before her, but her mind was wandering today. She’d had lunch with Jim earlier—and with Lieutenant Commander Martinez and Alicia Tomlinson, one of the contractor reps—another platonic lunch that was more working session than anything else. The commodore made sure it stayed that way, as if he were afraid that if he allowed anything casual, anything without a defined purpose to intrude into his fiercely focused day, then…. She didn’t know what he imagined might happen. But it was obvious to her that he feared idle moments, and probably most especially with her.

She sighed. She was not one to pine over lost causes. Yes, she was attracted to Jim Kirk, the man, as well as to Commodore Kirk, the officer with power, but she had also vowed a long time ago never to intrude into another woman’s relationship. She had not thought to include men in her equation, but she respected the honest affection she sensed between the former captain and his former first officer. She didn’t understand it, though, because she also knew that Kirk was attracted to her. She couldn’t quite put her finger on why she knew: probably something in his eyes when they had met the first few times. Since then, he’d been more guarded, but even that told its own tale.

With an exclamation of impatience, she ordered the screen she’d been working on closed and got up from her chair. No sense in spending time staring at work she wouldn’t get done if she could accomplish something else. She would go to the building’s cavernous basement and retrieve the latest set of samples left by the reps. The commodore would need them anyway for the meeting tomorrow afternoon.

She took the crowded turbo and as it stopped at floor after floor, her thoughts resumed their cycling. No, she’d had no desire to interfere with Jim’s relationship with his Vulcan. She would have been resented, resisted, and transferred faster than Bob Wesley could intervene to stop it. But now that Spock was gone…. Scuttlebutt was that he wasn’t coming back. She hadn’t had the courage to ask that question yet and doubted that she ever would.

She checked into the basement and headed for the storage area allotted to the transwarp project. She walked by others intent on similar errands along dusty aisles. Most were junior officers.

But when she arrived at the set of gray modular shelves pushed up against a similarly drab wall and surrounded by other shelving units, Lori was not alone. Standing before the cabinet, apparently deeply in thought, was Jim Kirk. He held a file under one arm.

Commodore, she said from behind him, to his bowed shoulders. He didn’t respond, so she cleared her throat and spoke more loudly. Commodore.

He turned gracefully, with no wasted motion, and acknowledged her presence with a nod. His handsome face was calm, controlled the way it had been since he’d come back. Though his eyes, which never seemed to be the same color, were large and liquid. What can I do for you, Commander Ciani? he asked without much inflection.

Nothing, sir. I’m here for the samples Mr. Vargas left the other day.

We’ve got ensigns for running the errands, he chided gently, but he didn’t ask why she’d come herself. She, probably wisely, did not ask him the same question.

Kirk stepped to the side and extended an arm, indicated she should go past him. She squeezed through the space and couldn’t avoid brushing against the front of his uniform, her back against his front. He must have known it would happen, surely. She, at least, was excruciatingly conscious of his warmth, the quiet sound of his breath, and the press of their bodies one against the other. But not his awareness. No, she realized as she reached up for the bound case she was after, Jim Kirk
was so tightly shut down that she wasn’t registering on him as a person, much less as a woman and a potential sex partner.

Ciani cradled the heavy case in her arms. Kirk hadn’t moved, and she wondered what had brought him here to the bowels of the headquarters building. He looked fine, looked almost normal, except…not.

How is he, she asked impulsively.

Kirk gazed along the long aisle of shelves opposite her. It stretched into the distance, maybe as much as half a kilometer. Headquarters was big.

Not good, he said.

She laid her hand on his forearm. His arm was hard, all its muscles tensed. So much for seeming to be normal. I’m so sorry, she said.

Yes, he replied distantly. Me, too.

And then he turned towards her again, and no one could fault his correct professionalism. Before Commander Spock left, he said, he and I were working on finding the perpetrators of the Federation Day attack. After hours. Now I need someone with good organizational and analytical skills to help me. This would be…outside official channels. Would you be interested?

I’m…not sure I can. Replace the commander. His intellect and—

I’m not asking you to replace him, Kirk said sharply. Just…to help. If you’re not interested, then—

Of course I am, she said quickly. I’ll be happy to help. She was no fool.

He nodded. All right, then. Shall we return to the office, Commander?

She followed him as he started the long journey out of the depths.
Almost four months after Kirk returned from his trip to Vulcan, he awakened to rain pelting against
the windows of the front bedroom with sharp, staccato bursts of aggressive sound. He lay quietly,
curled up on his right side, and listened. Drops of water were assaulting the almost-blooming
branches of the small tree that guarded the sidewalk between their house—his house—and Maeve
McLaughlin’s.

He opened his eyes to the dim light seeping into the room, stretched, rolled over onto his back, and
quietly told the computer, “Alarm, off.” Once again he was awake before he needed to be. It was
getting to be a habit. Most of the time he couldn’t sleep past dawn.

But that was okay, because he had plenty to do.

During the night he had kicked off the blanket, as he often did. He glanced down the length of his
body and saw that his cock was hard and high, pushing against the fabric of his briefs, insistent not
just with an early-morning bladder. He reached to snake his hand inside the waistband. But he
bypassed the hardness and cradled his balls instead. They were loose and heavy and moistly warm
against his questing fingertips. Felt good. It would feel even better if he allowed his hand to move
up and grasp himself, give a few quick jerks…. But he didn’t, though he should do it soon. Not this
morning. Sometime later. Tonight, maybe. Or later in the week. There wasn’t any rush.

But he needed to get working on the start of his day. With a bound out of bed, he headed for the
bathroom. Ten minutes later, he was dressed in black athletic pants and a lightweight jacket, water-
repellant, and closing the front door behind him. It might be wet, cold, and miserable outside, but
he was not going to allow the weather to stop him from his workout. If he ever saw Spock again,
he wasn’t going to present his lover with a body out of shape and flabby. He remembered that there
had been a healthy dose of animal, strictly physical attraction in Spock’s mind when they had
melded. And appreciation in his eyes, later. Spock had liked the way his captain looked. Well, he
would look even better.

Kirk flipped the hood up over his head and started on his morning run. Yesterday he’d spent an
hour lifting weights in the gym before beginning his day. He alternated his routines during the
week, intent on toning what hadn’t been too bad before. He was in better shape now at thirty-eight,
a week after his birthday, than he’d been when he’d taken command of the Enterprise. He knew
for sure from the way women looked at him.

The rain was letting up, but he didn’t care one way or the other about the moisture running down
his face and glistening on his clenched bare hands. He was cold for the moment but knew he’d
warm up within a block or two of effort. His shoes pounded on the black tarmac of the deserted
street. Sometimes he’d pass other runners this early in the morning, but not today. One two three
four, one two three four an inner voice repeated over and over, and he surrendered to the hypnotic
rhythm of it. This was the time of day when he allowed himself not to think of anything. Which
was different from allowing his thoughts to drift, because he’d discovered early on during this time
of isolation that just drifting was dangerous. There were too many ways for his spirit to be hijacked
and disheartened if he didn’t exercise control.

He turned left past Alphonse’s Pizzeria. No, a deliberate blanking of thought was a relief and a
time he prized. Breathing the air, letting it whistle past his lips and then pulling it into his lungs,
whether the air was frigid or moist or warmly caressing. Experiencing the impact of his feet as they
hit the surface of the road, first the left, then the right, then the left, then the right…. Lifting his
eyes to the brightening sky, measuring the clouds he saw today against the clouds he’d seen last
week, the week before that, or the day when he’d first started running after Spock had gone.

Just existing. In the moment. It was good to be alive.

He held that thought for the next fifty minutes and through the stretches he finished in the entrance hallway.

The audio news that the house computer had activated was a soft murmur when Kirk entered the kitchen, toweling his head dry after his shower. He was hungry and wanted his breakfast, but first he had a task to perform: a ritual. He went over to the kitchen outlet for the computer, one with a small video screen set in the breakfast bar. Every morning at about this time, he allowed himself to check manually for messages. The computer had instructions to alert him at any time, day or night, to any calls incoming from the Eridani system, but there sometimes were reroutings that disguised origin; the solar flares the other week had caused massive communication disruptions, for instance.

With the towel heedlessly slung around his neck, he slid onto one of the tall stools by the bar. “Computer, display messages from the last twenty-four hours.”

He didn’t know why he did this; Spock would have chided him and told him to trust to the computer to alert him when a communication came through. McCoy would have withheld his laughter, for he would have understood. Kirk felt…naive for the hope that always flared for an instant as he waited the microsecond for the messages to form on the screen.

All through the months of waiting he’d felt suspended in time and uncertain exactly what he should be feeling. He was a starship captain, damn it, and starship captains didn’t allow emotion to…. But then again, he wasn’t a starship captain any more, was he?

Kirk sat back and stared over the screen towards the equally blank refrigeration unit. They’d been through so much together. So damn much. You’d think that the universe would decide to stop picking on them and decide to pick on somebody…. But no, he wouldn’t wish this kind of keening ache, this need for somebody who wasn’t there on anybody, not on his worst enemy. Even Klingons loved. Whoever had sent the bomb on Federation Day: they loved.

When he checked, of course there was no message from Golgotharen forwarded by Sarek that the computer had somehow neglected to announce. There was a low-priority memo about the Starfleet Ball, held annually in May, and a request from his household engineer for the last week of April off from her duties. He quickly keyed in his assent, sent it, and then turned to get his breakfast.

Golgotharen’s healers were sparing with their updates.

Fifteen minutes later, after two slices of whole wheat bread, a banana, and a mug of coffee, Kirk was out of the house again, this time in everyday uniform with gold tunic, a standard-issue gray jacket, and an umbrella. He could have called for a priority lock to transport him directly to work; anybody of rank of commodore and above, he’d learned, was entitled to that from the ‘fleet upon request, but he spurned the idea. Okay for some of the geriatric officers who needed it, but he would not abuse the privilege or any aspect of his rank. Besides, the walk would do him good.

As he strode along he remembered how the Vulcans had proved they also believed that walking did a person good. When he’d beamed down to the sweltering planet to talk to Sarek and Amanda, he’d discovered that local transporter stations were situated few and far between. The citizenry had decided that too much convenience would not be good for their bodies, which must be developed as much as their strictly regimented minds, and so they had constructed a public transportation system with built-in exercise. That policy had created a long and tiresome hike for him as he made his way from point of materialization to Spock’s parents’ home; the heat, the gravity, and the
oxygen differential in the atmosphere had added to the exhaustion that had accumulated with his grief on the shuttle, so that he was on the edge of his limits when Sarek had finally greeted him at the door. But at least Kirk could concede the point to the logical citizens of the planet: exercise, generally speaking, was good.

As he approached his own local transporter station, he made a mental note to contact Sarek and Amanda soon. He was trying to maintain some sort of semi-regular personal connection. They were fine people—and hurting, too. He and Spock’s parents had managed a tolerable afternoon’s communication, that day months in the past, once the two of them had gotten over their shock at his news about him and Spock. Apparently, neither of them had ever given a thought to their son’s sexual orientation outside the forced childhood bond. Assumptions, Kirk concluded as he stepped up onto the pad and nodded to the familiar operator, could make fools even out of Vulcan diplomats and the wives they’d acquired to help them deal with the emotions of the other races in the Federation. That had been the only logic Kirk had ever seen in their union, that and plain old affinity, like the rest of mere mortals. And the fate that had brought them together. Two people in this wide universe, so different in background, and yet finding a common center….

Slipping into the chair behind his desk in the transwarp office—it was a penance he was accustomed to now. He didn’t want this job, but, by all the levels of Orion’s hells, he was going to be the best damn trans warp coordinator it was possible to be. On the bookcase shelf behind him, the academic and technical tapes proved the late night study he’d put in on the oddball mathematics that described warp drive and the higher dimensional physics and engineering that made it possible. He might not be an expert, but he could now follow the abstruse conversations offered by his engineers, and there wasn’t a file that had come to his computer since mid-February that he hadn’t mostly understood. And he wasn’t satisfied. An unopened instructional tape was ready for his take-home study.

At mid-morning Ciani stuck her head into his office to remind him of the meeting they would both be attending with the reps from Dynamic Designs. She would meet him there, she said. He nodded without looking up, unwilling to pull his attention from the proposed schedule for the third prototype test he was reading. The first two tests, which had occurred before he was involved, had worked more or less as hoped, revealing a few expected kinks that the designers had been able to address and providing almost as much thrust power as predicted. That was good. So good that The Powers That Be had accelerated the testing timetable. And that, in Kirk’s opinion, was bad. Yes, he wanted this engine design for the Enterprise, and if it wasn’t approved soon, that wasn’t going to happen, since the refit of his ship was proceeding efficiently. But not at the risk of failure. The first two tests had been small engines on small ships within the confines of the solar system, in the empty space between the orbits of Saturn and Neptune, and not in the interstellar void on a starship needing full power because of a Klingon attack or because some immensely-powerful entity was destroying whole planets. Always he recalled Spock’s suspicion of this proposed drive, and that conversation when he’d said that Wesley needed to check out a gravitational constant that…wasn’t.

But what, in this unreliable, chaotic universe was constant? Kirk rubbed the back of his neck without realizing how stiff it had become from his morning’s concentration. He’d had the project engineers check out basic assumptions every which way from Sunday, but they’d found nothing. Still…ordinary project engineers weren’t Commander Spock, the finest mind Kirk had ever had the pleasure of working with. There had been pleasure in witnessing the way Spock had concentrated, wrinkled his brow, or lifted his eyebrow, yes.

Precisely when he needed to, Kirk left his office, visited the restroom, and then made his way to the turbolift. He didn’t know any of the people in it by name, although they all nodded to him. When the lift stopped on the forty-second floor, however, the doors admitted Admiral Ted
“Morning, Jim,” the admiral said, sublimely disregarding the other people in the lift. He settled next to Kirk, facing forward and with his hands folded casually before him. “Computer, floor twenty-five.”

“Good morning, Ted.”

The admiral hadn’t changed over the last few months; he was still out-spoken and gruff, certainly broad-shouldered, vigorous, and a good twelve centimeters taller than Kirk, and still pronouncing opinions and policies that made Kirk’s chest tight with vehement disagreement more than half the time. With Nogura still in stasis because of the problems encountered in growing his transplant organs, Komack wasn’t hesitant to use his new influence for the good of the Federation as he saw it.

But something had changed between them, a situation that consistently bemused Kirk.

“Is there any news?” Komack tended to speak in a loud, assertive voice in the best of times; in the lift, his words erupted into the silence so everyone could hear. But Kirk was used to it by now. Komack would expect an answer and would harry him until he got one. It was better just to answer him than to get into an argument on the spot. Kirk had tried that once already, and Komack, in what Kirk had to admit appeared to be genuine concern, would not be deterred.

“No. Nothing since three weeks ago.”

“Are you sure he’s getting the care he needs there?” The lift stopped to disgorge one of its occupants, but the admiral forged on. “Maybe you should bring him back here. Or Starbase Ten’s hospital. We have excellent people there.”

“No, but thank you for your concern.”

Komack regarded him with a frown. “Jim, he’s been gone for a long time. You should think about it.” He made it sound like an order.

“I will,” Kirk replied. “Think about it, that is.”

Komack snorted. “I know you, Kirk. Too stubborn for common sense. It’s a damn shame.” Kirk was wise enough to know the admiral wasn’t still talking about him. “The wife was asking me about him the other day. Keep me informed. I’ll want to know when he’s coming back. A fine officer, Commander Spock. A fine officer.”

Kirk contemplated the tips of his boots for the next few seconds as the turbo slowed. The admiral exited and left Kirk alone with the group of people he did not know.

Over the months, most people he worked with had stopped asking him. Except Komack, of course, who didn’t give a damn about the finer sensibilities. On the whole, Kirk preferred his forthright questioning to those who went quiet when certain subjects were brought up around him. Komack might be an overbearing egotist, but for some reason he did appreciate Spock. It felt more than a little odd to know that they shared that appreciation.

The meeting went as planned, and Kirk didn’t even notice the effort he was exerting to focus professionally—at the level he expected of himself as an officer and representative of Starfleet—on the matter at hand. It had not been difficult to engage in such negotiations when he had been in command of the Enterprise. He’d haggled with humans, Andorians, Denebians, and more races than he could immediately call to mind, but when it had been his ship and his people he had been
representing, there’d been an urgency to the task that lent spice to the most boring series of talks. He’d effortlessly functioned as captain of a starship; he suspected he would have found satisfaction as part of Admiral Nkapa’s Operations team. Not the case here. The smiling civilians across the table were part of too many of his days. They represented the technical subjects that were not his forte. Time—and his genuine talents—wasted. Damn Komack and his smiling inquiries, his revenge on Kirk for his loyalties.

The meeting segued into lunch in the senior officers’ dining room on the topmost, seventy-second floor with both the reps and Ciani, a fine linen tablecloth, and an excellent selection of before-meal wines that satisfied even the finicky tastes of Marlin seb Devonaughton of Dynamic Designs and Trenton IV. Kirk accepted the being’s toast that acknowledged his recent promotion and called upon the local deity for his continued good fortune. Kirk didn’t correct the contractor or its assumption; Ciani glanced away and then joined the others in lifting her glass.

The afternoon was easier. He hadn’t forgotten the subtext of his appointment to the transwarp project, which was to make himself visible in the hopes that whoever had perpetrated the Federation Day attack would make himself, herself or themselves known. It was about the only element of his new position that felt worthwhile. And so Kirk faithfully held press conferences, attended public events, and today instructed an office aide to confirm the interview he was scheduled to grant Ralph Randolph of The Galactic News the next afternoon.

He went home. After putting in a few hours of study on the new tape, he grabbed something to eat from the replicator—stew and a salad he barely tasted—and switched focus to the events that were now fading from the forefront of the public’s concern. Federation Day had taken place almost six months previously, and the other shoe hadn’t dropped. Kirk was confused about that; why hadn’t the enemy followed through on its opportunity? That argued either lack of resources or a radically different mind-set than he had first assumed. What had been the motive? Not knowing frustrated the hell out of him.

He stretched in the synth-leather chair before his desk and computer, then got up to close the draperies over the windows that looked out on the backyard. He stared at the smudged shadows that were the bushes and small trees trying to bloom and reflected that at least he had made some contribution. As winter had reached its height a few months ago and San Francisco had actually experienced one of its rare sleet storms, he’d figured out exactly what Spock had meant when he’d said that he knew a way to track the components produced by the Melbourne explosives factory. It had taken him a good two months of diligent effort, but he’d finally been able to duplicate Spock’s Eureka discovery.

And then had come the problem of what to do with that knowledge. In all conscience, he couldn’t keep it to himself, but it was hard to imagine just sending it under secure code to Beldon’s terminal. He compromised by contacting Commander Sam Giotto, who was still coordinating evidence from the site and whom he’d last seen almost two years previously dying on the hard-packed soil of the planet Michaela. They’d had a serious, respectful lunch in London while Kirk told him exactly what he’d been doing, and he’d handed over the conclusions about the explosive tracking. Sam had promised he’d do his best. Kirk beamed back to San Francisco feeling humble because of the man’s loyalty and his steadfast belief in Kirk’s abilities. He didn’t know that he really deserved that…but he was grateful that he had been the kind of leader who had inspired people like Giotto and Hunyady.

Two weeks later, Beldon had called Kirk late one afternoon as he was working in his headquarters office.

*Kirk, this is Beldon.*
Good afternoon, Commodore.

It’s almost midnight here. I want to know how you knew the Kiwi Terraforming Works was the place to search.

I didn’t. Commander Spock did. But if you examine their records, it’s clear that they’re set up to hide unauthorized shipments.

That’s right.

Have you found something?

Enough. There’s definitely something unusual with the shipments, and they produce the kind of terrainblaster that was used. We’ve got them under surveillance. Time will give us the information we need.

That’s good to hear. I hope you’ll keep me informed of developments. Such as when the report on the DNA traces comes in.

The lab is having problems with that. The preliminary reports are in and they tell us nothing. We’re hoping to get something better with a few extra months of analysis.

Then how about letting me know when there’s an update on the debris field?

I can deal with you there. Hell, yes, if you keep me informed, too. Giotto tells me you’ve been doing regular research of your own. We could use the help, Kirk, and I know your reputation.

The way Beldon should have known Spock’s reputation? Or was the difference that Kirk was a human and Spock…was not? Kirk’s stomach had clenched, but he’d agreed, and ever since then Beldon had called him regularly for information exchange. The round-faced man had gone so far as to laugh and say he’d better put Kirk on the payroll. The comment wasn’t funny to Kirk. This wasn’t a game to him, nor was it a job. This was…necessary. Spock couldn’t come home only to face this same danger again. And that had been his own promotion ceremony at which all those people had died. This was…duty.

Now he was working on motive and opportunity. He’d decided to leave the technical questions of the explosive and the transportation to the scientists, but he knew something about anger, hatred, passion for gain or for power. And the mind touch. The mind touch that Spock had experienced just before he’d fallen to the street and before that on the Enterprise: nobody else was focusing on that. He would. Somewhere, there’d be a clue, maybe something obscure, maybe something overlooked by others, but with his belief that beings of telepathic ability were somehow involved, he would see it and make the connection.

The long list of those who’d claimed responsibility and other likely suspects glared at him from his computer screen. Impossible to go through them all, but some could be eliminated through strategic thinking and a little research. It was going to be a challenging project.

He worked until midnight, alone in his office on the first floor of the house. He slept and awakened in plenty of time to run to the local Farmer’s Market in a drenching rain, buy fresh bread and spring asparagus, and run home, thinking not at all.

When he checked his messages that morning, as he would always check, there was still no word forwarded through Sarek from Golgotharen. The longest previous time the institute had gone without some update had been seventeen days. Kirk banged the computer display shut with a genuine snarl and wanted to strangle someone. He knew he’d rather be angry than contemplate
what condition Spock was in now. What the hell had the healers done to him with their surgery?

But he was alive, right? Kirk forced his clenched fist to open. He’d hold onto that. Golgotharen would surely tell the clan if Spock had died. For a moment he entertained dark musings: would Vulcan bother to relay bad news about their well-known, black-sheep son? But, no, he could depend on Amanda at least, he was sure of it.

After an efficient lunch later that day with two of his engineers, Kirk walked briskly across the headquarters campus to the public relations building on the southeast corner. There Starfleet had its own holo studios, production facilities, printing press, and of course rooms appropriate for interviewing senior officers. The rain had finally stopped but the clouds were still low and threatening; Kirk made his way around puddles without thinking about detours and leaned into the brisk spring wind whipping through his uniform. Randolph was waiting for him in the lobby of the building. He approached Kirk with one hand outstretched.

“Jim. It’s good to see you again.”

He had to decide right then how to conduct himself: as a friend or a professional colleague. He hadn’t seen Randolph since a fund-raising dinner they’d attended in early January, and then they’d had little opportunity for conversation as Randolph had been covering the event. Lori Ciani, increasingly invaluable in the transwarp office, had been the one who’d arranged this interview, so he and Randolph hadn’t had the occasion to speak until now.

Randolph had shown his preference by calling him “Jim” and was now regarding him expectantly. Something inside Kirk hardened, and he was tempted to treat the man as he treated everybody else these days except for Bones. And then he relented. They weren’t friends—they’d been on the way to that, perhaps. But Randolph, with no ties to Starfleet and from a different world than the one he lived in, was someone he could at least relate to differently.

“Hello, Randy.” He took the man’s hand and shook with a firm grip. “It’s good to see you, too. How are you doing?”

The reporter brushed the hair out of his eyes. “I’m fine. And you?”

Kirk didn’t hesitate. “I’m all right.”

“You are? And here I thought you and Spock were the genuine article.”

Kirk bristled. “We are.”

“Then you’re not all right.”

Kirk had to admire the man’s technique—he wasn’t The Galactic News’ foremost interviewer for nothing—at the same time that he resented the intrusive comment. “Drop it, okay? My personal life isn’t the subject of our interview.”

“I was only wondering,” Randolph went on, reasonably, and as if he hadn’t heard the snub, “whether you were out and about yet.”

“What?” Kirk asked, nonplussed.

“Dating again. You know, the relentless search for someone to warm your bed as well as your heart? If you’re looking—”

“I’m not.”
“—then I could steer you towards a few fellows I think you’d like.”

“No,” Kirk said more forcefully than he’d intended. “No.” He wasn’t happy with his sudden surge of anger. “I’m not interested.”

Randolph nodded in apparent understanding. “Some people would say that you’ve had long enough to get over it, but when you’ve really found somebody you’re compatible with, it takes a while to start over again. I can’t tell you how sorry I am that Spock’s gone.”

“Thanks,” Kirk said shortly.

“If there’s anything I can do—”

He’d heard it many times before. “Thanks, I’ll let you know.”

“No, I mean it. I think you’re a man in need of a distraction. I’ve been meaning to give you a call for weeks. Maybe we could go out for a beer sometime.”

He didn’t need a distraction, not when he was trapped on practically every level of his life, personal and professional. The man whose eyes looked back at him from mirrors ached, and he didn’t know how the fulfilling life he’d led on the Enterprise had degenerated into this purgatory. He should have been able to tolerate it; he was a career military officer who understood that not all assignments would be to his liking, and the gods alone knew that he was accustomed to frustrating problems that resisted solutions. He could wait until his ship was commissioned again, but without Spock… Without the emotional connection to his lover that he had grown accustomed to, it was all harder than it should have been, and that angered him. Where was his strength? Where was his perspective?

Where was the satisfaction in living when his heart was suspended, waiting to see if it was going to be torn in two?

Kirk squared his shoulders before answering Randolph. Damn it, he wasn’t sentimental and he’d had plenty of practice climbing out of the pit of despair. He wouldn’t stay there.

“Sometime.”

“Next week,” Randolph insisted. “Tuesday at six? Over at Mario’s on Twelfth Street.”

Why the hell did this man want to be his friend? But the same impulse that had caused him to put this conversation on a personal and not a professional level prompted his reply. Maybe, after these weeks of virtual solitude, he could have a drink at Mario’s on Twelfth Street.

Whether he did or not, he realized, wouldn’t make any difference to anyone at Golgotharen.

“Okay,” he relented, and Randolph gave him a wry, knowing grin. “But no….” He didn’t even know the right term. “No innocent introductions to friends.”

“If you say so.”

“I do,” Kirk asserted. He extended an arm towards the interview rooms. “Shall we get started?”

“In a minute. I want to get some holos first, and Tima has just stepped away to the restroom…. Oh, here she is.”

Kirk had almost forgotten the dark woman walking sedately across the drafty lobby towards him,
and he wasn’t sure of her name. Tima. Fahtima…something. But Spock had liked her. Kirk remembered sadly that he’d actually once experienced a flash of jealousy because she and Spock had met unexpectedly in Luna City. That seemed stupid now. Spock had never given him reason for jealousy.

Kirk was about to ask the woman for her full name, apologizing gracefully in the way he’d perfected years before, but Randolph forestalled him by re-introducing them.

Kirk nodded, recalling that this was a woman who, like Vulcans, did not suffer physical contact gladly. “Ms. Gabon, a pleasure to see you again.”

She bowed from the waist. Her hair was covered with a rose-patterned scarf that didn’t quite match the pale pink tunic and flowing purple trousers she wore. Gabon clutched the scarf under her chin as she bowed to make sure it didn’t slip off.

“Commodore. An honor to see you, sir.”

“I’m lucky that Tima’s working with me again, Jim. She’s been laid up for months and you’re her first assignment since she got out of rehab.”

“Oh?” Kirk asked as kindly as his uninterested mind could muster. The woman did look a bit wan, as if she didn’t have the strength that normally propelled her. “I hope you’re recovered, Ms. Gabon.”

“I am fine, thank you. I merely fell down a set of stairs and most foolishly hit my head. The resulting concussion was troublesome.”

Randolph was frowning. “And the broken vertebra. And the smashed cheekbones.”

Into Gabon’s silence, Kirk cautiously advanced, “An accident, then?”

“Of course.”

Like the accident this woman had sustained on Luna City, sometime before she’d entered his hospital room like a wraith in the night? A wraith with a substantial limp, he recalled. His recollections of that evening were dim, but he did remember that.

There had been…hadn’t there been a male relative involved with the News as well? The fellow who had cursed at the Tellarite porter and shouted at Gabon when they were setting up the holographic equipment at the press conference. A fellow who might be taking out his temper on this woman.

“And how is your brother doing?”

Her dark eyes widened, then comprehension dawned. “You must mean my cousin, Hamza.”

“That’s right. He went to Luna City with us.”

“Yes. Hamza is doing quite well, thank you.”

Randolph put in with narrowed eyes, “He doesn’t work with us anymore, though. Got himself another job, didn’t he, Tima? While you were in the hospital.”

Her eyes sought the floor. “That is correct.”

“He’s a political consultant now,” Randolph told him. “For Douglas Johnson.”
The Eternist representative and leader of the opposition to the Utarf proposal. “That’s an unusual political persuasion for someone who works with you, Randy.”

The reporter shrugged. “I always knew he was an Eternist, but everybody’s entitled to their opinion, and Hamza is a damned fine photo journalist. I was sorry that he left.” Randolph threw back his shoulders, as if to rid himself of the unwanted topic. “I’d like some holos of you, Commodore, before we do the interview.”

Kirk tucked away what he’d learned about someone who was an open Eternist—he hadn’t actually met anyone else who was, had he?—and agreed to the holo request. Randolph wanted an informal, outdoor setting. He was cooped up inside too much these days, and any excuse to get out and stay out was welcome. But before they left the building Randolph’s comm unit beeped, and he apologetically told them “I have to take this call. You two go ahead. I’ll catch up with you. Fahtima can take care of this part on her own anyway.”

Kirk and the woman tramped halfway across the property with the fabric of Gabon’s clothing rippling in the wind. They came to the smallish park that was tucked next to a memorial to the first settlement on Mars. Cherry blossoms weren’t budded out yet, but Gabon quietly said that the effect of the stark branches would create an interesting holo. Kirk posed under her direction, feeling artificial and not-himself, but also knowing that this was the way the game was played. He shivered between shots and wished he had brought his jacket. Even he had to admit that the wind, heavy with moisture and picking up, was cool.

“Can you smooth your hair, Commodore?” Gabon asked. “It has been disturbed by the breeze.”

Kirk did his best to run his fingers through his hair but knew it was hopeless. The woman advanced with that gliding gait she had and handed him a comb. “It is unused,” she said. “I keep a supply for such instances.”

He combed his hair and handed it back to her, but she stood there uncertainly.

“May I ask you, Commodore….”

“Yes?”

“How is Commander Spock? I had no occasion to encounter news of him while I was ill.”

The polite lie, the social reassurance came to his lips but he left it unspoken. “Not well. He hasn’t regained consciousness yet,” he said with a surge of bleak anger again, although he wasn’t sure at whom it was directed. The arrogant healers who had done nothing? Starfleet as embodied by Ted Komack? Spock?

Or maybe himself, standing here in the cold, impotent. Subject to other forces, other responsibilities, the kindness and the abilities of others. Subject to Versin, God help him, and the nameless healers who held Spock’s life in the palms of their hands. In their minds.

Gabon looked down at her hands holding the holo-camera and bit her lower lip. “I did not know…. I had thought he was living with the Vulcan doctors. I am very sorry to hear this news.”

The words: they sounded sincere. Not like the mouthed almost-condolences or false reassurances he had encountered again and again in the early days of the separation, before the world went silent. Kirk knew that she spoke from genuine feeling. Sorrow.

“Someday he’ll come back,” he said.
A peculiar expression formed on her face, there for a moment and then gone. “We must all hope so.” She straightened and moved her shoulders minutely, as if settling more into her body.

“Commodore Kirk, I have not expressed my genuine regret that your…companion,” she stumbled over the word, “has been taken from you. I wish it had not come to pass.”

“Thank you.”

“And if…if you achieve communication with the commander again, I would wish to be remembered to him. He is a fine being. I did not know him well, but I find that…I miss him. I can only imagine how you must regret his absence as well.” She looked at him keenly. “You, who knew him so much better than I.”

He corrected her evenly. “Know him, Ms. Gabon. I know him. He’s in a coma, but he’s not dead.”

She put a hand to her mouth. “I know. I know that now. Forgive me, Commodore.”

Kirk didn’t want to talk to this woman any more; he abruptly gestured towards the PR building. “Let’s go back now.”

Her chin lifted. “No. That is, with your permission, a few more depictions of you out here. Unless you are too chilled?”

He shook his head through his resentment and still managed to bring out the charm that these days he used as a shield. Somewhere he found a quick smile. “Chilled? I’m warm in a blizzard, madam.”

Gabon gave him a doubtful glance, as if she wasn’t at all sure he was safe to be around. Or perhaps that was an indication that she saw the rancor behind his words. At any rate, she nodded him back to his position against a barren brown branch that showed no sign that spring was already here, and she lifted her camera once again.

As they made their way to the interview room, he considered how Spock had talked about this woman a few times. How he had seemed to care for her. Didn’t that imply an obligation?

“Ms. Gabon, is there anything that I can do for you?”

She regarded him blankly.

“If there is some trouble with your cousin, there are agencies that can help…. ”

“Oh, no. There is no trouble.”

“You’re safe where you are? There won’t be any more accidents?”

She kept walking with her head slightly down, picking her way across the puddle-dotted concrete. “Commodore, allow me to reassure you. Hamza is the best of cousins, the best of friends, and I admire him. Yes, he occasionally cares so passionately about an issue that he raises his voice, but that is not unusual with men of conviction, is it? I will not move from our home.”

Kirk, startled, said, “You live with him?”

“Of course. Where else would I be? It is where I belong.”

Kirk wasn’t so sure; the psychology of battered women was one he had never comprehended, but, then, he wasn’t certain Gabon fell into that category. Well, he had tried.

After the interview with Randolph he worked late that night at headquarters and didn’t get home
until past eight. He ate a slice of bread folded over ham and cheese while he stood in the kitchen, and then he applied himself, again alone in the yellow-lit glare of his home office, collating data related to Paris.

About ten he got up and stretched his legs by pacing around the first floor, the way he had sometimes walked around the bridge of his ship. A different perspective sometimes helped the thinking process, too. He remembered the woman he’d talked to today, and he wondered if she were in any real danger. Most murders were caused by domestic disputes….

And that made him think about the Eternists and their radical arm, which everyone knew existed but no one officially claimed. What was that man’s name? Hamza Machar.

Quickly he keyed in a message to Lori to find out everything she could about a Hamza who at one time had been a photo journalist. This might be worth the effort. The Eternists were one of many groups on his list of those who might be responsible, although they, like the others, didn’t quite fit the profile he was aiming for. But he couldn’t forget Leonis IV, where there had been many casualties in the name of the humans-only faction. Then there was the fellow who’d been taken on Luna City before he’d poisoned the water supply. Yes, the Eternists definitely were stirring beyond what their legitimate political arm would officially espouse.

To the file he added the name of a Foursquare Fathers member who had recently traveled out to sector ten in an attempt to set up trade with the Tholians. It wasn’t a secret; Kirk’d gleaned the information from public sector files of The Johannesburg Press, but the trick was to see the patterns behind information. He was supposed to be good at that….

When he finally laid down on his bed, on the left side that was his, it was raining again. He remembered one time he and Spock had played together in the ship’s pool, before they had become lovers. Spock had teased him about his middle name and smiled at him with his eyes. They had touched, not quite innocently, but the water had hidden their desire even if their eyes could not.

Kirk rolled over and clutched the second pillow that was still there to his middle. Their first touch, their first kiss, the first time he’d shuddered into orgasm in Spock’s arms. The last time he’d held Spock in this bed.

He choked and forced the visions away. Sometimes memories were too sweet for him to bear.

He awoke early again and checked messages before he set out for the headquarters gym. He bench pressed thirty pounds less than his maximum before he had to stop; his shaking arms wouldn’t allow any more reps. He swore as he sat up and mopped his dripping face with a towel. He wouldn’t let Golgotharen’s silence weaken him.

Early on, McCoy had badgered him into an occasional lunch date. Today was one of those days, and Kirk left to meet his friend at a small deli a good ten blocks from the campus, in the basement of a house in a mostly residential section. He liked it there, where very few Starfleet people bothered to go: too far to walk for most of them, and if they were going to use the transporter, they’d go further afield to someplace nice. He descended the worn steps and opened the swinging door. Here, the air was heavy with spices and flavor, the floor sported stained wooden planks, and the three people who worked there—one behind the counter, one waiting on tables, and one whose balding head was infrequently visible through the kitchen passthrough—greeted him as if he were an old and valued customer. They never mentioned his name, he was “the commodore,” and Kirk liked the way they left him alone, with only their smiles to show they really did know who he was.

McCoy was already there, biting into a big chunk of sourdough bread, which he loved. The first few times Bones had insisted that they meet, Kirk had been suspicious and silent, even surly. Now,
their silences were comfortable and treasured. He might not have appreciated it when McCoy had first forced his way into Kirk’s remote seclusion, but now he did.

“‘Morning, Bones,” he said as he slid into a creaky seat, and he reached for some bread, too.

“‘Afternoon,” McCoy corrected as he looked at the non-regulation watch on his wrist, then showed Kirk the figures 1201. “How ’fleet expects to police a Federation when the brass don’t know the time of day….”

“I’m a commodore, not a clock-watcher,” Kirk said easily.

He settled comfortably into conversation with someone he knew thoroughly and who thoroughly knew him. They talked about a wide range of topics, many of them concerning crewmates. How Sulu was taking a temporary assignment out on the giant starbase on Titan, orbiting Saturn, and how Uhura was in Australia at the Canberra Communications Institute reorganizing the curriculum.

“You know those two are an item, don’t you?” McCoy asked.

Yes, Kirk knew, and he wished them well. Not a relationship he would have predicted, but he was glad for them. You took love where you found it, if you were wise.

“And I’ve finally done the deed,” McCoy announced as he finished up his cheese and broccoli soup. The corned beef sandwich had already been demolished. “I’ve gone and met Patty’s parents.”

“You old dog, you.”

“No kidding. But they’re older than me, at least.”

“And? Did they approve?”

McCoy threw him a chiding glance. “Patty’s forty-six years old and has served on deep-space vessels longer than I have. I don’t think she needs her folks’ approval for shacking up with a slightly-used doctor.”

“Best doctor in the fleet,” Kirk said promptly. “That’s got to count for something.”

Kirk knew better than to ask Bones if there were going to be a formal commitment in the future between him and the Enterprise nurse. Bones had been burned badly in his first marriage, and Kirk didn’t think McCoy would ever try again. Kirk wouldn’t judge him; he’d had no experience of marriage.

The deli had only one card processor, up by the counter, so McCoy handed over his card for payment to the waitress and they sat for a short while in that silence that precedes good-byes. McCoy stirred in his hard wooden chair and spoke.

“Jim?”

Kirk didn’t want to respond, because he knew from the tone of voice that McCoy was about to talk about Spock. But he had obligations to his friends—and to this friend in particular.

“What do you want, Bones?”

“I wonder if I should try to contact Golgotharen. See if they’ll respond to me.”

“I don’t see why they would. They don’t respond to me. Or to Sarek.”
“I’m basically Spock’s admitting doctor. There’s such a thing as professional courtesy.”

“Which I doubt that Healer Versin would acknowledge.”

“Damn Vulcan inflexibility!” McCoy exploded with a flat palm to the table. “No word now for more than three weeks. You must be going crazy.”

Kirk couldn’t keep the bitterness from his voice. “Do I look like I’m going crazy? I thought I was one of Starfleet’s shining stars.”

“Jim, I—” McCoy couldn’t finish what he was saying, because the waitress returned and handed him his card. She stayed and offered a few comments on the weather, they responded, but finally she left.

Bones leaned across the table towards him and lowered his voice. “Don’t let it get to you. I know this is a tough time for you, that your instinct is to…do something, but there’s not much you can do. Just…sit tight.”

“Afraid I’ll go storm the citadel of Golgotharen?”

“Yes,” McCoy said bluntly. “Now’s not the time to go off half-cocked.”

“How long,” Kirk asked reflectively, “can a man go without any self-respect? This isn’t the life I bargained for.”

“Jim….”

“No. Don’t worry. I don’t see any sense in banging my head against the wall, either here or on Vulcan. And I knew the rules when I took Spock there.”

“I’ll admit, I’m worried. A coma of this length, even for a Vulcan, does not suggest a positive prognosis. But don’t you give up, Jim.

“As if I would,” Kirk said softly.

That night he attended a performance of *La Traviata* at the San Francisco Opera as the guest of the Betan Metal Works, a contractor producing some of the most delicate equipment used in the transwarp design. He hadn’t counted on the after-hours wining and dining that was expected in his position; as he tried hard to maintain an interested expression during act three, he contemplated how wrong he’d been to think that transwarp coordinator was the position Spock should have been assigned. Spock would have done his duty and done it well, he would have adjusted to the social necessities as Kirk had, but he would have been as miserable as Kirk was. Maybe a little less so, since at least the figures presented by the engineers would have given him some solace. And he would have had the time and opportunity to prove to himself and to others whether the complex equations and daring assumptions that undergirded this project would work or not.

But, no. Spock was lost somewhere in a coma that simulated death, and it was Kirk who was left to mouth pretty words between acts to people he didn’t care about. When Violetta finally died, it was a relief.

He went home. It was too late to work on anything else, and so he went to sleep, ignoring his heavy balls and how his cock ached for his hand. Not yet. Nevertheless, he dreamed of nameless, faceless beings who pressed against his chest, skin to skin. He felt their fingers on his arms and skimming down his back.
The next day included an every-three-weeks meeting with Bob Wesley, who was Kirk’s commanding officer. They went through the proposed schedule for the third test; Kirk wanted it moved from the Kuiper Belt to beyond the Oort Cloud, the vast birthplace of comets at the outer reaches of the solar system and well away from interplanetary or interstellar space lanes. He also wanted to significantly increase the mass of the testing vessel; using a glorified shuttle to test a warp drive that would almost always be used on much larger vessels seemed senseless to him. And he wanted the entire test delayed at least six more months, giving them a total of another year before it would take place.

Wesley argued budgetary considerations. Kirk argued safety and practicality. Each saw the other’s points but remained committed to his own. It was Wesley, though, who outranked the newest commodore in the fleet.

Kirk was conscious of the other members of the administrative team who were present and the recording of this session, done as a matter of course. It was obvious that he wasn’t going to win on all fronts; he had to give something away.

He relented on the timing, cautiously offering a three month extension over the original schedule instead of six. Wesley matched his strategy, suggesting that perhaps it would be possible to relocate out past the orbits of Neptune and Pluto for the test, since the safety issue was, he grudgingly admitted, important.

What about the test ship? Kirk asked. Surely ’fleet had some experimental vessels large enough to make the prototype engine work for its breakfast.

Fifteen minutes later they had a rough agreement. The schedule remained as it had been originally proposed, but the location of the test was changed and the question of the ship size was to be bounced upstairs. As much as he could be with such arrangements, Kirk was satisfied.

It was close to lunch and everybody else who had attended the meeting stood and filed out. Wesley and Kirk were the last two remaining, as they each used the comps set into the table to make final notes. It was a habit they had picked up when commanding starships. It was important to use the time available to summarize for Starfleet Command as soon as possible, since the next emergency could happen in minutes and claim your life.

It was a ridiculous habit, Kirk thought as he keyed in the last figures. Neither he nor Wesley were in any danger any more. Even whoever was responsible for the Paris bombing and the attack on the half-demolished Enterprise seemed to have moved on to some other job.

Wesley looked up from his task. “How about lunch?”

Kirk rose from the padded chair. “No, thanks.”

“How hasn’t McCoy given you the lecture about skipping meals? God knows, I got that one from my CMO often enough. God rest his soul."

He didn’t have time for this. “Sorry, Bob, too much work to do today. This meeting took up half the morning.”

“True enough. But you’re working too hard. You need to get out more.”

And he didn’t appreciate the criticism. Kirk stuffed a few disks into his case with determination. “I get out plenty. I don’t want to get out any more than I do already.”

Wesley stood and walked around the end of the table so he was on Kirk’s side. “Jim. Don’t take
this the wrong way, but…. Don’t you think that it’s about time you faced facts?”

“I deal with facts every day, Commodore, thank you. If you have a concern about my professional performance, then—”

Wesley was staying calmer than Kirk. He said, reasonably, “You know I’m not talking about that. You’re doing a good job, better than I expected, though I should have known you’d never do anything less than excellently. This is about the fact that it’s time you…started seeing people. Stopped…waiting.”

The anger that he seemed to carry around with him all the time was very close to the surface—or was it that Bob was safe? “I don’t need help conducting my personal life,” he snarled, and then at least he had the good judgment to turn to go.

But Wesley caught his arm, and Kirk let the grip bring him to a halt. Wesley’s voice was sharp, like an arrow. “Yes, you do need help. You’re getting ridiculous. Sure, I know you had a good thing going with Spock, but he’s gone now and you’ve got to stop burying yourself in a hole. There’s a wide world out there, Jim, and there are people who want to share it with you. Remember that ice hockey game that you and I promised ourselves we’d go to? Remember that you said you’d go to another game with Lori?”

Hockey? When he already had to attend operas and fund-raisers and press conferences, when he had to present a false face to the contractors and damn near everybody else in his life, when he was buried at Starfleet, when he couldn’t even wake up in the morning or lie down in the evening and admit to himself how damn much he missed the man who used to share his bed and his mind and the life they’d led? When he didn’t dare let loose the tumult of feeling within him?

“If you’re looking for a companion, go with Commander Ciani,” he said shortly. “I’m not interested. But she seems willing enough.”

“No, you go with Lori. Open your eyes, Jim. She’s willing, but for you, not me. Start living your life without Spock. Or can’t you?”

He wanted to slug the man, but instead Kirk worked on containing the anger that was racing through him. His pride stung: he needed to hold onto the belief that the carefully constructed life he presented to the world was working. He could very well function without Spock, thank you! He was functioning!

He glared at his old friend. “Why don’t you try going with your wife, Mister?” he taunted. “The one I still haven’t met. I wonder if she even exists.”

Wesley released the hold he had on Kirk’s arm. Whatever emotion had been in his eyes was peculiarly blanked.

“Oh, she exists, all right. But we’ve separated. I was going to tell you over lunch.”

All of Kirk’s resentment drained from him in an instant, and he felt ashamed of himself. What was he doing, tangling with Bob Wesley, one of the few men in headquarters he counted as a genuine friend?

There was an awkward pause as the two of them regarded each other.

“Bob. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Wesley passed a hand over his chin. “Nobody knows. I moved out last week and I’ve been trying
to cope with it ever since. It hasn’t worked for a long time. Almost from the beginning, really.” He pulled out one of the chairs and sat in it heavily.

Kirk hesitated and then he pulled out a chair, too. The two of them brooded together for a while, and then Wesley claimed Kirk’s attention with a short, insincere laugh.

“You know what’s ridiculous? There isn’t even a hockey season going on right now. The Sharks were eliminated from the playoffs last week. I was just using the game as an example.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry things haven’t worked out with Jeanine, Bob. Any chance you two will reconcile?”

The gray-haired commodore shook his head. “I don’t think I want to. I know when things are over.”

“Divorce?”

“No, I think we’ll just wait out the term. The awkward thing is we renewed the marriage for a year a few months ago. But I don’t want things to get messy with a divorce. No need for that.”

“You wanted me to start going out because that’s what you’re facing.”

Wesley gave a self-deprecating chuckle. “Yeah. And because I honestly think you should.”

“It’s different for me, Bob.”

“Everybody thinks that. We all think we have the grand passion, the greatest love affair this side of Delta. Hell, Jim, Spock was a man. A male Vulcan, anyway. What the hell you were doing shacking up with….” It was apparent that Wesley reconsidered what he was going to say. “I never did understand it.”

Kirk felt something tiny but significant break inside him, like one small crack in the protective shield around the warp core of his ship. Letting a few of the dangerous, toxic particles through. The sadness.

“I never asked anybody to understand it.” Except that maybe he had. His mother. Bones.

“You’re a ladies man, Jim,” Wesley said earnestly. “Always have been, always will be. This thing you had with Spock, it was just a….” The commodore searched for the right word.

Kirk supplied one for him. “An aberration? A leftover from the mission, when unnatural pressures brought us together in an unnatural relationship?”

Wesley’s shoulders squirmed uneasily, but he stuck to his point. “I’m not saying that same-sex is unnatural. Just that it wasn’t right for you.”

He wasn’t going to let himself be angry again. “I think,” he said gently, “that I’m the best judge of that.”

“But what I said about needing to get out is right. Spock’s not here, Jim. Go out with Lori. That’s one hell of an attractive woman, she’s smart, she could make it…easier on you.”

Kirk looked down. He’d thought about it. To be completely honest with himself, of course he’d thought about it. He missed Spock and everything about him in ways he couldn’t even express or admit to himself, but he was also a sensual, healthy man who had reveled in their physical
relationship. Making love with Spock…it had been the best sex he’d ever had. And now he found that, in a way that was separate from and in addition to his longing for his lover, he missed the sex, the physical closeness, and there were times when he wanted another living person to touch him.

Maybe….

“I don’t know.”

Taking Lori out for a night on the town. Drinks first, then a play, and then a stroll on over to Antonio’s for a late-night dinner. That moment when they both wondered what would come next, and his practiced invitation to her to join him for a nightcap…in his home.

The slow walk up to the bedroom. Undressing her and discovering the body of a woman again. Breasts. Cupping her breasts and tasting a nipple, feeling it flex in his mouth and hearing the sharp inhalation of her pleasure. The scent of her perfume.

And then…. Rolling on top of her and sliding into the moist, feminine warmth he was so familiar with…. Had been so familiar with, before he’d discovered the lure of Spock’s mind and the glint of amusement in his first officer’s eyes and the electric touch of his hand and the warmth of his body…..

Before he’d discovered he didn’t want to live separately from the most compelling person he’d ever met, and that he wanted to share everything with…him. Him. Not her.

But…. Face facts, Bob had said. Spock wasn’t here. And he had needs.

After he and Lori had made love, then what? Would the emptiness come crashing out from the place where he kept it hidden, overwhelming him? Or would it be the first step in putting his life back together again without his Vulcan lover?

“I’m not ready for that,” he said as honestly as he could.

“Yet,” Wesley supplied.

Kirk just looked at him, feeling the first layer of sadness wrap itself around him.

Don’t you give up, Jim.

As if I would.

Wesley stood. “Well, someday you will be ready, and when you are, don’t say I didn’t tell you.”

He held out a hand. “Lunch?”

All right. That one small concession he could make. Maybe that was the first step in putting his life back together again. “Lunch.”

That night Kirk went home at the same hour that everybody else did, but he went straight to his office and studied warp drive dynamics until past ten before he got himself something to eat. And then, instead of going to work on the explosion data, he sat in front of the vid and mindlessly watched a news channel until midnight, as if to prove to himself he could.

He went to sleep and woke earlier than usual the next morning, when dawn was still two hours away. He ran that day until he was exhausted, until the sweat had completely soaked his clothing, but he didn’t allow himself to think—or to feel—anything at all. Sweet bliss.
Still nothing from Golgotharen. He bleakly wondered what it would take to pry information from Versin. How much longer?

It was Friday, and on Friday evenings Commander Lori Ciani came to his house to help him with the data the two of them had worked on separately during the week. It hadn’t occurred to him until after his conversation with Bob that Friday was a traditional date night, when couples shared time and tested their compatibility. Hell. It had just been another day in the week to him. The days were all alike in space.

The computer announced her arrival that night and he went to let her in, feeling self-conscious in a way he hadn’t in all the weeks previously. Bob had forced the issue now.

The door swung open and Lori smiled at him. She was wearing a white turtleneck sweater that did nothing to hide her exceptional figure, along with elegant black pants and one of those stylishly-short swing jackets in black and white checks. She looked…spectacularly sexy, and she knew it.

“Good evening,” she said brightly.

“Hi,” he responded.

“I have something for you,” she said as she walked past him. Lori swung around and held out a small box she was carrying. “Surprise. Happy Birthday, Jim.”

He took the box gingerly, while protesting, “But my birthday was—”

“I know, more than a week ago. But I knew you wouldn’t want it acknowledged at the office, and we didn’t meet last Friday, so here’s my chance. Don’t worry, it won’t bite,” this said as he peered at the package and hefted it in his hand. “And it’s nothing inappropriate, either. Chocolate cake. Okay?”

Of course it was okay. How could he be offended? And she was right, he had definitely been in no mood to have his birthday celebrated at headquarters.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You are welcome,” she replied warmly as she relieved him of the box while handing him her jacket. “Will you hang this up for me? We can have some cake later, when we’ve finished up that first correlation you compmailed me about, okay? I’ll put it in the kitchen.”

She casually reset his security system by tapping the code into the datapad on the wall, then went directly to the kitchen and did whatever it was that needed doing. He was left to stand in the entranceway and wonder when and how she’d become so comfortable in his home. It was his fault. He was the one who’d said their work sessions should be held here, instead of at headquarters, or the local library, or anyplace else. Going to ground where he felt safe and in control, he suddenly understood. But now Lori was at ease and familiar here…and he wondered what her expectations were after all this time. What exactly did this birthday cake mean?

He’d never been one to suffer uncertainty when he could act to dispel it. He dumped the coat on the nearest chair and strode into the kitchen, where she’d arranged two plates and cutlery for their own personal celebration.

It wasn’t so much that he reached for her as that he was moving forward and she was turning away from the counter. Too close, and so he grabbed her elbows and held her at that distance—not too far, not too intimate. She looked up into his eyes with, he recognized too late, a combination of expectation and delight.
“No, Lori,” he said gently.

Sophisticated woman that she was, she instantly changed her reaction to one of artful playfulness. “What? You don’t like cake? I knew I should have gotten a pie in—”

He shook her just a little, in affection that he knew was genuine. And he wanted to be genuine with her, honest. “I…don’t deserve this. And I don’t know that I have anything to give you in return.”

She regarded him soberly then, and in silence he endured her penetrating perusal. Yes, he knew the scent of her perfume by now, sweet and very heavy. She didn’t wear it in the office, only on Friday nights when they brought their heads together over computer displays. The stairway to the upstairs bedrooms was over her shoulder, within his line of sight, and he knew with certainty that he was not ready to take that trip upstairs with her. Much better to remain downstairs, where all his hopes that centered on Vulcan were still intact.

Finally she spoke. “Your friendship, Jim. That’s all I’m asking. We can be—”

“Friends. That’s all I’ve got right now.”

“And that’s an improvement.”

Startled, he asked, “Have I been that bad?”

“I understand,” she soothed. “It would be different if Spock had died, but this separation is so much worse. Not knowing if he’ll ever be back or what’s going to happen to him. Of course it’s taken you some time to adjust and decide what to do.”

He released his hold on her. Is that what she thought this evening represented, his decision about what to do?

Lightly, he turned on the charm. “I’ll go so far as to eat that cake with you, Commander, but no further. Understand?”

She responded with an impish grin that produced two glorious dimples. “Understood, Commodore.”

But he wondered if she really did.

They labored over their figures, their lists, and their speculations all evening. Though they focused on motive and opportunity, always in the back of Kirk’s mind lingered many other unanswered questions. What were the common elements between the attacks? If the perpetrators could manipulate matter, as it seemed to him that they could, then why weren’t the attacks more ferocious, more decisive? Was the unsolved death of Representative Pren’felit linked to these events or was it only a tragic coincidence?

Abruptly his fist slapped into his palm.

“What is it?” Lori asked as he got up and paced around the confines of his office.

“Nothing. Just…. How can they do this? So much death and destruction.” He gestured towards the stacks of disks and printouts on his desk. “It’s easy to think of this as only a problem to be solved, but these were people who died. People with lives to live, other people who loved them, people who died in agony and for no reason at all. It’s important to remember that.”

Somberly, she said, “I remember Neari’lon.”
“And Pren’felit,” he added. “Whoever killed him had a sick mind, breaking off his antennae like that. Remember who we’re dealing with, Lori. I’d bet money that wasn’t an isolated incident.” And neither was the attack on Spock.

He took his seat by the computer again. “Now, let’s check out the correlation coefficients for file seventeen.”

Eventually Lori said that it was time for cake and suggested that they eat in front of the newly-installed fireplace. She settled on the floor, gracefully folding her legs beneath her, and putting her plate on the new coffee table. Kirk watched her making herself so comfortable, so artfully sexy, and he wisely took one of the wingback chairs across from her.

“And Pren’felit,” he added. “Whoever killed him had a sick mind, breaking off his antennae like that. Remember who we’re dealing with, Lori. I’d bet money that wasn’t an isolated incident.”

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“Someday,” Lori said, “you need to actually light a fire in this fireplace. Why else did you have it installed?”

So he could see the light playing across the planes of his lover’s face. He thought about how Lori would look in the flickering light, too.

The cake was delicious, as he knew it would be. He doubted she’d baked it herself, but Commander Lori Ciani did many things well. She wouldn’t be any good on a starship on active duty, but she made an excellent administrator. And he couldn’t deny that she’d been invaluable in his night-time investigations about Paris.

She took a petite bite and swallowed. There were sacrifices to be made for her figure, he knew. “I found out what I could about that Machar fellow. The photo journalist.”

“And?”

“He isn’t on Johnson’s payroll. He isn’t on any official Eternist payroll at all.”

“Both Randy and his cousin said he was. They should know.”

“I don’t think so. Of course, I could be wrong, but according to what I discovered he’s taken a position with a hydroelectric energy firm in Lima.”

That made Kirk sit forward, the plate forgotten on his knees. “That doesn’t make any sense. He doesn’t have any expertise in that technology.”

“It didn’t look like he does. But then again, we don’t know everything about him. Or maybe they just needed someone to take pictures for their company brochure.”

He contemplated that for a long minute.

“Going to alert Commander Giotto to this one?”

“I think so,” he said. “Machar was on Luna City with us.”

“I remember. So were a lot of other people.”

“But not at Federation Day.”

“I checked. He was in San Francisco.”

“Background?”

“Grew up in a collective village near Khartoum in northern Africa. That’s all I was able to get,”
she said apologetically. “I know I don’t have the skills you’re used to.”

He smiled at her suddenly, coming out of his abstraction. “That’s all right. You’re doing a good job.”

She smiled back, then cast a more demure gaze to the carpet. There were those dimples again, damn it.

He knew he’d made the right decision when he’d turned away from the opportunity presented to him in the kitchen, the opportunity accented by the way she had swayed within his grasp and the willingness he had seen in her eyes. But that was a decision, he suspected, that would need to be made more than once. Tonight he was aware of her as a woman in a way that he’d denied before, and that made him angry. He didn’t want to climb up out of the frozen depths of his suspended animation, where all things were still possible and his pain was just this far away from being real, but it seemed that time was doing it for him.

The two of them finished up their work past midnight, closed the computer, and walked without hurry towards the door. Kirk was acutely aware that now was the time when a man intent on a seduction, even a slow one that would span weeks or months, would reach for her and a kiss. There were many forms of friendship.

She plucked her jacket from the chair with a reproachful look but no comment. “Good-night, Jim.”

He took it from her and held it for her to shrug into. “We made good progress tonight. Thanks. And for the cake, too.”

She was buttoning up but paused with her hands over her chest. “You deserve that, you know. You are a very special man.” And before he could stop her, she went up on her tiptoes and gave him a kiss on his cheek. “Just between friends,” she whispered, and her breath lingered against his skin.

Then she was tripping easily down towards her ’car, and he watched her drive away.

“Lights off,” he said as he walked through the living room, and the first floor was plunged into darkness. Slowly he climbed the stairs, his hand gripping the rail as if he didn’t have the energy to ascend, until he stood at the top of the stairway. The house was very quiet around him, and all his limbs felt heavy.

Too heavy, with too much emotion in every sinew. Everybody expected him to be emerging from the shadows now, ready to resume a vigorous and rewarding life, but instead he felt…almost the way he’d felt when the bond had been broken, the victim of a hurt as real as a shattered arm or leg. As if it had formed and been torn yet again when Golgotharen had pulled Spock into its secretive maw.

He drew in a deep, fortifying breath. He’d been able to get over the broken bond when it had happened, and he would find a way to get past the layers of sadness that engulfed him now. He had to.

Mechanically Kirk went through his bedtime routine: undressing, washing, brushing, pissing. The bed was soft and inviting for his aching heart, and he laid himself down with a sigh and clenched his eyelids so tightly that small sparks of light erupted. They were stars in a velvet blackness, where he and Spock had traveled through space in the arms of their Lady.

He relaxed his eyes so that the light faded and only darkness remained, the darkness between stars. It was time.
He skimmed the tips of his fingers across his exposed chest but didn’t linger there. He’d waited too long and his cock was already hard and demanding his touch. With an impatient grunt he hooked his thumbs in his briefs and got rid of them by the side of the bed. The cool air on his genitals felt good. His fingers wrapped around his hardness.

If only he could make this last. He wanted it to last, for him to be able to make love to himself the way that Spock had sometimes made love to him: taking his time, lingering, making each caress count and investing them with devotion, slowly bringing his arousal up from the depths until his cock wept, so that his heels dug into the bedclothes and his body arched with wanting and he gasped out, Spock, let me come!

But he couldn’t do that for himself. There were some things only Spock could do for him, since he wouldn’t let another lover into his life. Would he?

His hand still on his cock, Kirk rolled over with dissatisfaction. God, what was he thinking? Four months might seem like a long time to Randy, to Bob, to Lori, and it had seemed an eternity to him, but he was prepared to wait a lot longer than that for Spock to come home.

*Be honest with yourself. How much of your instant excitement tonight is because you’ve worked the past hours with that beautiful, sexy woman who smells so good?*

He refused to feel ashamed. Spock would understand exactly how it came to be, if they ever spoke, if they ever merged with each other’s minds again….

_Fool!_ He rolled over again, this time to his other side, facing the curtained windows he wouldn’t lift his eyes to see. Face facts, Bob had said. And that meant acknowledging, really acknowledging that Spock probably wasn’t coming back, probably wouldn’t survive with his personality intact, probably wouldn’t be in that forty percent who were cured, might be one of those who retired to the desert, emotionless, perfect, empty, or he might die, might be dead right now with a message from Sarek winging across the emptiness of space to tell him. _Your former bond partner died on Stardate 5702.9…._

No.

Odd, how Golgotharen communications used the term bond partner and not bondmate. He supposed it was too emotion-laden, but he much preferred bondmate. There was something intimate about it. Arousing. The two who mated minds and bodies. How he wanted to touch Spock’s body again. His long, knowing fingers. The ruched skin of the chenesi at the small of his back. The softness of his lover’s inner thighs, and how Spock shivered when kissed there. The sweet, delicate skin at the tip of his lover’s tongue, at the tip of his penis.

Looking into Spock’s eyes.

*See me.*

“Bondmate,” he whispered into the quiet air, a declaration and a summons, and as he rolled onto his back his hand worked against his stiffness. The first thrills of sensation centered all his physical awareness there. “Uhn.” He was the want-to-be, the former, the almost bondmate of Spock of Vulcan, and they had shared…not enough. Not enough years, not enough days, and never enough of Spock. He was the dissatisfied commodore who missed his lover like withered flowers missed rain. He had bloomed beneath Spock’s hand, as he knew that he had released some special beauty in Spock’s soul that would have never been expressed without him.

“Come back,” he whispered, as he leaked pre-cum that slicked his fingers. _Oh, God, please come_
back.

Come back so that he could hear Spock’s velvet voice again.

*Speak to me.*

He caught his breath as his thumb teased his urethral slit and swirled the slickness around. So good. Soon, soon.

Come back so that he could tell Spock all his frustrations and have the one who understood him more than anybody else help put his life into perspective.

*Listen to me.*

He was in the rhythm now. Stroke, stroke, up, down, his left hand cradling his balls and rolling them in their tightening sacs, and it felt so damn good.

Come back so that he could run his fingers across the beloved face, up over Spock’s angled cheekbones and along the wondrous curve of his ears, then to the soft skin at the side of his neck. Place the palm of his hand there and feel the thrumming of life-giving blood. And Spock’s hands would be on him, those strong, long fingers running around his waist and then down to cup his ass, and as they were pressed so close together their mouths would find each other and they would fall into a kiss and breathe from each other’s lives.

*Touch me.*

He wanted to stop, to make it last so much longer, but there was no way he could stop jerking to just under his flared-out cockhead, to where he had that sensitive spot, oh, Orion’s hells, right there, yes. His neck muscles tensed and he lifted his pelvis that little bit, then down against the mattress to shove up again through his thrumming hand, now moving so fast.

Oh, yes, he wanted Spock to come back! Come back so he could take Spock in his arms and feel the heat radiating from his body, sexual heat they ignited between them, and then tumble him into the bed and they’d push full-length against each other, one cock against the other, each needing, moving, pressing, kissing, fucking.

*Make love with me! Fuck me! Let me fuck you!*

Only a few seconds left, that unmistakable rush of sensation was already building and his balls were tight in his other hand. He jammed his heels into the bed and arched up, pulling furiously and heaving in short, scattered breaths, working his mouth around his soulmate’s name, but what came out was:


The worst part of solitary sex was the lonely aftermath.

Kirk opened his eyes to a blank ceiling that looked gray in the dimness of the room. It seemed very far away, as if he were in a deep well gazing up. The arousal that had consumed him a minute ago seemed like nothing in his sadness now.

He missed Spock, and he was beginning to comprehend that he might miss him for the rest of his life. The proud, confident words he’d said to his lover, about just wanting him to be alive on Vulcan, that it would be enough for Kirk if he knew that somewhere Spock lived…. What a joke. What a distorted reflection of what he really wanted.
It wasn’t going to happen, was it?

It was Spock’s mind that was killing him, not his body, and nobody had been able to restore the mind arts to him. Now Kirk allowed himself to wonder if it ever would happen, despite Gri-Ta’s speculation that it could. He’d been hanging on to that speculation for a long time, on her supposition that somewhere inside Spock he had protected the essence of Kirk and their fledgling bond. And if only the essence of Kirk could be found, there would also be the bond…and everything else Spock needed to be a whole and healthy Vulcan. They would be able to touch again, the way it really counted, soul to soul.

No, with his lover’s body shut down, distant, disintegrating, that wasn’t going to happen. The odds, as Spock had so often quoted to him when they were on the ship, were against them. And this time there was absolutely nothing Kirk could do to affect those odds, to manipulate events and force the conclusion he wanted. Needed.

Maybe it really was time to face things the way they were.

His hand was sticky with his emission. Time was, Spock would lick him clean.

Sighing, Kirk fumbled behind him to the headboard, trying to find by feel the container of wipes he kept there. Instead, his fingers bumped against the forcefield they kept around the crystal hyacinths.

He remembered….

The very first time he had melded with Spock, long before they were lovers and practically before they had recognized they could be friends, when he had scented the heavy fragrance of the flowers within their mental joining. To Kirk, the hyacinths outside his mother’s back door, from his childhood, had always represented springtime, new beginnings, and the infinite possibilities he intended to convert into a rewarding life. He hadn’t really known why such a perfume was present when his first officer’s fingers reached to join their minds, but he had accepted it as part of the experience.

Potential. Partially realized when they had acknowledged their passion for each other. He’d expected a lifetime of potential realized as they lived the years together.

And he wasn’t going to give up on that dream now. Not now and not in the future. Kirk sat up in the darkness and aggressively grabbed at the wipes set to the side of the crystal sculpture. He lifted his limp shaft so he could thoroughly clean all around it, and then he threw the used towelette across the room. Damn it, no, he wasn’t going to give up. Four months was not, after all, a very long time.

*****

At oh three hundred and thirteen hours, the computer awakened him with a loud chime and the announcement, “There is an incoming message from Shikahr on Vulcan.”

He didn’t even think before he ran, naked and afraid, to the comm set in the desk in Spock’s office. “Computer, display message.”

The message read:

To: Commodore James T. Kirk, Starfleet Command
From: Sarek, house of Surak, Shikahr
Forwarded from: Versin Z’mastlzpz, Golgotharen
Stardate 5702.9
The condition of Spock Xtmpsqzntwlfb remains unchanged.
He had said his good-byes, to whom he knew not, and he had expected to be extinguished. The excruciating, painful weight pushed on him, squeezing him down, down, and down some more, until he was a compressed point of almost-nothing. He wanted to die. To blink out. But for some reason he did not understand, he endured, like some Atlas with all the weight of the universe on his shoulders, although chanting to himself how he could not continue. But he did. Somehow, he did hold on.

i cannot! he gasped. Innumerable times. i cannot!

This was not existing. He didn’t know anything, not who he was, not where he was, not even why he insisted on not giving up. Although, when the pressure would ease long enough for him to take an anguished breath, he knew that enduring was good. Somewhere, he found the realization that he had great strength of will, and he could endure much. He wanted to scream at that thought, to rant at it and deny it…but he could not. It was truth. Continuing to endure meant looking directly into the face of pain and hopelessness. What had he to hope for, he-who-does-not-know-himself or any others?

And then a ghost of a memory, saying *Try not to forget me.*

i am trying. trying. trying not to give up.

But it was so hard.

cannot
cannot
cannot

He knew that time passed but he had no way of measuring it. On and on and on…until finally he said

i cannot

and he meant it.

There were no reserves of energy left. Whatever it was that had been fueling his desperate desire for continued awareness was exhausted. Sadness engulfed him; he had failed.

Good-bye, he whispered again to whatever it was that was outside of himself. And he felt himself slipping slowly, inexorably away, like an electron being pulled into the maw of a black hole.

And in those final suspended moments, as the particle that was all of him hovered just short of the event horizon, a brilliant light shone in on his darkness. He threw up his arm to shield his eyes. The light came to him from above, emerging from a clear-cut circle. The spotlight defined for him, for the first time, the limits of his place-of-being. So much larger than he had believed….

But as he watched, something emerged from the circle. The tip of a finger, as if he were underwater
and watching someone dip a finger into a pond. Then the whole finger, other fingers, and the rest of a hand. A masculine hand, giving the definite impression of strength and purpose. Then, part of the forearm emerged. Fascinated and caught by the sight, he watched, but the rest of the being did not appear. The fingers curled. Beckoned.

As he observed, the disembodied hand blurred and, it seemed to him, changed into a different form. Still a hand, but broader, with shorter fingers, and no dark hairs on the back. But the transformation could not be maintained, and soon the vision returned to the original one and stayed that way. Summoning him.

He hovered for a time—less than a dranath—knowing that he would hurtle to sure destruction if he didn’t move…. He reached up and took the hand. Fingers closed around his wrist with satisfaction and pulled him up, and up, and up….  

*****

He tried three times to open his eyelids before he managed to accomplish the task. They were so heavy. All his limbs felt heavy.

A face hovered close above him, half a meter away. It filled his blurred vision. A face that he knew he had never seen before, and yet it still seemed familiar. More than familiar, well-known. Dark hair swept to the side, and there were pointed ears and sharp, knowing eyes. Square-jawed. He did not know this man, and yet he felt he did.

His voice would not obey him. So difficult even to continue to look. But he tried to say “Who?” Only an airy breath came out.

“Do not be concerned, Spock,” the man said. “I will answer your questions in time. Now, your task is to recover. You should sleep.”

Sleep? When he had just emerged from a dark cave where he’d been imprisoned and tortured? He did not want to.

But the man shook his head. “No, my friend. I insist.” There was a rustle of cloth and movement outside of Spock’s range of vision, then suddenly a hand appeared, reaching for him. The same hand that he had seen….

The ghost of a smile was in the man’s eyes as his fingers settled on Spock’s face. “For you, brave one,” and Spock did not know if he wished to pant in distress or delight as he felt the mental contact that indicated their minds were merging. No! Yes! Yes! Yes!

His eyes squeezed shut as he could not endure the additional sensory input. Against his skin, the fingers moved in an undoubted caress, and that caress was echoed within their minds.

He heard himself groan. After all he had endured…so good. So good!

//it is good// the man soothed. //experience it. this will be here for you now and later. i will not let you slip back into the depths again; i will stand guard. for now, this is enough. more would overwhelm you. you should sleep. sleep.//

He could not resist the command, although he wanted to. He wanted to spend eternity here in the
meld with this unnamed person who gave him what he needed. Wanted. But it was impossible to resist. He took one thought with him into slumber.

He did not know much about himself, but this one called him Spock. His name was Spock. Identity out of the long darkness.

*****

The next awakening, he was alone and spent a full hour staring around him before he attempted to sit up. When he did, the small effort exhausted him. There was a tube running up into his arm, another one that catherized his naked body, but he did nothing to disturb them. Spock fell back against the pillow, knowing that he had been very ill. He slept again.

The second day was better. He sat up almost immediately, although he was incapable of swinging his legs over the side of the bed. A male Vulcan appeared in the doorway of the alcove; his was an unfamiliar form.

“Spock Xtmprsqzntwlfb, greetings. I am attendant Shon, and I will assist you today.”

Shon made him lie down again, but then he removed the sheet that had been covering Spock’s body and rubbed him with a fragrant lotion. The man did not massage but applied the moisture lightly. His hands were gentle and kind. Even so, the action was painful. All of Spock’s muscles and joints ached.

He cleared his throat and managed to say, “Why?” This time the word was intelligible.

“You’re skin is very dry. I have been moisturizing it for you. Did you know that you have a most distinctive scar right here, on your left knee? It’s a relatively recent mark, and I’ve been wondering what could have made it.”

Spock did not know what he was talking about. He knew nothing about his body. He wished Shon would finish and go away.

But instead the attendant wrapped him in another sheet and instructed the bed to elevate at the head, so that Spock was able to sit without effort. And then he provided a small cup of water with a straw protruding from the top. “Only one sip,” he cautioned. “Your stomach won’t be able to handle more.”

Spock carefully followed directions. He found it difficult to suck, difficult to swallow, but he did get a small mouthful of water down. He could feel it travel along his esophagus and into his stomach. Most uncomfortable.

“I think you’re tired now. Why not rest? Healer Deverans won’t be here until later.”

So tired. He closed his eyes and slept. He awakened twice more for short periods of time, and Shon was there each time to give him water and talk to him, although nothing he said seemed of importance. Spock offered him few words.

When he awakened the fourth time, it was night. He could make the deduction because of the light that had previously fallen in the corridor outside the archway. Before, there had been the suns’ light, although he had not consciously noticed it. Now, the shadows of dusk and starlight. Perhaps T’Khut would rise later.

He lay quietly, feeling as if he did not have any desires that were not fulfilled. He existed. He apparently was alive. But...he had experienced something extraordinary. The touch of another’s
mind.

Or perhaps that had been a dream. He was not even sure why such an event was so important. Restlessly, his legs stirred, although he stopped that immediately because he was so sore. Nevertheless, he played his memory over and over, as a miser might contemplate his most precious ingot of gold. The sensual sliding of one consciousness against another had been most gratifying.

Startled, he glanced along the length of his sheet-covered body. In the dim room light that mimicked night, he was able to see the meager stirring of his penis as he thought of the joining. And he felt the awakening of sensitized nerve endings, meant to convey physical pleasure but awkwardly constricted because of the catheter. He was aroused by his memories and was confused by that reaction. Was that right, to associate mental contact with intimate sexual union?

It was easy to quell his reaction; the catheter limited it at any rate. Memories came to him instead of how it had been to be trapped for so long. The crushing loneliness. The pain. His remembering was so real that he felt his shoulders begin to ache, and his respiration increased in reaction. He tried to push the images away. There was no logic in recalling such a painful time. But then as his eyes closed, he wondered if the memory had been a dream, or if instead it was the experience in this white-washed room that was unreal…. After many minutes of confused reflection, he drifted on the edge of sleep.

“Spock Xtmprsqzntwlfb.”

The voice was definitely real, warm and low and inviting. Friendly. Spock forced his eyes open as he felt the dip of the mattress by his hip. Someone—the square-jawed man—was sitting on his bed.

The man held up the familiar hand. “There is no need to speak. You are weary and should rest. But before you do, I believe you need something that I can give you.”

It was impossible to control the jump of his heart and the glad anticipation that instantly arose. Spock stared at the hovering hand, and he realized that the hesitation meant something. Permission was being asked.

“Yes,” he hissed.

The man nodded gravely and then said, “My name is Deverans Mashtlevtlns, son of T’Nar and Solan. I am a healer. Do not fear.”

Fear? He feared nothing but that the meld would be withheld.

Deverans reached with both hands to the points on Spock’s face. As each finger settled, Spock felt the spark between them ignite, and he eagerly arched up for more.

//slowly//

//but…// his words were halting even here. //i need.//

//and you will have. see? here. and here. slowly, slowly. take what you need. i give it to you.//

Indeed, he could not have prevented himself from accepting the glowing congress that Deverans offered, that was so kindly laid over him like a blanket placed over a person shivering in the cold, with concern, with satisfaction that distress could be eased. First one contact point was initiated, and then another, delicately, gradually, and completely under the healer’s immense control. Spock could only hungrily wait for each to be given to him and then allow the…the pleasure to wash over him as greater and greater connection was established. He sighed and knew that in the outer world
his own hands, bony-thin and dry and needful, rested heavily on the forearms of the one who had come to give him this bounty. He clutched at them to maintain the contact that he needed so much. It was shameful, how he needed, but he could not deny it. Or the pleasure.

//yes, pleasure, my friend. it is not wrong to acknowledge it here, where two merge into one.//

Somewhere, the hazy memory formed that he knew what pleasure was like and had experienced it in full measure. Firmly, Deverans directed his attention away from that recollection.

//later. all will be answered in its time. for now, only the here and now. you and i, and how we are together giving you life again.//

This was life? This hunger satisfied?

//and more. you will know life, for i perceive that your personality emerged intact from t’kah’s treatment. this pleases me. for now, though, you have had enough. keep what you have, my friend, and sleep.//

Deverans began the withdrawal, although Spock’s arms in the outer world tensed in denial. But he experienced the healer’s amusement and his lingering, wistful hope that someday, in the fullness of his strength, perhaps his patient might be able to control the meld.

For now, Spock would protest no longer. Deverans had said there would be more. He slept.

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Twice more over the next two nights, Deverans came to him, awakening him from slumber with the touch of his fingers. Each time afterwards when Spock awokened in the morning, he was able to do more with his body and saw his small world with more perceptive eyes. This, he knew without asking, was the result of their joinings.

On the fourth day, Shon the attendant removed the catheter and other tube and draped Spock’s nakedness in a knee-length, one-piece garment that went easily over his head. He allowed Spock to sit with his legs over the side of the bed.

“Do not try to do too much today. Perhaps just stay where you are.”

But Spock would have none of this caution. He stood on shaky legs and willed them to take him across the room to the chair waiting for him. Shon watched him with critical eyes and said, when he finally sat down heavily, “I do not think any of the healers expected you to be able to do that. You surprise everyone here. Except maybe Deverans.” And he made a notation on the screen set into the wall next to the bed.

This would be the day of his liberation, Spock resolved. He would stand and walk and eat and learn more of this place. It occurred to him that he did not know exactly where he was, and so he asked, “Where am I?” He was talking more to Shon each day.

“The Golgotharen Institute.”

But those words meant nothing to Spock, and, besides, he was planning how to use his remaining energy to get up from this padded chair and begin his round of exploration.

He didn’t get far that day. After many hours of rest and wrangling with his attendant, he made it to the entrance of his room that opened to a hall with little traffic. He leaned heavily against the side of the door and looked to the left. The corridor was floored with squares of white laminate, and the
walls were a soothing pale green. Here and there he could see other archways that must lead to rooms for...more patients? Yes, that must be the correct conclusion. He was a patient in some sort of hospital facility, of course. A woman in a long violet dress came out of a room and disappeared around a corner. It was very quiet.

To the right was a window. His was the last alcove along the hall. Spock knew that he was testing the limits of his energy, even with the watchful Shon at his elbow, but he could not possibly retreat to the bed for the day without seeing outside the window. He pushed himself off from the doorjamb and approached it.

How disappointing. The window was nothing of the sort, only a disguised projection screen. It showed that the suns were low in the vermilion sky, shining over a small grove of low-growing trees. Haltonin trees, with wide seven-lobed red leaves and dark brown branches. They produced an appealing perfume when the flowers bloomed, and were otherwise prized for their ability to grow almost anywhere on the planet, in harsh conditions or at the average Vulcan household. This could be a picture of...anywhere from the planet. He could be anywhere. Golgotharen?

Spock turned away and staggered back to his bed, breathing heavily, wishing he could shrug off Shon's supporting hand but knowing he needed the help.

"You are physically distressed," Shon observed. "Perhaps tomorrow you will listen to my advice and not go so far."

Indeed not. Spock intended to stride along that hallway tomorrow and see where it led. He rested against his pillow and asked, "Will there be food?"

Shon elaborately assented. "Yes. You are ready for food. But only a little, as your system has been shut down for so long."

How long? Spock wondered. The question was ready to be formed by his tongue, but the pause that always occurred before speech could happen allowed him to reconsider. This was one question. Surely he had more? Yes, suddenly he had many more. It would be more logical to form them in the proper order, rather than randomly inquiring of this man throughout the day. And, then, there was Deverans....

Shon allowed him a mouthful of soft cereal that was usually fed to children, old people about to give up their katras, and the very ill. Spock accepted the food fed to him in a spoon and swallowed it, but now he wondered why he had been so ill. What was wrong with him? That was another question.

Shon prepared him for sleep with another application of the lotion. The process was not nearly as painful as it had been initially, and Spock lay quietly on his stomach under the man's ministrations. The attendant's concentration on his leg muscles was most soothing, but in contrast Spock's mind was awhirl.

He was aware that all was not as it seemed to be. The window that really wasn't a window had triggered these thoughts. In particular, he was not what he seemed to be. There was...more. More to himself. More to life than the satisfaction of his hungers. He knew...almost nothing.

A few days ago when he had awakened, even yesterday, this realization would not have bothered him. Now it did.

Shon gave a last pat to his left ankle and then skimmed lightly up the length of both legs before resting his hands on Spock's buttocks. Spock tensed as he felt the competent fingers start to rub in
the lotion.

“No,” Spock said as clearly as he could with his face against the pillow. He lifted his head and enunciated again. “No. Not there.”

The usually loquacious and self-assured Shon hesitated. “As you wish, Spock. I am a medical professional, however, and you need not—”

“I prefer not to be touched there.” To his surprise, the words came out fluidly. “You have not the right.”

“And you have the right to say it,” Shon said mildly. “I will comply with your wishes.”

Spock attempted to turn over, but he did not have the strength, he found to his frustration. Shon had to help him, and when he was over, the attendant carefully draped the sheet over Spock’s genitals before continuing with the rub-down.

Spock lay in silence, enduring the contact that confused him. There was something about it…. Yes, the sexual connotations. But he was not aroused now, he had not the energy. Something else teased. A memory? More of himself that he had abruptly understood was not yet whole?

He could not bring any images up from the depths, only vague disquiet. The determination to get well as quickly as possible filled him again. He would walk easily, as Shon did. He would eat to sustain his body without effort. He would attempt a fuller connection at night.

The attendant was still rubbing him, now on his shoulders, and Spock focused on his face that was necessarily very close. “I meant no offense.”

“All is silence within the family…and at Golgotharen,” said Shon. Apparently the words were a quotation of some sort.

The attendant left after helping him into something new, a two piece garment of light brown with a drawstring around the waist. “For sleeping in,” Shon said. “We will get you some real clothes tomorrow.”

Spock lay in the darkness, and because of his exertions during the day he fell asleep almost immediately, when he had intended to indulge himself with anticipation of what he was sure would come.

He was right. He was awakened in the middle of the night by the dipping of the mattress as Deverans sat next to him and by feather-light fingers against his temples, asking.

“Greetings to you, Spock Xtmprsqzntwlfb.” The deep voice came quietly. “Peace and long life. May I have your thoughts?”

Just the words sent a thrill through him, straight down his front from his neck to his groin. How he wanted this. Not only because he knew the meld was the fuel for his recovery. Not because he was determined to go much further tonight. But because the touch of Deverans’ mind was exquisite. It was as if he knew exactly where to stroke Spock: what soreness needed healing and what should be avoided. He blossomed under this healer’s expertise, as if he were stretching his limbs one by one, night after night, and finding them whole and healthy. Yes, he wanted to be whole and healthy again…although he did not know why he might not have been before.

“Yes,” Spock whispered as he had whispered each other night, only this time with a tinge of embarrassment because of the pleasure he anticipated.
Deverans, within the joining so quickly, caught the emotion. //there is no shame in what we do together. i will do all i can to help you.//

//i accept your help// was all Spock managed before he was swept away in the full tide of mental contact. He never wanted to leave it, always tried to prevent its ending, and now he opened himself up to it fully. For a while he floated, only good surrounding him and not bothering to suppress his delight, soaking up the very molecules around him and knowing he was healing.

//like lifting my face to the suns// Spock reflected.

//like contentment within a bond// Deverans agreed.

//like repletion after sexual intercourse.// Spock did not know where that idea came from, but he knew it was true. He had often felt this boneless satisfaction after love-making.

Amusement from his thought-partner. //yes. i agree with you; i have felt the same. we mimic the body’s union here.//

//but not…entirely. i have much further to go, have i not?//

A wisp of sadness. //yes. we continue therapy until the linkages re-animate. this is but preliminary to the great task that we must achieve if you are to live. but you have had enough for tonight.//

//wait. i have questions.//

//not now, my friend. even you must rest after such exertion.//

//but….// Dissatisfaction. A desire not to remain where he was, but to stretch, to explore, to go further than Deverans wanted him to go. To find something—someone?—he had not yet found.

//no. you are too weak. and you do not yet know the way.//

Spock looked beyond himself, the first time he had done so. He determined //there. i would go there.// And he was suddenly a considerable distance from Deverans' presence, as if stepping into another room where all the walls were at unequal angles and where the floor rose and fell like moving waves under his feet. As he struggled to regain his equilibrium, he recognized that he might have made a mistake….

But then Deverans was there, rushing close and forcing a more intimate contact in order to support him in his disorientation. As if they were skin to skin. Spock leaned against him and the world settled. The mental embrace, for that was what it was, felt very good, and Spock knew that Deverans was also forcing stillness on them both so that they could experience it together.

//ahhhhh// from the healer.

//i do not know if this is…//

//remember, i said that there is no shame in what we do here. it is natural between us.//

//too quickly….//

//how can what is—what is already there—come too quickly? you and i, see the affinity. our minds hold one another. we are compatible.//

//i…see.// It was true. It would be illogical to deny what was obvious before him.
And now his reserves of energy were truly exhausted. Spock looked around to remember how far he had gone, to make sure he went further the next time, and he did not protest as Deverans began the withdrawal.

//you may ask your questions soon, spock. but for now, sleep.//

Spock slept, and when he awakened late that morning deep contentment suffused his thoughts and all his bones, as if he had, indeed, indulged in love-making with a most beloved partner. But as he came to full wakefulness, he realized that was not true, for Deverans was not his partner. Try as he might, Spock could not conjure up a different face or a different name.

Spock heard the sound of Shon’s footsteps coming closer, and so he changed his frowning expression into calm normality. He did not wish to be seen as uncontrolled…except, inevitably, within the meld with the healer, where all was laid bare.

Shon brought with him real clothing—underclothing, a pair of linen pants, and a soft, pullover, short-sleeved tunic that would fall in draping folds over his hips—but before he allowed Spock to dress, he insisted on another massage. “You’ll be too busy today for one,” he predicted, “and too tired afterwards. I know you better now, Spock Xtmprsqzntwlf. You’re one of those who could never stay on your own land. You’d always go off exploring.”

Spock did not know if the attendant was correct, but he had a feeling he was.

Shon continued, “So unless you want all your skin to flake off”—surely that was an exaggeration; he was dry but not to that extent—“you’d better let me take care of this now.”

Nodding in agreement, Spock removed his sleeping garments with some help, and he rolled over onto his stomach and pillowed his face on his folded arms. Shon started by warming the lotion with his hands and then applying it to his upper back. The force he used brought out a grunt or two from Spock; each time the action on his body became somewhat more vigorous.

More footsteps padding along the hallway caught Spock’s attention, and he wondered who else was housed here with him, and he anticipated exploring later that day. But the footsteps came closer and closer, and since there were no other rooms past his own, Spock glanced at the doorway over his shoulder.

Deverans, seen for the first time in the daylight, walked into the alcove, all seriousness, with nothing of the amused playfulness that sometimes had surfaced between them in the joining. His shoes were soft moccasins, his clothing a nondescript black shirt and pants, but he carried himself with a quiet authority that seemed…quite familiar to Spock. It was pleasing to look upon a man who was competent in his being and knew it, but who did not need to exercise force to prove it.

“Greetings, Shon. Peace and long life to you,” Deverans said with a nod of his head.

“And to you, Healer.”

“I wish to talk privately with our patient. You may leave, and I will administer breakfast and dress Spock. Return in one wadan.”

“As you say.” Shon bowed, wiped his hands on a towel, and left without another word.

“Remain where you are, Spock. There is no need to get up for me.”

Spock subsided to his less than respectful—or dignified—position. But he felt somewhat gratified that Deverans had not attempted to put their relationship in the physical world on a different level
than the intimacy that existed between them in the melds. It felt right, comfortable, to stay where he was, even if he had to twist to see the healer, who was now up by the small table next to the head of the bed. “You are here to answer my questions,” Spock guessed.

“Some of them,” the healer agreed as he coated his fingers and palms with lotion. “After last night’s experience, I deemed it important that I do so. Had Shon just begun this procedure?”

“That is correct,” Spock said, and he felt the sure, long strokes of Deverans’ hands on his back.

“It is important that we continue to moisturize your skin and stimulate your muscles. We will allow you to walk as much as you wish. You suffered from immobility for too long.”

Spock drew in a breath as the man rubbed against his chenesi. Faint tendrils of electric sensation emanated from the organs that were usually stimulated during arousal. He had not noticed it when Shon had passed over them.

“Do not be disturbed by this reaction, my friend,” came the understanding voice from above him; the healer did not miss much. “A sexual reaction is an excellent sign that your body is truly recovering.”

He allowed the touch that soon went lower to his buttocks where Shon was not permitted access. Although he toyed with the idea of also denying Deverans, the words did not quite come to his mouth.

Deverans broke the silence between them. “Relax.”

It was not too difficult to do so. Deverans’ hands on him were as comfortable as his presence in the room or in Spock’s mind. But there was still much he did not know.

“You say I have been immobile for too long. How long is that?”

“Eighteen full cintels. Or to use the Standard language with which you are accustomed, four months since you first entered this facility. There was more than another cintel before you came to us.”

Uneasiness filled him as he contemplated this answer. Parts of himself had been left behind for a considerable period of time.

“And what has caused my illness?”

Deverans was down by his ankles by now; he was much more brisk in his ministrations than the attendant had been. “You were attacked by a creature that was able to suppress morantz. The connections within your brain withered as a result, and eventually you entered a coma.” A quick slap to the sole of one foot. “I will help you turn over now, Spock.”

Spock could almost accomplish that maneuver himself, but it was easier with the strong, stabilizing hands of the healer. He exposed the naked, front part of himself with equanimity. They had shared their minds. Surely this minor intimacy of the body was less than that.

“I do not have memories of my illness, of this attack that you say occurred, nor of much else,” he said quietly. Deverans was applying the lotion in long squirts from the bottle to his palms before working it into Spock’s chest with capable fingers. “Why do I not remember?”

“Because of me,” Deverans said frankly.
Spock stared at his bowed head. “You?” He grasped Deverans’ upper arm, and the healer immediately acceded to his silent demand. He stepped back, pressing the slippery palms of his hands together before him.

“Yes. Me. I have suppressed your memories with a block that I established from our very first contact, the better for you to heal.”

Spock could not deny his surprise as, with some difficulty, he brought himself to a seated position without any assistance. He had considered Deverans a guaranteed friend, someone he could trust. Someone he trusted with his very essence. But he had no evidence for his supposition. The first meld had been forced on him; he’d been in no condition to resist. And the others: his need had driven him forward when he should have waited.

“Restore my memories,” he commanded, and he swung his legs over the side of the bed. How dare this healer presume to such power over him? He had thought the blank spaces of his past were a natural consequence of his illness.

What had he forgotten? He had a desperate need to know. “Restore them!”

The healer wiped his hands on a towel and then advanced to the bedside. He regarded Spock kindly. “Intentions are revealed when we are in the meld. Did you observe any malice in my actions?”

“I am not myself,” Spock said roughly. “I did not realize until last night that we were not indulging in full union. I cannot estimate the extent to which I am capable of joining with you.”

“At this point,” Deverans said quietly, “fourteen percent. There are some who did not think you would ever achieve that level, but I believe that we can go further. I am anticipating doing that. Aren’t you?”

Spock would not deny it. “Yes. You know my reaction. You see how I am eager for what you give me, like a small child.”

“No,” Deverans corrected, “not like a child at all. Like a strong man who has been denied his birthright for too long—and who has faced death with great courage.”

“And yet you refuse me my memories. Is not that a birthright?”

“Depending on your progress, it is possible that the blocks on your memories may be lifted sometime in the future. That is not entirely in my hands. But certainly it will not happen yet. You must trust me on this issue.”

Spock examined the man’s expressive face, fighting his surging emotions and attempting to remain calm. But how could he? The withholding of his memory was an unconscionable action—and very dangerous. He drew a breath at a disturbing possibility: something fundamental in him might be changed. Whenever his memories were released to him—and he would insist that they be released—would he be the same person as he had been before? He must be. That shadowy, barely perceived Spock-who-had-been: he had people to see, a life to live, promises he must keep, he knew that as he knew his blood must flow.

And yet…. Another part of his judgment told him that he should trust Deverans. There had been no malice in the meld. No. Instead there had been an uncommon affinity. They had fit together so well, and there had been a genuine match between their minds, as if they were long-time bondmates. Most beloved partners. His rocketing heart rate steadied. He swallowed deliberately as
an aid to control, yet continued to challenge the healer’s gaze with his own. Spock asked abruptly, “Do I have a bondmate?”

Deverans looked at him soberly. “No, my friend, you do not.”

He took that in. Again, contrasting reactions. That answer felt—not quite correct. But should he not accept Deverans’ words as truth? He had no evidence to the contrary. Specifically, he had evidence that what Deverans said was likely true: could he have so wholeheartedly entered into their melds otherwise? Enjoyed them, needed them as much as he did? The ephemeral memories of his body were nothing compared to the reaction of his mind.

“Do you have a bondmate?”

A sort of stillness came over the healer, and his words had meaning. “No, Spock, I do not at this time have a bond partner.”

So. That felt right. Deverans’ thoughts in his had been unfettered, now that he was able to examine the experiences they had shared more dispassionately. At least they were both free, and Spock indeed did not need to be concerned about any of the experiences they shared.

“I do not see,” Spock said, “how the suppression of my past can in any way aid in my healing at this time. Surely this cannot be standard procedure in a situation like mine.”

“There are no situations like yours,” the healer said bluntly. “Yours has been a most challenging case on which we have worked for a considerable length of time.”

“We?”

Deverans nodded. “Yes. There have been many healers gathered to give of their skills in an attempt to retrieve you from the darkness, Spock. And many of these learned men and women are of the opinion that it was an element from your past that caused or at least contributed to your disability. Therefore, it is only logical to withhold that which may cause you further harm. Nothing must impede our work.”

“Many,” Spock said slowly. “Are you included in that number?”

“I am not as experienced as the seniors who have stirred themselves to help you.”

“But?”

“I have seen what they fear, more intimately than they as I am the portal to your past. It is… unnatural to us, but I have never believed that a condition or person or event is necessarily harmful only because it is different. There can be beauty even in that which is not-Vulcan.”

Spock burned with the not-knowing. Not-Vulcan? Beauty? Unnatural? It was not right that this man should hold Spock’s essence when Spock himself knew nothing of what he was talking about.

“I do not trust the conclusions of those who judge me in this matter,” Spock said flatly, “but I do trust yours. Give me my memories. Give me this beauty you speak of.”

“I cannot. But I hear your request.”

“It is a demand.”

“I am your healer first before I am your friend, Spock, and I will restore your past when my
judgment tells me it would be best for you—and when the seniors instruct me to do so.”

“How can you call me friend when you obstruct my own will, my own self?”

Despite Spock’s obvious emotion, the healer maintained his equanimity. “I have been fascinated by you from the first time I read your file, well before I was assigned to your case. You are a most interesting being, Spock. Not only your many experiences, but who you are and how you have responded to those experiences.”

A wave of energy took over Spock’s limbs. The emotion he was bottling up manifested itself in strength that he used to stand and walk past the healer, eventually coming to face the blank wall. Like my past. He placed one hand flat on the wall, an aid to stability, a focus for his anger and frustration, an anchor in the physical world that was still newborn-fresh to him. With eyes cast down, he forced out, “I must put my trust in you, Healer Deverans MashtlevlNnts, because I do not have any other choice in this matter. But I fear.”

A rustle from the other side of the room as the healer came closer. “What do you fear, Spock Xtmprsqzntwlfb?”

He whispered, “That I have already lost myself.”

“I will help you find your most essential self.”

“And what if your judgment and mine on what is most essential are at odds?”

Suddenly he felt the healer’s fingers settling on one side of his face, and he turned in surprise. Always they had come together at night, on the edges of sleep. Now Deverans raised his other hand to rest lightly on the meld points, but without the spark of true contact. They stood, face to face, so close, and Spock felt his nakedness keenly.

“How can you and I be at odds?” the healer asked quietly. “I said it when we were within last night: our minds hold one another. We are uniquely compatible.”

“Yes,” Spock slowly acknowledged. “I do not understand this coincidence, but it is true.”

“Who is to question this reality? You. Me. The necessities of your treatment have brought us this. Brought us each other.”

And with the last word, Deverans initiated the meld between them again, and Spock was surrounded by the brightness of their joining, where nothing was hidden and truth glowed like gold.

//i pledge: i will not leave you bereft, spock.//

And just as suddenly it was gone. Deverans was smiling at him gently, and the tips of his competent, powerful fingers still rested on Spock’s skin.

“I should have anticipated this. A man such as yourself: you would not acquiesce lightly. But you must, Spock. Nothing must interfere with your recovery, including your past. I will not take that risk.”

Spock knew he must capitulate. Cor yhr mahr. What is, is. He had no power at this time and so must wait.

Deverans saw the decision in his eyes, and his smile deepened. So odd to see that expression on a
Vulcan…. Equally disturbing to be so physically close to the healer, their bodies less than a handspan apart….

“Friends?” Deverans asked.

“I will call you friend,” Spock agreed, and he slipped sideways away from the healer, away from the man’s touch and the warmth of his body that unsettled him, though whether in a good way or a bad one, he was not sure.

He reminded himself: they had no bondmates.

He raised his hand in the salute that came to his fingers naturally. “Peace to you, Deverans.”

“And to you, Spock.” Then, with a twinkle in the healer’s brown eyes, “While there are some benefits to a massage applied to an individual while standing, I do not believe we should attempt such an action at this time.”

He was being…teased, Spock realized.

He liked it. It felt familiar.

“I will recline,” he said with as much dignity as he could, and then he spoiled the effect by requiring help back to the bed. His lips thinned as he lay upon the mattress; he had so much strength to regain and such a long road ahead of him. And he would be unaccompanied by his past, his memories, by whoever the shadow-Spock had been.

But Deverans would be with him.

“After I finish applying this lotion, we will see if you can swallow a few more mouthfuls of the churitz.”

Deverans rested his hands on Spock’s chest and began to rub. Spock stared up at him. With a sigh, he relaxed against the mattress and closed his eyes.

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Later that evening Versin Z’mastlwpz, master healer at Golgotharen, examined the report on Spock Xtmprsqntwlfb. The healer assigned to the case had been diligent beyond what had been expected, as it had taken so long for the patient to reach the point of death and thus be receptive to a final attempt to help him. The long wait for death—a valiant battle conducted by the patient, observed by the healer—had produced a bonus: a unique mental congruence between the two had been established that might not otherwise have occurred. Deverans’ dedication had undoubtedly saved the half-breed’s life. But of course, Versin had thought it might happen that way.

Deverans was achieving some progress in the therapy, but the fact remained that Deverans, and only Deverans, was able to make limited contact with the patient’s mind. Versin doubted that would change. Most unfortunate for Spock.

The master healer’s eyes impatiently scanned the rest of the file that detailed the improvements in motor control, in muscle tone, and other bodily indicators. Spock’s physical condition was not important or at issue here; what mattered was the receptivity of his mind. Spock had come to Golgotharen to re-animate the connectivity centers of his brain, and any physical progress was peripheral to that effort.

“Computer on,” Versin said into the air above his desk. “Reproduce the following in memo form
and send to the address on file.”

*To: Clan Xtmprsqzntwlfb, Vulcan, Shikahr City*

*From: Versin Z’mastlxpz, Golgotharen*

*Stardate 5789.4*

The condition of Spock Xtmprsqzntwlfb remains unchanged.
Underworld

The unseasonably dreary, rainy days of March and April couldn’t last. They gave way to an early May sparkling with sun and fresh, warming breezes. All the blossoms that had hidden in the storms burst into sudden bloom, and Kirk’s backyard was ablaze with color. He ran in the mornings to sunlight and clear skies, and in the evening hours he wrestled with supposition and conjecture—and worried about when the next attack would come. He was sure there would be one, but the absence of malice-apparent troubled him greatly. It was better to face the enemy you knew.

Late in the month he allowed Bob Wesley to convince him to attend the Starfleet Ball, held in the largest ballroom in the city in the reconstructed St. Francis Hotel. “We’ll go together, stag,” Bob had said. “Two bachelors.” The security there was significant even if the official line of the Federation and Starfleet was business as usual. Holding the ball at all was a statement for the unknown perpetrators.

Kirk danced with many women; he was well-known and honest enough with himself to know he made an attractive partner. One dance only he allowed himself with Lori Ciani. She wore a black, one-shouldered dress that followed every contour of her generously-curved body, and she waltzed like a dream. He enjoyed each minute spent gently holding her against him, and that was why he only allowed himself one dance. He was not yet ready to give up. The music ended and they eased apart, and her eyes glowed up at him. “See you next Friday?” she’d asked with a voice that almost trembled. “Of course,” he said. “We’ve got to track down the contacts that were made for Tholian trading.” But he remembered the scent of her perfume that night as he made his way through the dark and empty living room to the stairs.

Five months and three weeks exactly since Spock had fallen to the ground, right behind him, close enough for him to catch if only he’d known what was happening.

June came, and with it another in the long parade of notes from Golgotharen, relayed by Sarek, saying that there was no change. San Francisco that month was delightful and warm with cooling breezes, as he experienced when Penda came back from Canberra. She bullied him into accepting a lunch invitation with her, and they sat on a side street in the old, pre-World War III part of the city, out on a restaurant’s patio where they sipped the wine he had ordered.

“Make it a toast to me,” she’d said. “I’m moving in with Hikaru.”

He had toasted both of them, and two weeks later took one of his days off to help her move her belongings to Seattle, to a twelfth floor condo she and Sulu had purchased there. It was the least he could do; she was making a real effort to stay in touch with him. Then he went home to call Beldon and find out what the latest reports said. He and Beldon had come to a fine understanding of each other, and Kirk hardly ever allowed impatience or contempt to creep into his voice when dealing with the man. Besides, President Dubois was getting edgy and wanted a summation by October; Kirk intended to have some input into that.

July was windless and so hot even the tourists weren’t happy with the sights they had come to see. The grass surrounding Kirk’s house browned because it wasn’t being watered regularly, as the system hadn’t been programmed. He hadn’t known there was a system for water sprinkling to be programmed. The local homeowner’s association cited him for poor property upkeep, and he had to hire their recommended contractor to set things straight. The man came to work as Kirk was leaving to attend a baseball game; Ralph Randolph had called and insisted Kirk come to meet his partner Juan, accusing Kirk of being churlish when he tried to beg off. The Giants were in the cellar again, he said, but what the heck. Kirk went and found that conversing with Randy’s partner
was like drinking cool water. Juan thought like the scientist he was, and Kirk spent three full innings absorbing his words as he talked about the chemical properties of the latest catalyzing agent his lab was working on. Randy looked at them both a bit askance and then laughed. “This one is taken, Jim,” he said with an arm around his partner. Kirk had flushed and glanced away, sorry he had given the wrong impression. It seemed sick that Randy would think he was interested when he wasn’t. It was just…he missed the way scientists talked.

When Wesley told him the next day that Jeanine had initiated the divorce proceedings he didn’t want, Kirk suggested they meet after work at a bar. They did, and then the two of them got nicely, decorously, definitely drunk. “Crying in our beer,” Bob said. Bob slept on the navy blue sofa that night because he was too unsteady to climb to the second floor and too miserable to go to his empty apartment. Kirk promised that they’d make it to some hockey games together in the fall. He lay in the big bed with the black and white comforter and calculated: seven months and almost two weeks since Spock had said he’d felt the touch of another mind. That should have meant he was getting better. Instead, he’d collapsed. What did that mean in the wide view of things, for the Federation and its safety, the safety of its citizens? Or was it just James Kirk who was in danger…of breaking his heart or transforming himself into a man who would never again captain a starship? He got up, took a detox pill, told the computer in Spock’s office he wanted transwarp files, and then settled to spend the nighttime hours studying the details of the trial that would test the engines in a few months.

In August even the residents of the city by the bay gave up on the relentlessly scorching, windless weather and abandoned the baked concrete to find cooler climes. It seemed almost everybody Kirk worked with was out of town. Lori disappeared with some woman she knew for the Canadian Rockies, and Komack was nowhere to be seen. Beldon was in Crete. That was when Bones and Patty invited him to a beach house they’d rented on the coast of North Carolina. He resisted, because a new and considerably more thorough analysis of debris was about to come in, and he wanted to be there even if Beldon wasn’t. But Bones insisted—the team in Paris can forward it to the terminal here, you know. Giotto will do that for you—and he spent five whole days doing practically nothing besides sitting on the big wrap-around porch, sipping whatever was put in his hands, and staring out at the ocean. “This is the life, isn’t it?” McCoy had asked, and Kirk had agreed. What a life. Yeah. The analysis still hadn’t arrived when he made insincere thanks to Bones and his lover and beamed on out of there.

September dawned and it was nine months exactly since the last time his lover had touched him. That kiss in the hallway before they’d left for breakfast. Almost nine months Golgotharen had had his lover, and still there was no change. No change on the orbital facility above Vulcan and no damned change here on Earth.

Kirk thought he would go mad with restraint, patience, inaction. He needed to…do… something….

*****

Jubilation mixed with frustration the morning he checked his terminal before breakfast and read the text notice from Commodore John Beldon. The new debris analysis had come through and some promising data provided leads for Giotto and his security people to finally follow. Beldon promised to keep him updated on anything else they discovered.

Damn it! Updated? Kirk slammed his palm on the countertop. If there was finally some information they could act on, he didn’t want to be standing on the sidelines.

The next message was from Giotto, a taped visual that showed the iron-haired officer pulling black protection vests from a locker.
“Sorry this is short, Commodore, but as you see we’re getting ready for a mission later today. The new report shows four untreated alpaca hairs and a half cubic centimeter of bat guano from the debris, so my people and I are getting set for a tour of South American caves. At least we were able to narrow the search to ones with flowing water, since the hairs show signs of being soaked sometime. It’d be nice,” here Giotto gave a wry grimace, “if it could be narrowed even further. Commodore B hasn’t conducted a real tactical operation for quite a while…. I’m attaching the report. Giotto out.”

Kirk didn’t waste any time. He told the computer to read the summary page out loud as he ran upstairs to take a thirty second shower, threw on his uniform, called his office to say he’d be late, then arranged for a priority transport to Beldon’s worksite in ten minutes, all the while thinking of the alpaca hairs and bat guano that must have been inadvertently transported to Friendship Hall along with the explosive. Their first real lead was too broad; they couldn’t start investigating every subterranean system on an entire continent. He spent the time waiting for the transporter lock examining a map of major caves in the southern continent, trying to fix locations and names in his memory.

He materialized into the broad daylight of a mid-September afternoon in Paris, at the safe coordinates a few blocks away from where the explosion had taken place almost a full year before. He started out briskly towards his destination, his arms swinging as he concentrated on their problem.

Ground cars rumbled alongside him. Doors to the buildings he passed opened and then shut. A woman’s voice was raised in sharp disagreement as she and a companion walked by in the opposite direction. Kirk let the sounds wash over him and thought.

He had a good mind, he knew it, but he also had few illusions. His raw intelligence couldn’t match that of many others who had served him on the ship or here on Earth. The difference with him had always been in processing the information, in seeing the connections and having the courage to make choices. Popular literature called it “intuition,” but Kirk had always scoffed at the term. It sounded too arbitrary, even mystical, when he knew it was usually a matter of seeing data from slightly different perspectives. Sideways approaches.

He used to be very good at sorting the wheat from the chaff. Now the question was not only where in South America to investigate with the full power of Starfleet, but how to convince Beldon of his conclusions. If he moved swiftly, he might be able to catch Giotto and his crew before they left.

Remembering what the computer had read to him, he heard the flat tones of measures and ratios. In isolation they meant not much, but could they be connected to anything else? South America. Why go to South America for an explosive? Was there anything in all the investigations he and Lori had undertaken that would point to that location? Something nagged at him, for though he couldn’t recall anything specific, it seemed to him that he should.

He pulled his communicator from his belt and asked for a link to his database at home. “Computer,” he said, “examine Melbourne Kiwi Terraforming databases for links to South America. Present summary.” He’d sent everything he had to Beldon, but maybe that data wasn’t being given the same scrutiny as what the team had collected for themselves.

“Working.” A few seconds passed as he continued his brisk walk into the heart of the Federation complex, where there were signs of the almost-completed reconstruction of Friendship Hall.

“Parts number one dash four seven made in Buenos Aires. Shipment of construction explosive terrainblaster 4 to Caracas, Venezuela stardate 6438.2. Assistant manager Ian Frost included stops at Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Lima in his business trip stardates 6189.4 through
“Computer, stop.”

He almost broke stride as the realization hit him. That was it. Lima. Familiar excitement coursed straight through him, a chill in his arms and his chest so intense and visceral it felt like a sexual thrill. This was how it used to feel on the bridge of his ship, his excellent people surrounding him and supporting him, all of them engaged in work of consequence.

The building where most of the work Beldon was doing loomed before him, and he took aim for it like a falling man lunging for a rope.

Lima. Of course.

****

“Out of the question, Kirk!” Beldon practically bellowed. He was trapped, seated at his desk in a small, cluttered office with no windows, and Kirk loomed over him from the other side, the open door behind him the only escape. The red-faced commodore pounded one fist on the surface before him. “I won’t let you take that risk!”

“Risk?” Kirk leaned in, his voice low and intense. He was going to create an advantage and hammer it home. “Commodore, let me be blunt. You don’t know risk. You’ve been sitting behind a desk for more years than you can remember and—”

“And you haven’t?”

“I haven’t.”

“It’s been a year since you had the Enterprise!”

“And I remember what I needed to do to bring her and most of her crew home, John. I remember.”

“I don’t care. I won’t send you on this mission with—”

“Risk,” Kirk interrupted, not caring what Beldon was going to say, “is not following through on what I’ve told you. Risk is launching a broad-based operation without a specific objective and giving the enemy plenty of time to pack up and run away without a trace. We can’t let this one opportunity slip away because of mismanagement.”

“Mismanagement?” That finally brought Beldon to his feet, though it was a struggle. “It was me who sent the first debris report back for further analysis! I’m the one who kept Giotto in reserve, knowing we’d need some real security work before this was through. I’m the one who managed to keep Starfleet’s hand in this, kept the local authorities out, gave us the power that we—”

Kirk spread his hands in sudden conciliation. “Yes, you’re right. You’re a good manager. And a good manager knows the abilities of his people so they can be used to achieve the ultimate goal. Use me, John.”

“It’s out of the question. You’re not a security person, you were a starship captain. You sat in the center seat and gave orders. You’re not suited for this mission, even if I were to agree with your analysis. Giotto is going.”

For a long moment Kirk was speechless. Is that what this chair-bound Starfleet administrator
thought a starship captain did? What he had done with his ship and the lives of his crew?

He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted. Commander Samuel Giotto slipped into the room and quietly closed the door behind him.

“Sorry for the interruption, sirs, but I feel sure you don’t want your voices to carry into the other room. I understand you were wondering if Commodore Kirk is qualified to accompany us in our investigations?”

“One investigation, Sam. I know where you—we—should go. At least start.”

“Commodore Kirk has a theory,” Beldon said. “Based on his own research—”

“Which has proven useful to you over the past months,” Kirk put in.

Beldon agreed with a nod, seeming to calm down. “Yes, it has. He’s had an individual on his personal scanners for a while who’s unexpectedly taken a job in Lima, Peru.”

Giotto frowned at Kirk. “Little enough to go on, sir.”

The need to explain himself to the man he’d once commanded might have rankled, but he didn’t let it. “The name of his firm is Andes Hydroelectric. The motto of the firm is ‘Taking the tears of the mountains and transforming them into power for you.’” He’d read it almost five months previously, when Giotto’s report on Hamza Machar had come through, and it was those words that had nagged at him as he strode towards this confrontation. “The tears of the mountain. There’s a cave in the Andes mountains a little more than a hundred kilometers east of Lima, on the east side of the range, with a cavern that’s called La Gruta que Llora. The cave that cries. See the connection?”

Giotto nodded—one swift motion—and he then turned to Beldon. “Sir, I request permission to relinquish command of this operation to Cap—to Commodore Kirk.”

“I think that’s carrying loyalty to a former commanding off—”

But Giotto was shaking his head. “Nothing of the sort, sir. It makes sense. Commodore Kirk is almost as good at hand to hand as I am. He regularly practiced with my people, and he’s led more investigations of the most dangerous kind than I have. I’d frankly appreciate having him come along on this mission to La Gruta que Llora.”

Beldon tried to salvage at least some of his position. “Then you agree with us that it makes sense to investigate that system first?”

Giotto’s loyalty overcame his diplomacy as he said, “If Commodore Kirk says that’s the place, then it probably is. I served under him for four years.”

Beldon harrumphed but didn’t immediately have anything else to say. He sat down in his chair hard and jerked a disk from the computer. “I won’t be responsible, Kirk. Take this on your own head. I’m going to log my doubts about your participation.”

The little respect Kirk had maintained for Beldon plummeted. The officer in charge took responsibility for the people he commanded. That knowledge ran through his blood.

“That’s your right, John. But understand, I don’t have any doubts. We’re going to discover where that explosive came from and that’s going to lead us to the perpetrators.”
“Perpetrators who somehow managed to get that bomb through all the security at Friendship Hall? I don’t think you’ll find the aliens who are trying to break up the Federation in South America, Jim.”

He wouldn’t let doubt cloud his vision or his resolve. “We’ll see. Sam, what’s the schedule? We need to make the time for me to beam to my office.” He steered the man through the doorway. “I can join you in less than an hour.”

*****

It didn’t take long for Kirk to beam to San Francisco and make arrangements for his absence. He didn’t know exactly what the protocol for such an event was at headquarters and he really didn’t give a damn. He wasn’t going to give Bob Wesley or anybody else a chance to stop him. The pride of the competent drove him, and he knew how unattractive his actions might appear to other eyes, but he was certain that he could conduct this investigation the way it should be conducted. He’d get results.

He paused with his hand suspended over the comm link and remembered how, a few years ago, he’d been criticized by Starfleet Command in the Mid-Mission Review report for not allowing junior officers to assume enough responsibility. This wasn’t the same. Giotto was an excellent officer, but he didn’t have the background in this particular investigation that Kirk did. Kirk had lived and breathed what had happened in Paris for months, and what had happened on the Enterprise, and what had happened to Spock. He was probably the only person on the planet who was convinced that all three incidents were connected, and by god, he was going to take his conviction and use it to find the bastards who had killed all those people, threatened the safety and stability of the Federation, and driven Spock into the wordless void of Golgotharen.

He stood by the side of the desk in his office and ordered a standard issue phaser from armaments to be ready for him to pick up in ten minutes, then looked up to see Lori Ciani standing in the doorway.

“What,” she asked in a tense but level voice, “are you doing? What do you think you’re doing asking for a phaser?”

Damnit, she didn’t have the right to ask him that. Not professionally. But maybe—personally.

“I won’t be gone long. You can handle the meeting with the containment designers this afternoon, and then—”

“I know about all that, I read your memo a few minutes ago. You could have told me everything in it face to face.”

Except that then he would have had to speak to her, which he’d wanted to avoid. He saw an expression in her eyes that he hadn’t seen in a long time. It was the way his mother had looked at his father when he was saying good-bye, about to leave the family again for a long voyage that she couldn’t join in and didn’t understand.

“Commander, I don’t have time to explain.”

“Make the time. Tell me what’s going on.”

When he remained silent, when he started collecting the disks on his desk instead, she came closer. There was a catch to her voice when she spoke. “We both almost died on the Enterprise, Jim, don’t you remember that?”
He kept his head down. “I remember.”

“I was so scared. And after it was all over, I was so grateful that neither of us would ever need to put ourselves in such danger again. Nothing like that was going to happen to you again because now you were grounded, you weren’t a starship captain anymore.”

“Lori….”

“Was I wrong, Jim? I must be wrong, because you’re getting a phaser, for God’s sakes.” She sounded angry. “What’s going on?”

There was no way to avoid this. He walked around the desk and stood before her, seeing the emotion in her eyes: the anger mixed with fear for him. He didn’t want her concern, because she was trying to blunt his resolve, but nevertheless it moved him. She really did care for him.

He took her shoulders in his hands. The warmth of her body rocked him and forced an awareness that he couldn’t turn away from. He hadn’t touched her since the waltz in May, had been careful to avoid any chance of another kiss at the end of a Friday evening because her perfume lingered in his brain, and the scent came to him at odd hours of the day or night. He didn’t want to be this close and didn’t want to tantalize his hungry body when he was committed elsewhere; he was still suspended in time, waiting for word from Vulcan.

Her small, feminine shoulders fit the palms of his hands. They emphasized the strength of his own masculine body and the eternal appeal of the differences between them. He had always been drawn to petite women, because differences had always excited him.

“Lori. Don’t worry.”

“How can I not worry? You’re going somewhere dangerous. You might not come back.”

He shook her gently. “Of course I’ll come back. This is an investigation. We’ve got a lead on where the bomb might have come from and we’re going to follow through on it. I’ll probably be here again in a few hours, ready to go to lunch.”

“You’re just saying that to me, it isn’t true.” She wrenched herself out of his grasp and he was glad she had.

“Drop it, okay?” he said with some exasperation. “You weren’t supposed to know about this. If you hadn’t picked up the habit of coming in here without knocking, I’d be gone already and you wouldn’t have a clue why I was taking the day off.”

“‘Taking the day off’? Is that what you call an armed assault with a phaser? Jim, that isn’t your job. Your job is right here in this office. What you’ve been doing in the evenings, it’s been great, I’ve admired you for it, for your dedication, but that’s not what you’re in Starfleet for.”

Was it really that easy to misunderstand him?

“You’re wrong,” he said quietly. “This office isn’t what I do. And it sure as hell isn’t who I am. If you thought I was somebody else, I’m sorry.”

He went behind the desk to the bottom drawer, where he pulled out the long-range communicator he kept there. He straightened and slapped it on his waist belt with satisfaction, with a motion that he hadn’t used in too long. He was more sure of himself now than even before Lori had come in. He had defined himself long ago and Starfleet had helped make him who he was. Starfleet couldn’t unmake him now.
It was time to leave, but Lori was still standing there, trying to compose herself. “I’m the one who’s sorry,” she said in a low voice, her head down as he came back to her. “I never intended… Of course you have to do…whatever it is you feel you need to do. I’ve always known you were different from all the other men here at HQ.” She lifted her eyes to him and managed to sketch a strained smile. “It’s part of your appeal.”

He couldn’t help it, he had to offer her a small smile in return. “Good. I’m glad that you noticed I’m not so good at paper-pushing.”

“Even that you do pretty well,” she sighed, and she touched that recalcitrant lock of hair that he never could get to stay where it belonged. “Please…be careful,” she whispered. “I don’t know what I’d do on Friday evenings without you.” And without giving him a choice in the matter, she embraced him, her face turned against his shoulder.

She didn’t hold back the way she should have, the way his carefully constructed rules of conduct between them must have told her she should have held back. Instead she pressed herself full length against him, hugged him hard, and he could feel not only her breasts and her hips and the soft mound of her pubis but also his own body coming alive. His cock was getting hard, and he didn’t want it to though it felt good….

For a moment, only a moment, he buried his face in her soft blonde hair, and it crossed his mind that if he had not met Spock, he and Lori might have…. Since his sexuality did trend in this direction. Then he looked over her head, preparing to push her away….

And saw Admiral Ted Komack standing in the doorway, watching the two of them embracing.

“Sorry to be interrupting,” he said, not sorry at all. “Kirk, Beldon’s been in contact with me. What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

*****

Five of them materialized far out of sight of the hydroelectric facility and high over the official entrance to the cavern that cried. The wind rushed straight into Kirk’s face with the biting cold of an early mountain spring in the southern hemisphere. He straightened, letting it drive against him, feeling its wild force and knowing it matched the determined fervor that propelled him. At last he was doing something. He was glad it was windy.

None of them spoke to break the silence of their isolated, desolate environment. Lieutenant Joyti Vajpayee crouched down, pulling out her enhanced tricorder, and the rest of them fanned out in a protective square about her. Giotto climbed a few meters to man the northwest corner of the barren outcropping on which they’d been deposited, and Kirk strode towards the southeast, hunching on his heels to see the valley where the little town of Palcamayo huddled in apparent misery. The town existed in a swale that sloped between the shoulders of two other mountains in this Andean chain, as if it were about to be swallowed up into the deep underworld by one careless shrug of the earth.

Kirk’s eyes ranged over the town and then up past it while he heard the smallest of beeps behind him: Vajpayee activating the scanner. She searched the world within, but he gazed outward, silently, motionlessly throwing his soul out to revel in the natural grandeur all round him, rejoicing in what he was finding. Not only the snow-capped peaks stretching as far as he could see—jagged, untamed, and spirit-stirring—but that part of himself that had been suppressed, sleeping under the great weight of headquarters and his new duty, finally rousing back into life. He tasted fresh air and felt how he was settling into himself.
Finally.

He had always loved mountains; they had captured his soul long ago and carried it up, up, up until he could look far below him, to where he had been before. He understood why the ancient Greeks had placed their gods on the aerie fortress of Mount Olympus.

He wondered what lay beneath the sparkling ice field a kilometer below them. For his business wasn’t where the thunderbolts were thrown from; he had to go underground to discover what the mountain sheltered. What it held hidden. He also understood why the ancient Greeks had a god who lived underground with his stolen mate, a god who presided over a life in Hades. Into the depths he and his people would go.

“Got it, sir.”

Kirk gave the peak directly opposite one last lingering look and then, mindful of the patches of ice all around, made his way to the lieutenant whom Giotto had said was good enough to have served on the ship. She’d better be. Her coordinates had to be exact or they’d end up materialized in rock. This wasn’t the easiest thing he had ordered her to do.

“Refined metal in a large space underground, just as you said there’d be, sir. There’s a tunnel where we can beam that leads to it.”

“Sixty meters away, at least,” he instructed, though they’d been through all this before they’d left Paris. “We can’t afford to have anybody hear the sounds of the transporter releasing us.”

She nodded. “There are twists and changes in elevation, too.”

“Life forms?”

“I can’t tell, sir. The rock obscures too much.”

He gathered the rest of them up with a glance, then they stood in a single file, waiting. They all wore the newly-approved field protective gear that Beldon had insisted on: the torso vest that covered their shoulders and encased their crotch and provided some protection for the neck as well. Kirk hadn’t trained with or worn the new gear before, and it felt bulky and restrictive to him. He’d been tempted to go without it, thinking he’d be more effective that way, but then he’d flashed to a pair of concerned brown eyes and a voice he missed so much telling him Jim, it is logical to protect yourself.

Right. And so he wore the same full regalia that the others did, awkward as it felt.

Kirk stopped himself from asking Vajpayee to double-check her figures. He could see the care with which she punched them in and sent them to the powerful Starfleet transporter in Santiago. Her life was on the line, too.

He hadn’t expected the coordinates to be exact, just adequate. Kirk felt himself falling as his body took shape again, and he flexed his knees and put out his palms, flat, in a trained reaction to keep his balance. He landed with a thud on what felt like a rocky surface; something sharp was sticking into his left foot. One careful hop to the side and he was standing on uneven ground, one knee bent. He’d fallen maybe half a meter to the bare rock.

He stood in the darkness, one hand on the phaser at his belt, and listened past the sounds of the members of his team regaining their stability, then past the sounds of their quiet breathing. They’d beamed into utter darkness, as he’d planned. He’d instructed that the nightsight goggles not be used until they were in. They wouldn’t have been any help in the first moments after materialization
anyway. Each of the glasses generated a pinprick of light so that it could be enhanced by technology and guide their way through the underground. But that light could still identify them, could make them targets. He wanted to make sure that didn’t happen.

Giotto was to his left, not even a shadow, but that’s how they’d lined up. Next to him, the two other men, Foster and Aziz, and then Vajpayee. He strained to see but couldn’t make out exactly where they were, which was good and exactly the way he’d wanted it.

A silent minute passed. Then another as he waited, up on the balls of his feet, his hand poised over his weapon for sudden action, but nothing moved, nothing sounded, nothing threatened them.

“Goggles on,” he commanded in a low voice.

The vision enhancer presented a weird, distorted view of reality. The rock that encased them glowed purple, the faces of the people with him yellow, the protective vests they all wore smudges of muted blue. The goggles were capable of much more if given more generated light to work with; they could have made underground as bright as day given the energy from one lit match. But not here. They were making do with the minimum. It would be enough to make their way down.

For it was down they would go. The ground sloped to Kirk’s right. With an inquiring tilt of his head he established from Vajpayee which direction to go for the cavern that might reveal more explosives like the one that had decimated Friendship Hall eleven months previously. If that’s not what the readings represented…. Well, to hell with the ridicule that Komack would throw his way. He’d start over again.

The confrontation with Komack had been difficult but it had also been a great opportunity to speak his mind. The decibels had increased along with Kirk’s resolve. He’d won. He was here. He set off along the long descent.

His spirit urged him to great speed, as if dogs were nipping at his heels in the dark, but he knew better. Long habits of care to preserve the lives of his people had not been blunted by his interminable captivity behind a desk. Best to move surely and steadily in this unfamiliar environment. The muted crunch of boots followed him as he touched the glowing purped sides only when he needed to for guidance or balance. He sniffed, testing the air; it was dry but not stale, though very still. There must be some conduit to the outside world for it not to smell like ages had passed since anyone had last walked this way. That was good; bats needed a way in and out for them to have deposited the guano that had come to Paris along with the explosive. He allowed himself to hope, to think ahead to when they might have solutions and answers, to when the Federation would be safe from the unknown enemy…and when it would be safe for Spock to come home without fear of being attacked again. Kirk wasn’t descending through these dark entrails of the earth on a fool’s errand.

He estimated they’d gone ten meters when the crack they were following took a more abrupt turn down, presenting a slope of at least twenty degrees. He whispered over his shoulder, “Drop off here.” He couldn’t see how far the slide went or if the pathway got more or less vertical. That didn’t matter. There had to be room enough to get through or Vajpayee wouldn’t have sent them this way. Supporting himself with a hand to either side, down he went, his boots scuffing against the rock.

It had been well more than a year since the last landing party he had led on an unknown world, but some things hadn’t changed. He was energized as if by the warp engines that had served him for so long, he felt that he was capable of assessing, planning, implementing anything that would advance the goal of the mission, and his limbs were propelled by that hint of edginess that he had always been able to bend to his will. This was the part of being a commander-in-the-field that he’d liked
the best, the ability to act with his arms and legs as well as his determination, to move through a situation and by doing so, set it right.

He braced himself hard against the sides of the tunnel as it steepened. The overhanging rock was closing in on them; it was close enough to graze his head. Giotto probably was already ducking. They were possibly twenty meters along now, with another forty still to go.

The feather stroke of something against his cheek startled him into alert stillness. “Stop,” he murmured.

Silence from those behind him and then that brush of something against his face again. He peered ahead. Though the sharp descent they’d been following angled straight in a few meters, the passageway constricted so they’d have to get down on their hands and knees to follow it. The air flow coming through and then expanding had alerted him. Along with it came a sound so faint as to be undetectable while they were moving, and it merged with the *swish-swish* of the blood coursing through his ears. Far off, a dark trickle of water, perhaps a river flowed in these depths. Would they need to cross it to find what they were seeking?

The narrower tunnel resisted him, as it was almost impossible to enter head first from the angled passageway he was in. So Kirk backed up the slope behind him, then doubled over on himself like a snake and started crawling forward with determination. At first he was able to use his legs in a frog-kick to propel himself, but within five meters the walls closed in so that only the push of his arms and the flexing of his toes within his boots kept him going. This was what Vajpayee thought was passable? The sounds behind him of shifting bodies against rock grew loud in this enclosed space.

He’d never been subject to claustrophobia before and he wasn’t now, but Kirk could almost perceive the weight of the mountain above him, pressing as if ready to collapse on him. He reversed the perception, not letting himself get caught by doubt or fear: this summit that raised its head more than forty-five hundred meters above sea level was like his ship. It pressed down and yet soared up, the way the *Enterprise* confined her crew within small places and yet ranged in her unfettered voyage further and faster than almost any other construct of sentient beings. The cave system was still so high that anyone trekking to it had to fear altitude sickness, even in its depths, and only the special injections he and his small team had received allowed them to function at normal efficiency.

Kirk scraped forward another half a meter and breathed shallowly through his mouth. He remembered Lori’s claustrophobia on the ship. This tunnel was much worse than the short one they’d confronted there: here there was eerie darkness stabbed open by the odd light of the goggles, the oppressive stillness, and the crush of the rock all around his body. Spock’s dependable strength could have handled this and would be right next to him in any setting. But not Lori: Lori with her big eyes and her lack of understanding and the way she had leaned against him. The way she needed him in a totally different way than Spock would ever need him.

Kirk grunted as he pushed with his elbows against the bedrock that seemed to be narrowing around him, and he was conscious of his cock. Not getting a real erection, just…there, as often happened when his body went on its own red alert. But it hadn’t happened like this in a long, inactive year….

He pulled his lips back from his teeth in a mirthless grin nobody saw. Okay. He would take the sexual energy that he had banked inside and he’d use it to give his body strength and purpose. Everybody knew that the best athletes abstained before a competition. He’d been abstaining enough to do anything.

How long was this worm’s track, anyway? He was ready to end this journey to the truth. His
shoulders ached and he was beginning to feel the strain on his lungs, but he was capable of far more physical exertion. He could give so much more than this.

He never would have gotten this far if he hadn’t been in the same tip-top condition that he’d maintained on the Enterprise. Komack would still have been trying to have the last word and with good reason. Kirk was grateful for the long hours at the weight machines in the gym and for his dedication to his fitness. He could still do this, and he could still do anything else Starfleet asked him to do.

Except continue as he had been. These few minutes, of settling into the person he had claimed to Lori that he was: they had convinced him. He had to emerge from this long channel of darkness and from the dark months that had preceded it as if to a new birth.

A whiff of fresh air hit him in the face, a signal that he need not crawl any more because their path was broadening. He lithely pulled himself upright, scanning from one side to the other for any kind of danger. If he had been wanting to set a trap, it would be here, as each of his people emerged, off balance. He sensed nothing except…a sound.

Though Vajpayee’s scan hadn’t shown it, there were definitely some sentient beings with them, for at least one of them was listening to—playing?—music.

Playing. Someone was plucking melancholy tunes from an acoustic guitar, slowly, note by note, with heartfelt loss behind the melody. They would really have loss, he vowed savagely, by the time he was finished with them. How dare they threaten the lives of so many? Not too far away now.

They had been disgorged into a crack that soared overhead more than thirty meters, Kirk estimated as he craned his head, and he could see a cloud scuttling across blue sky from what must have been an opening perhaps half a meter square. That was the passage for the colony of bats that had taken up residence here.

And while he was still looking up another sound startled him: the distinct tone of a transporter coming from further along in the tunnel. The music came to an end mid-song; Kirk snapped his head around, his hands automatically grabbing for his phaser and his body tensing. He peered through the artificial daylight that the goggles gave him, but no one appeared. He couldn’t pinpoint the location of the beam because of the distortions of echoes, and there was no way to tell if someone were beaming in or beaming out.

Kirk exchanged glances with Giotto, then checked the rest of his people; they’d all heard and seen what he had, and there wasn’t any need to say anything to them about caution and alertness. They were professionals. Four hands on four phasers showed him that.

Knowing that silence was essential, he eased through the passageway as quietly as he could. The floor was smoother here, and that was the clue that it was time to check for security measures. A meter further on and he found a glowing diode tucked behind a fold in the rock formation to his right.

He motioned to Aziz, who after a quick examination pulled an instrument from one of the front pockets of his vest. They had come prepared. There was a humming sound, and then Aziz nodded. The gleam of the diode remained, but Kirk had no doubt that it was deactivated.

He flattened himself against the rough rock wall, straining to hear anything: someone exhaling, the scuff of a boot against rock, perhaps a machine being activated. Nothing so far, and so he moved closer. The quality of the light gradually changed as he advanced; the walls were no longer purple but gray, his own hand not yellow but more flesh-toned. Additional light was spilling over to where
they waited. They were very close. The long crush of months he had lived on Earth seemed to line up behind Kirk, urging him to action, to solution, to purpose. He held them back, wary of acting sooner than he should, but needing to let loose soon.

Finally, a low murmur of voices came to him. He struggled to hear them clearly or at least distinguish individuals. There were maybe three men speaking. Four? Why were they here? Then there was the sound of metal against metal, as if a door were closing. Kirk itched to go closer and hear better, but there was too great a chance of being seen before he should be.

He motioned to Vajpayee, who came up like a wraith next to him, and in silence he nodded towards her scanner. The new model made far less noise than the older type he was accustomed to, and he was willing to risk its hum being detected to get the information he needed.

The goggles distorted everybody’s eyes; hers looked small when she held up both hands, fingers extended. Eight. Eight? Then she signed an “H” in the air. All human.

Kirk turned towards the grotto. What coincidence had occurred that they had walked into eight people when there might have only been one or two? This beaming-in was more than guard relief or an inspection visit. Maybe they’d run into a meeting. Maybe his luck—which Wesley had kidded him about, which reporters had interviewed him about, and which he himself had always believed was born of preparation and action—maybe his luck had finally returned.

More people to interrogate than they had dreamed of. Hades, it seemed, was well populated.

Time for the confrontation. Kirk felt the heft of the phaser in his hand.

With his people behind him, Kirk burst into the cavern, shouting, “Don’t move! Stay right where you are!” but not assuming anyone would obey him. He dodged around a metal rack, still shouting, and ran with his phaser plainly showing in his hand. In a few seconds of blurred action he formed an impression of very bright light, of a much larger space than he had expected, of several orderly rows of black metal racks, of people scattering in different directions—and the quick flare of a phaser firing at them.

Kirk returned a quick shot, though he didn’t have a good view. In the seconds that he took to zigzag forward, he processed what some of those racks were cradling: terrainblaster explosives along with some smaller units he couldn’t immediately identify, and his lips pulled back in a fierce grin. So. He had been right on the first guess.

You think you’re always right, don’t you, Kirk, Komack had accused.

No, but sometimes his own form of logic was crystal clear to him.

Aziz, who was nearest to Kirk, cried out, stiffened, and fell to the ground. Kirk was pretty sure he was only stunned—the phaser had had that characteristic low level hum—and he remained still as Kirk ran past him. Down to four against eight at least until Aziz revived, and he didn’t know how many others were armed.

He veered off to the left as he followed the source of the shot; he caught a glimpse of a thin man with flowing brown hair and long limbs dodging behind one of the racks.

Where did he think he was going? How could he escape? Even if there were another way out, Kirk and his people were going to follow every one of these enemies of the Federation. It wouldn’t take nearly as long as it had taken for the debris dust to settle on Federation Day. Damn them!

From behind him Kirk heard something he couldn’t quite make out—an accusation or a curse—
and then he sighted his target diving behind a metal desk next to a free-standing portable ‘fresher. Kirk vaulted over a chair straight for him, and that was what saved his life. As he was at the top of his arc with his legs extended, the man reappeared over the top of the desk with his phaser in his hand, and he fired.

Kirk was hit by a sledgehammer to his chest, where the bulk of the protective vest shielded him, and if his head had been where his enemy had thought it would be, he’d be dead. Kirk shuddered as he lost strength and momentum, as he felt and actually heard a sizzle envelop his left arm, felt lines of force, heat, pain run up the left side of his neck and lick under his chin. He was falling…. Damn it….

The rocky surface came up to slap against him as he fought to remain conscious. Kirk managed to twist enough so he didn’t fall flat on his face but on his shoulder instead. Oomph! he heard from his own mouth as air was forced from his lungs, but the impact jolted him back to intense reality. He blinked, staring at his fingers curled in front of him, and then abruptly realized he was a helpless target sprawled on the ground…. He rolled to his right, gasped when he put weight on his left side, and fought anger not only at his own stupidity but at the person who had just done his best to kill him.

That phaser hadn’t been set to stun. It was an illegally-used military grade weapon that had been ratcheted all the way up to kill, and if Kirk hadn’t listened to his Vulcan’s voice in his head he’d be cooked meat by now. He didn’t know if the phaser had a “disintegrate” setting and he didn’t want to find out.

He bumped against the solid bulk of something or other—another desk? The ‘fresher? He wasn’t sure where he was—then rolled behind it where he hoped he would be out of sight. His eyes were streaming with reaction-tears from the pain of the burns on his upper arm, so he ripped the goggles off and forced himself to open his eyes as he lay gasping on the rock floor. Where was he, that man who had almost ended Kirk’s life, his determined waiting, his impatient searching, and all his dangerous hopes? Kirk had been granted a few more seconds, for no one was standing over him firing without mercy. Not a professional, then. Kirk raised his head, squinting and listening. All around him were sounds of scuffling, shouting, and other phasers being fired—was that someone in the distance shouting human?—but no sign of his tall assailant. He had to get up and at least protect himself, try to go after this person who might now be stalking Giotto or one of the others.

Kirk rose to one knee, held his phaser at the ready, and blinked through his fuzzy vision. What was he behind, anyway? Three large barrels, each more than a meter high, were shoved right up next to each other. Two of them were labeled Tensomite, a common substance used to put out fires. But on one of them, so close to his nose that he had to pull back to read the words, was stenciled: Tri-Magnite 9347.8.

Alarm made him catch his breath. Tri-magnite was an unstable explosive, very effective for certain difficult terra-forming problems but not commonly used without some real safety precautions. Storing it out in the open told tales about the terrorists’ lack of resources—or their stupidity. And their plans…. What had they intended to do with a whole barrel of the stuff, which from the date had been recently obtained? One terrainblaster had done enough damage, but tri-magnite was a different order of magnitude.

Kirk wiped a sweaty palm against his thigh. A stray phaser shot near this explosive could destroy the cavern and everybody in it. Take the top of the mountain off and blow the town of Palcamayo off the face of the planet at the very least, too. Kirk felt sick to his stomach. He’d pledged his career and his life to prevent destruction caused by Klingons, Romulans, Tholians, or other unknown enemies encountered on the fringes of settled space, but he hadn’t thought something like
His assailant hadn’t fired because of the tri-magnite, and the barrel had saved Kirk’s life, but its real purpose was to take lives, to destroy lives, in the hopes of advancing whatever agenda these people—these humans—had.

He was damned if he was going to let any of these weapons be used! His little task force must have come at exactly the right time; that meeting they’d interrupted could have been a consultation on what target, what time, which people to attack.

Grimly, Kirk adjusted the setting on his weapon, then popped up over his dangerous shelter and pressed the trigger, praying that his understanding of tri-magnite’s stability in the proximity of a phaser blast was accurate. He aimed at the stalactite hovering overhead. The base of the rock formation shimmered and then disappeared, and the rock plunged behind the desk with a crash.

Just before it did, though, his enemy dashed around the desk, doubled-over to present a smaller target, his mouth wide and panting, and he charged straight for Kirk. He wouldn’t fire towards Kirk because of the tri-magnite.

Kirk had a second or two to react: aim his own unadjusted phaser straight at his attacker and vaporize him as the rock had been vaporized? There wasn’t time to change settings. Besides, he wanted prisoners to interrogate. So he jumped to his feet and kicked as the man came upon him. The phaser went flying to land somewhere behind the desk in the rubble.

The man roared and aimed swift chops at his mangled arm. Kirk jumped back, tripped, and hit the ground hard. He barely fended off a knee to the groin, and then Kirk let his own phaser drop when he grabbed two flexing shoulders to hold off a lunge towards his throat.

They froze like that for seconds, and breath wheezed in and out of Kirk’s lungs. Kirk’s arm was on fire, but determination made the pain a distant sensation that he could overcome. His foe stared down on him, his eyes glittering and his mouth moistly open.

“Kirk! Alien lover!”

“Who are you?” Kirk managed to get out.

“I’m a human! You’re a betrayer of humanity!”

The Eternist—Kirk was sure that’s what he was—made a sudden grab towards the weapon on the floor next to them, but before his fingers got to it Kirk took advantage of the shift in balance to shove him directly over onto his back—and onto the phaser—instead.

He wouldn’t stay there but took their momentum and rolled them over again so he was on top, only this time he jabbed towards Kirk’s eyes. Kirk avoided being blinded by the slimmest of margins and got one hand free in the next second to punch savagely up at the square jaw. He connected and pain shot through his knuckles, then he struggled to buck the man off.

He gained the upper hand, rolled them over again, and pressed his assailant into the rock. Kirk shoved one knee with determination into the man’s groin, holding him down with both hands on his shoulders and ignoring how much it hurt to do so.

“We know all about you, Kirk! Unnatural! Lover of men!”

Was that why Spock had been attacked? Because the two of them didn’t conform to some standard of behavior these people held was pre-ordained for humans? “How did you get the bomb into
Friendship Hall?” Kirk snarled, with an angry shake that scraped the man’s head against the rock. Had they been spied upon?

“Ass-fucker! Cock-sucker! Living with an alien and taking it up your—”

Kirk saw red. With a growl he tightened his grip on the taut shoulders and shook.

That was the opening the Eternist needed. He whipped his arms past Kirk’s hold and grabbed hard, right on the raw flesh of the burn. Kirk jerked as his body reacted to the sudden fire, and a few whirling seconds later he was on his back with hands tightening around his windpipe. He couldn’t breathe…. Two chops to defend himself were ineffective, and spots were starting to form before his eyes. And he was hearing things. It sounded like a transporter activating from a distance away. Damn it! He…wasn’t…going…to….

Kirk heaved with all his strength, kicking against a rock to give him leverage. Again they rolled over and over, each of them grabbing for any hold; Kirk dodged another stab at his eyes, then another that was destined to pull off one of his ears, until finally he managed to seize a handful of hair as they hit something hard in their desperate scramble.

They were up against where they had started, the three barrels, one with the tri-magnite, and somewhere near was Kirk’s phaser that he’d dropped. Kirk read the intention in the blue eyes as plainly as if he had spoken aloud; his enemy didn’t want any person in the cavern to be taken alive, and he would use the phaser to ignite the explosive.

“No!” Kirk shouted as the man disengaged from him and lunged sideways, his hand reaching. He’d seen the weapon before Kirk, but only by a split second, and Kirk’s legs worked so much better than his arms did at this point. He pivoted on his hip as he lay on the ground and kicked, extending as far as he could. The phaser went scuttling away to the accompaniment of a bellow of rage, and then in another second it was over. Kirk was on him, his hands tangled in the matted hair.

The man stared up at him with unreserved hatred as Kirk used both hands to bang his head hard against the rock floor. One…. Two…. What was he doing? Succumbing to the same emotion that drove the people who had no perspective and no mercy. With a snarl he released the Eternist and instead clipped him forcefully under the chin, the way he knew would be most effective without permanent damage. Consciousness left those accusing eyes.

Kirk sat on the unyielding ground, his chest heaving and sweat streaming down into his eyes, but only for a moment. Everybody else…. He scrambled on hands and knees to where the phaser lay innocently, grabbed it, adjusted the setting, and then whirled up on his knees, ready to use it.

The sounds of raised voices and then running came from the opposite side of the cave. A phaser shot, then another. Kirk steadied himself as a figure came dashing towards him, and then he fired. His target crumbled with a comic look of surprise and dismay; he’d thought he was going to get away.

A long half minute of silence passed, while Kirk remained up and tensed, but nothing came his way. It seemed that the last opposition had been conquered in this mountain, deep where no one had expected it.

He sat back on his heels, feeling the adrenaline start to fade and the growing crescendo of his burns. He stared across the few meters that separated him from the tri-magnite and the unconscious Eternist who believed with all his heart that Kirk was worthy of destruction simply
because he was different. Kirk was glad he hadn’t killed the man…because he wanted him to live to see how wrong he was.

Kirk hauled himself to his feet and was about to go in search of his former security chief when he heard someone calling.

“Commodore Kirk?”

“Over here.”

Giotto and Vajpayee emerged from the confusion of metal racks as Kirk was rummaging through the front pockets of his vest with an effort he tried to hide. His left arm and hand were shaking.

“Are all of them accounted for?” was the first thing he asked.

“Yes and no,” Giotto responded. “We’ve only got seven, counting these two here. But—”

“But my readings show all life forms accounted for, sir,” said Vajpayee with a frown. “I suppose it is possible the initial reading of eight was incorrect, but—”

“No, you were right, Lieutenant,” Kirk said. He finally found what he’d been searching for in the vest and pulled out a few medicated cloths. “One was in the ’fresher when we got here. Remember that sound of a door closing? I heard him beam out straight from there. He must have had a communicator with him.”


“A coward,” Vajpayee put in.

“Maybe not,” Kirk snapped. A leader could have other goals. Now he was worrying because one had gotten away: were there other caches of weaponry like this anywhere else on the planet? And would they soon be used in retaliation for what they’d done here today? “How are our people? Aziz?”

Giotto was examining Kirk’s arm. “Groggy but okay. The rest of us are fine if you don’t count that nasty burn you’ve got there. You’re going to need regeneration on that.”

Kirk considered rotating his shoulder and then thought better of it. “I know. But I’ll be all right. Here, put these burn pads on for me.”

He silently presented his arm to Giotto and managed not to sigh aloud in relief as the antiseptic net dissolved on contact. Thirty seconds later and he was ready to go.

He left Giotto and Vajpayee to deal with the two unconscious men and went over to where Aziz and Foster had the other five trussed. Four were stunned and laid out in a row like corpses. He recognized none of them.

The fifth man looked up at him from where he sat on the floor, his hands restrained behind his back. Kirk had met this man before: Colin Flaherty, an aide to Douglas Johnson, the political leader of the Eternist party. They’d been introduced backstage at Friendship Hall almost a year ago. Flaherty had been one of those protected on the right side of stage, along with Kirk and President Dubois. He had also emerged from Kirk’s private research as a likely leader in the Eternists’ radical arm.

Flaherty’s gray eyes attempted to convey conviction when Kirk came to stand above him. “We
didn’t do it.”

Kirk crouched before him. “How did you get the terrainblaster explosive past the shields?” he asked gently. “How did you transport it?”

“We didn’t,” the aide insisted. “We never did a thing. You can’t fault us for doing nothing.”

Kirk surveyed the racks. Even half-filled, there was a sizable arsenal there. Add in the tri-magnite and… “You can’t expect us to believe you.”

“You’ve got to,” Flaherty said desperately. “What happened in Paris…. For God’s sakes, Kirk, Mister Johnson was almost killed. You can’t think we’d try to take out our own leadership!”

“We’ve known about the radical arm of the Eternists for a while, Mister Flaherty. A faction who doesn’t care for the slower approach taken by your leadership.”

“No,” the man said stubbornly. “Somebody stole one of the terrainblasters from us, and we never found out who. We even had an armed guard here, two of them.”

Kirk had interrogated many prisoners, fooled some, coerced a few, threatened more than he wanted to remember. This man would be put under the psycho-tricorder eventually, and the real truth would come out, but for now…. Kirk regarded Flaherty with assessing eyes and a sudden rush of intuitive insight. If this man was telling the truth, and he honestly didn’t know anything about Paris—or the Enterprise in orbit around Space Dock—or Spock in the streets of San Francisco… then this raid upon the bowels of the earth had been for nothing.

*****

It was the Starfleet medico who finally pried Kirk away from the interrogations. Thirty hours after he’d beamed along with the prisoners to the secure facility in Vancouver, the doctor insisted that he leave and go home to get some sleep.

“We aren’t miracle workers,” she argued. “You can’t expect me to patch you up and then watch you exhaust yourself. You’re asking for infection to set in. The few hours of sleep you’ve allowed yourself here aren’t enough.”

He had gazed at her with a jaundiced eye, thinking simultaneously that she would never have made it on a starship and that she sounded a lot like McCoy. But…she had a point. His arm was still sore, and he wasn’t doing anybody any good observing a process that was still several days from completion. In the highly-regulated procedures of interrogation on Earth, permission had to be granted for the use of the psycho-tricorder. The mechanism was too much like the Klingon mind-sifter for Kirk and many others to feel comfortable with it, and the medical community had weighed in against the device after its initial deployment so that only in extreme measures was it sanctioned. Here on Earth, Starfleet was not omnipotent, not the way a starship captain could act and decide unchecked on his own ship….

Kirk ran a hand over his face. He really was getting too tired to function efficiently with thoughts like that. Better to pack it in and leave.

And so he’d beamed to San Francisco on this September evening. He might have requested beaming to the safe coordinates closest to his house, but he had become attached to the short walk from the transporter station to his haven on Fortuna Street. At nine o’clock in the evening the darkness was punctuated by the glowing street lights and accented by the light spilling from open windows. It was balmy this night, and many of his neighbors were enjoying the weather by having
conversations outside, some sitting on their front steps in the warm air.

He paced along, slowing when people recognized him and called hello. Over the long months, the neighborhood had become accustomed to having such a well-known figure among them, and he no longer got stares or shy questions from the youngsters. He returned the greetings he received, most of the time with a restrained nod. But he didn’t really know any of these people, didn’t know their names, and knew instead what they represented to him: duty. Here on the residential streets of San Francisco the citizens of the Federation lived in security and safety because of those who protected them. But the city seemed surreal to Kirk; reality to him for the past day and more had been the harsh white lights of the detention center, the set, frightened expressions of the men they’d captured, and raised voices as people argued about psycho-tricorder exams. His voice had been one of those; he’d argued vociferously for speed, speed, and more speed, because he had a gut feeling that something else was about to happen.

Damn! Kirk crossed the small side street. His boots made slapping sounds against the blacktop, and his shadow raced in front of him and then slipped behind him as he found his way from the illumination of one street light to another. If only that eighth man hadn’t gotten away. Locked in the ’fresher, of all places. He refused to see the humor of it and didn’t allow himself the grins that others had offered when told the story. It wasn’t funny to him.

What had they gained? Yes, they’d taken out the arsenal, they were preparing to arrest others who had been on the sensor screen for a long time, and they’d forestalled whatever action the Eternists had been planning to take. All of it good.

But fundamental dilemmas remained, the same ones that had puzzled them almost a year before. Beldon had stood next to him outside the one-way window of an interrogation room just ten hours before, and he’d sourly concluded that they were back to square one. “We captured a few rotten apples. But not the ones we’re looking for,” he’d said, and then he’d returned to Paris.

Kirk should have made this walk with triumph lightening his steps and success muting the throbbing of his arm. But they still didn’t know how the terrainblaster had gotten into the hall, and it seemed that none of the radical Eternists they had captured and interrogated so far did either.

And so he proceeded more slowly as he reached his block; he felt weary in spirit as well as in body. Fortune was capricious and had twisted things, and nothing had happened the way it should have.

There was no light spilling from the windows of his house and no welcome waiting for him. Well, he was glad to be home, anyway. He nodded to Maeve McLaughlin, who was waving at him from across the street where she was talking to another woman in a pool of light, and he punched in his code on the outside datapad.

“Lights remain off,” he commanded as he moved into familiar darkness. He was going to go straight to bed.

He was halfway across the living room before anything struck him as…somehow different. It was a difference that lifted the hair on the back of his neck. In a split second he realized that there was someone else in the house.

He hadn’t focused on it before, he’d been too intent on broader issues, but he should have been concerned for his own security. The long-haired man from the cavern had said it: we know all about you, Kirk. Such as where he lived.

Casually he turned from the stairway and headed for the kitchen instead, testing with his senses
and not doubting his conclusion. Was that the hint of an inhalation he heard? The brush of cloth against a wall? Enough light came from the windows for him to see, as he walked as if to get himself a drink of water, the dark shapes of all the pieces of furniture where they ought to be. But there had been something that alerted him….

He tensed as he went around the kitchen bar into a room that could easily become a trap, but only the hard metal surfaces of the replicator, the sink, and the wine cooler greeted him. He ran the water, all the while scanning out into the Great Room, looking, looking….

What had happened to their security? Kirk was sure it was excellent. Someone…or something… had circumvented it. His mind raced. Surely not someone he knew….

He edged towards the drawer that held the cutlery, intending to arm himself, but before he could get close a voice from the darkness commanded him, “Don’t move, Kirk.”

A man’s voice that he had heard before. Middle-aged, hard, with the hint of a regional accent. A shadow emerged from the short hall to his office, only it was a bulky shadow, too big to be one person….

Two people, one in front of the other. Lori. And behind her a dark-skinned man he couldn’t get a clear view of but felt sure he knew, with his left arm cruelly wrapped around Lori’s chest, with that hand clutching a phaser. The other hand held a knife, and it was poised over her throat.

*My God, Lori.* His heart pounded with fear for her, but it was a consuming rage that energized his body and propelled him.

Kirk took a quick step, intending to turn it into a run and then a leap…. But before he gained momentum, Lori cried out in obvious pain and terror, the shadow of a man jerked her to the left, and Kirk skidded to a halt and froze. He could just make out in the dimness the definite trickle of blood that now oozed down Lori’s neck.

“I’ll slit her throat for real if you don’t do as I say! I’ll use the phaser on her and she’ll be a blackened stump. Show me your hands! Up! Up! Now come on out. Slow.”

“Jim!” Lori choked out. “Please….”

Kirk lifted his hands—but not too high—and walked forward, sliding his feet against the tile floor. Frantically he searched his mind for a way to improve their chances. Lori’s hysterical panting filled the air. She had no defense against this attack. Son of a bitch!

He wracked his brain for a weapon. Not the knife drawer; he couldn’t get into it and then throw a weapon fast enough. The man had been there before he had; the knife against Lori’s throat was brown-handled, sharply-serrated, one of Kirk’s own.

He imagined the stylus on the breakfast bar threatening the man’s eyes or the coffee mug being smashed into his nose. But they were too far away to reach for, especially with the intense, threatening gaze trained on him. The man’s eyes were orbs of white in his dark face.

“Keep walking or I’ll kill her.”

Lori sobbed one loud, trembling cry.

“Don’t worry,” Kirk soothed, “you’ll be all right.”

“Don’t be so sure of that, Kirk.”
Enough light came through the windows—starlight and the shining sliver of a crescent moon—to tell him: Lori’s eyes were huge and tear tracks marred her perfect complexion. She was on the verge of collapse, with only the arm under her breasts keeping her from falling to the floor. Her eyes tracked his every move, and it wasn’t hard to see that she was silently begging for her life. One of her eyes was already blackening, and her white-blond hair that she usually kept neatly pulled back during business hours tumbled about her face. The button-down blouse and long skirt that she had on were wrinkled, as if she’d worn them days too long.

“Stop right there.”

Kirk cursed to himself as he came to a standstill. Bastard Eternist! What had this person done to Lori during their wait? Had she been threatened brutally? Beaten? Raped? She wasn’t like an officer of the line, accustomed to danger and what could happen to body and soul out on the frontier.

“What do you want?” He felt exposed with his hands uplifted, but not helpless. He held some advantage here, on home ground. He’d use it to get Lori out of this monster’s hands.


Kirk lowered his hands cautiously and instead spread them wide. “You’ve got me. Now why don’t you let the commander go?”

“Commander?” Hamza snarled. “Is that what she is? I thought she was one of your women. You’re one of those who likes both, right? Women and men. And aliens. You make your women dirty when you go into them after you’ve taken one of those freaks.” He spat over Lori’s shoulder directly towards Kirk. The spittle spread into a small shower that caught the meager light, then disappeared as it fell to the floor in the gloom.

Kirk struggled to subdue his disgust and anger. “Whoever she is, she’s no threat to you. Let her go,” he said evenly.

Machar’s face, half hidden behind Lori, twisted into a sneer. “No. I like the way she feels against me, and when I hurt her, I hurt you.”

The sexual threat was real, and Kirk’s stomach clenched to think of what this man might have already done…what he would do if he managed to kill Kirk first and then was left alone with a defenseless woman he hated.

“Is that what you want to do, hurt me?” He eyed the way the Eternist had the phaser cocked to one side. Unless this man were trained in hand-to-hand—and Kirk didn’t think he was—having two weapons at the ready was a disadvantage. They had to be coordinated for maximum effectiveness, and one could get in the way of the other….

“I’m going to do more than hurt you, I’m going to kill you, Arrogant Fed. You think you’ve stopped us, don’t you? You think that because you found out where we were keeping a few bombs that you’ve won. You’re wrong! I’m going to make sure of that.”

“You?” Kirk allowed his lip to curl in scorn. “Your people are singing like birds, they’re giving us all the information we need. All of you are being arrested. You’re next on the list.” He moved closer.

Abruptly the phaser pointed straight at Kirk’s chest, and this time there wouldn’t be any protective
vest to absorb the murderous energy. “Stop it right there, Kirk, or I’ll kill you now instead of in a few minutes.”

But Machar’s arm was unexpectedly at an awkward angle—aiming at Kirk and still trying to restrain his captive—and much of the pressure he’d exerted on Lori was relieved. If only she were trained and could use that opportunity to free herself, allowing Kirk to assault the man who held her…. But she wasn’t any help at all. Kirk stopped, his hands held out from his body in apparent compliance with what he’d been ordered, but he could act more swiftly when the time came this way.

“Good.” Machar looked him over. “You aren’t much. Even if I let you live, you wouldn’t be enough to stop me. I bet you want to ask it, don’t you? Want to know how I got the explosive into Friendship Hall? That was the question in all the newspapers.”

Kirk was almost close enough to make one wild leap possible. He just needed to get the man distracted, so at Kirk’s first action he didn’t slit Lori’s throat….

“I did it. Me, a mere human, not supposed to be able to use my mind for tricks like that. All I had to do was think it, and there it was.”

Lori caught her breath, a huge intake that raised and lowered her chest. “You?”

“Me. I’ve always had it, the power in my mind. I can do damn near anything I want to.”

She swallowed hard, and Kirk could see the effort she was putting into not screaming. Her voice was trembling, though. “You attacked us on the Enterprise, too?”

Machar actually kissed the back of her head and Kirk almost moved then, except that the man so obviously kept his gaze and his phaser trained on Kirk. It had been provocation and invitation; he’d wanted Kirk to go after him. And so Kirk subsided.

“I could have killed you all if I’d wanted to keep the Whitman-Nu radiation going. You were so beautiful, woman, running through the ship. I watched you.”

That got all of Kirk’s attention. Very few knew what had happened on the Enterprise.

“What do you mean,” Kirk asked sharply, “you watched us?”

“I’ve been gifted, Kirk. I saw how that mongrel lover of yours took his space walk. I laughed because I could have killed you all, in an instant, with one thought.”

Could it be true? One mutated human with a grudge to accomplish what Starfleet and everyone else had believed had been done by many? It was…possible. Was it possible that the determined rush through the cave had been for nothing, only for Kirk to encounter the real killer waiting for him in his own home?

“What do you plan to do now, kill us with a thought?”

Hamza’s teeth showed in a tight smile. “That would be perfect. The way I killed Pren’felit. I made him stop breathing. See my souvenir?”

Yes, Kirk had caught a glimpse of something that hung on a chain high around his neck. Now Machar wrenched Lori to the side so that it was more visible to Kirk in the dimness, visible enough for him to realize with a sickening tightening of his stomach what it was: an Andorian antennae, dried and shrunken, ripped from Pren’felit’s head on the day before Spock had collapsed.
“But I won’t kill you that way today,” Machar continued. “Too risky if the Feds find the two of you dead the same way they found him. They might finally be able to put two and two together and start looking for somebody like me. No, regular weapons today. It will do me good to practice.”

Kirk’s eyes sought Machar’s. He didn’t altogether believe him, but…. There was a chance he wouldn’t survive this encounter, and then this enemy of the Federation—if he were genuine—would continue to destroy. “You’ve got to stop this,” he said with conviction. “You killed innocent people.”

“Nobody’s innocent.”

Kirk put out his hands, pleading, hoping that the action disguised his move forward. Almost close enough…. Men with weapons in their hands were always overconfident, never expected to be overcome by the unarmed, and Kirk knew unarmed tricks that this arrogant Eternist had never heard of. He’d made a fatal mistake and laden himself with too many distractions.

“You killed innocent humans. If you’re an Eternist, then you value human life above all others. You go against your own most basic tenets by what you’ve done.”

Lori spoke up in a thin, reedy voice. “How could you kill us? We’re human like you are.”

And then she looked towards Kirk with suddenly widened eyes. She was trying to communicate with him, knowing that Machar couldn’t see her face. Kirk wanted to shout at her No! because the knife was still too close, Machar too ruthless, but it happened a second later and he had no recourse but to support her attempt for both of them….

She lifted her foot and stomped at her captor’s with all her strength, and of course she missed because he drew his foot away, but that also threw them both off balance just enough. Kirk dove not directly towards them but took two quick steps off to the right, where it would be harder for Machar to bring the phaser around, and then he launched himself directly towards where their attacker’s front was lewdly pressed up against Lori’s body.

The sizzle of a phaser flashed by Kirk’s shoulder. He ignored it, ignored Lori’s sharp cry, and pounded into Machar, leading with his right shoulder, imposing his own body between captor and captive. His left hand grabbed at the phaser, then slipped to the wrist and forced it down, still firing, to aim at the floor. He could feel the sizzling temperature from the weapon casing, he could smell his enemy’s hot breath, and he could feel the whole length of Machar’s arm against his own as they each struggled to impose their will on the other.

“Jim!” Lori cried from where she’d slid to the floor at the base of the breakfast bar.

“Get away!” he managed to get out as he barely dodged the knife swipe awkwardly aimed at his gut, but he didn’t let go of Machar’s wrist. One moment of weakness on his part and the phaser would be right on her.

“Look out!” she cried, as this time the knife came straight for his thigh. He tried to dodge again while still grappling for the phaser, but this time the weapon scraped its way against the surface of his flesh.

He roared in pain, and as part of his assault, and in absolute fury at what was happening, and he took the sound that was erupting from his mouth and used it to drive himself forward. Machar resisted by side-stepping, turning them both around, and Kirk followed him, still pushing the man backwards, now into the darkened living room. They careened against a chair, banged against the couch as he and Machar remained locked together, grappling with each other, but he was propelling
his assailant towards the far wall as quickly as his driving legs could, for he wanted to give the man no time at all to use the knife. In a few seconds they slammed against the marble side of the new fireplace with a loud *thud*. The knife hand was now effectively pinned against the marble and Kirk was able to concentrate on the phaser. He chopped at it once, twice, with his free hand and then, as Machar twisted to evade a third blow, Kirk abruptly changed tactics and aimed at the man’s exposed neck instead, and he put all his strength and fury into the blow. *There!* 

Machar dropped like a statue to the smooth-stoned hearth. His head hit first. Then the tension in his body seemed to leave all of a sudden, and he settled onto his back.

Kirk stood staring at him for a few seconds, his chest heaving and his hands open, ready to react to another attack, but nothing happened. He bent to grab the phaser out of one motionless hand, then he pulled the knife from the other and tossed both of them onto the couch behind them.

Finally, Kirk dropped down, his knee jabbing forcefully into the man’s chest, and his fingers groped for a pulse at the throat, about where a knife had been held to Lori’s throat. Nothing. He ungently forced an eyelid up and looked into a lifeless eye.

Hamza Machar was dead. Good!

James Kirk had killed him in his own home with the force of his own hands. Good!

The sound of weeping came to him, and Kirk swiveled around on his other knee away from the body. In the next second Lori had erased the distance between them and flung herself into his arms. He cradled her and let her momentum take him the rest of the way down, so he was sitting on the floor, holding her in his lap, curving around her and protecting her now as he hadn’t been able to do before. Her weight was nothing in his arms.

“Jim,” she hiccupped into his ear.

He ran his hands through her hair. “Lori, are you all right?” he asked with fear. He brought his hands to either side of her face, so he could see her. The blood on her neck had already congealed. “Did the phaser hit you?”

She shook her head. Her lips moved soundlessly, and he saw how perfect they were, how soft and yielding they would be, how desirable they were. He froze, staring at her lips and feeling an irresistible urge. Then she leaned towards him, and he knew what she would do. He didn’t stop her.

Their lips met in their first kiss.

He was acutely conscious of every touch between them, as if his whole body had been energized and awakened to a unique awareness by his struggle with Machar. He felt her arms around his neck and her fingers against his skin. His arms that held her trembled, and where she sat upon his lap was so close to his stirring cock….

She shifted with a small sound that was between a murmur of appreciation and a need for comfort, and she twisted her closed lips against his, offering more if he wanted it. This was a rising tide between them that told of what could be. Much more.

He pulled back, he hardly knew why, and asked her tenderly, “He didn’t hurt you? How long was he here with you?” She could so easily have been killed.

With a little sigh she rested her forehead on his shoulder. “I’m okay,” she sighed. “He wasn’t here long before you came. He said he was a neighbor, and I let him in. So stupid.”
“Why were you…” He let the question drag out.

Lori snuggled more into his embrace, as if to deny what she was going to say. “I…I was worried about you. You know I knew your door code, so I thought I’d…surprise you.”

“Lori…” he said, half-admonishing, half-fondly, wholly exasperated, and he tightened his hold on her and buried his face in her sweet-smelling hair. She wasn’t lying dead on his living room floor, and he was so glad that she wasn’t.

They remained like that as the clock on the wall ticked the minutes away and as Kirk regained his breath. His upper arm was throbbing again and he could feel blood seeping through the uniform pants on his thigh, and holding Lori like this was a constant, invigorating distraction that he didn’t know whether he wanted or didn’t want. But mostly Kirk asked himself a question he could barely imagine the answer to. Was it possible that he’d just killed the real attacker? The one they’d been searching for?

Eventually he turned his head and found himself so close to her baby-soft cheek. Without thinking about it, he reverently kissed her skin, and then he told her, “We’ve got to get up and…. We’ve got to get up.”

She nodded and unfolded herself until she was standing again. She extended a hand to him, and though he didn’t need to, he took it in his own as he got to his feet.

He kept their hands clasped as he contemplated the still figure of Hamza Machar. The man seemed slight, inoffensive, and not powerful at all, though Kirk well remembered the toughness in the body that had contested his. After all his ineffectiveness for many months, he found it hard to conceive of the coincidence of trying to be killed by two dedicated men in less than forty-eight hours. Some people believed such ill actions came in threes. He was glad he wasn’t a superstitious person.

Time to put an end to this.

“Lights up.”

*****

“Lights up,” he said three days later as he walked into the house. It was early Friday evening, and the debriefing was finally over. There was nothing more that he or Lori could contribute to the investigation of the death of Hamza Machar, and so they’d come home from Vancouver.

Home to Fortuna Street where Lori had learned to be comfortable with him, where she had learned the code to his door, where she had brought him cake. Where she had been used as a threat against him, because Hamza Machar had assumed that she was important to him. Where Kirk had saved her. Where they had kissed.

He stood in the entranceway of his home and looked at her. She was very beautiful, and she was here, next to him, needing him and wanting him. Gazing up at him with her eyes wide in expectation. Surely he hadn’t asked her to come with him for another Friday night session of talk and careful distance. Had he?

He felt as if he had lived in great silences for months: His unexpressed yearning for Spock. His unreal acceptance of Komack’s punishment. The ultimate silence he had endured from Golgotharen. His unacknowledged attraction to Lori.

And now the time had come to break silence and speak. This minute seemed to stretch, not only in
time as he and Lori examined each other in mutual uncertainty, but in distance. For many months there had quivered in his heart a small line that stretched from an unassuming street in San Francisco all the way to Vulcan. But that had been fanciful, Bones might have called it wish-fulfillment, his imagination, and perhaps he had been making a fool of himself all this time.

After all, the bond had been broken.

There was a life to be lived. There was his soul that needed comforting. There was a bed upstairs that would embrace two.

Kirk took a deep breath and then released it, and with his exhalation he abandoned hope. Lori’s lips beneath his three days before had been more real than the months he had spent convincing himself that Spock was coming back. It was time to put an end to his imagining. He was going to give up on the memory of what he had shared with Spock, because he’d never have it again.

He took a step towards her and it was not difficult to do. Her sincerity and beauty drew him to her, and he took her into his arms. She came willingly, with a small sigh and his whispered name on her lips.

“Jim….”

He wanted to say her name in reply, but he didn’t. He couldn’t seem to find any words. Instead he looked at her face upturned to his, so close, at the arch of her perfect eyebrows and the glow of her eyes and the creamy smoothness of her skin. At her lush bow lips. He spent long seconds knowing that he wanted very much to kiss her. She had cried out to him for help, and he had ripped her away from rape and death.

And so he bent his head and touched her lips with his.

At the first contact he thought: how very much alike kisses were. He could imagine he was kissing the first woman he had ever taken to bed or the last one.

He couldn’t imagine he was kissing Spock….

…and he didn’t want to. He wouldn’t do that to himself, and it would be so unfair to Lori. No, this decision he had made was for himself, for his own future and happiness, and he could go on with it. He needed to lose himself in her, lose himself in her femininity. He had missed this, hadn’t he? The softness of her in his arms, the way she was melting against his body, how small she was.

Yes, he had always been attracted to differences. His cock stretched out towards her, and he knew his body craved this, demanded it. He just had to let go and it would happen. Celibacy for nine months: he’d never gone without sex for so long in his adult life. He would have her tonight, he’d mount her and spread her legs wide and his cock would plunder her pussy. He’d make sure she enjoyed herself, too, for he knew how to do that for women. A fantasy flashed before his inner eye: Lori in the midst of orgasm, her mouth open and working, her head flung back on a stretched neck, her hands on his arms, scratching the way some women did when they lost themselves to their bodies.

He had never allowed himself to think of her that way before, had consciously suppressed the image, and now it seemed too startlingly intimate. He pulled his mouth away from hers as he forced the vision away. His lips strayed to her neck with small kisses.


He tongued around the plasti-skin that still protected where she had been cut by the knife, and as
he did a swell of emotion washed through him. Dear Lori. She had been so terrified, so needful, and yet she’d had the courage to try to get away. He moved up her neck towards her ear and remembered that small stomp of her foot that she had actually thought would help. He couldn’t fault her bravery. He twisted her around in his arms and sucked on her earlobe with gentle admiration.

Lori’s chest was heaving by the time he was finished, and she pulled away a little. “Do you want to stay right here for the rest of the night?” she asked with a little trill of laughter. “Shouldn’t we go somewhere else?”

Part of him wanted to lift her up in his arms, take her up the stairs to the bedroom, drop her on the bed and then crawl on top of her to make love immediately, but he wouldn’t.

The couch was closer. He grabbed her hand wordlessly and pulled her there, then pulled her down onto his lap….

Oh, God, a woman’s breasts. Yes, he had missed these. He burrowed his face against the plush curve of one of them, nuzzled with his nose to find the nipple’s peak that exposed itself through the fabric of her blouse.

“I like that, Jim,” she murmured.

He wanted her naked. Together they unbuttoned every button, and she drew the blouse off while he was already fumbling behind her to unsnap her bra. It came loose, it was gone, and her breasts were there for him.

Perfect. He held Lori with his left arm around her and with the other he slid his fingers under one of her ample breasts. Hefted it, felt its yielding resiliency, the warmth of it, the weight in his hand, and then with his thumb he circled the nipple that was high, proud, and already hard.

She let out a breathy “Ohhhh,” and that sound shot through him. He had always loved thrilling his partners, giving them pleasure, and now he knew he hadn’t lost his touch. He was good at this and knew how to perform. He could give her what she wanted and he would get what he needed….

This delicate creature, so unlike himself. He buried his face against her shoulder, surrendering himself to the feelings she inspired and the way his body had come alive. The way his cock had come alive. She hadn’t touched it yet, but she was pressing indirectly on it and knew it; Lori was no virgin, and he could rely on her to do what he needed her to do…. God, God, so long since anyone had touched him there and he wanted it, wanted it, wanted her white fingers against his aching shaft.

Kirk inhaled sharply and then kissed the point of her shoulder, a long, tongue-filled kiss that left a wet streak on her skin when he lifted his head. Her fingers were twisted in his hair and caressing his ears, and she was kissing the side of his face when she could. He liked everything she did for him.

He took a while exploring her breasts, discovering what pleased her best and which breast was most sensitive. Running the tip of one finger around and around her aureole. Taking a nipple between two fingers and tugging on it. Pushing in with his thumb, gently, not too hard, the way he wanted to treat a lover.

He wasn’t hurting her, this foreplay was preparing her. He wanted her ready for him, wet and hot, so he could slide in with one long thrust and have her cry of surprise and pleasure mingle with his own cry of escalating lust….
…which he was barely containing now. He abandoned her breasts and wrenched her head down to his. He took her mouth in a fiery kiss.

He let his passion run free and took possession of her mouth, her tongue, and her body with the sudden tightening of his arms. His cock strained up against the fly of his pants and suddenly the indirect pressure wasn’t nearly enough: he abruptly moved her to exactly where she would sit on it best. He thrust up against her.

She knew exactly what to do. Without retreating from his plundering of her mouth, she ground down on his sex and sent sizzling bliss through him. He wanted more of it! And so he roughly pulled her down on him again, and she answered with an experienced shift of her body, flexing her hips whose curves inflamed him, tilting her pelvis whose dance excited him, dropping her weight on his hardness. He tore his mouth away from her to gasp his delight.

He wanted more. She wanted more. Lori twisted in his lap so she was facing him, straddling him with her legs wide as her skirt billowed about them, and he could imagine her panties rubbing against his pants. Just the thought of the word that described her undergarment inflamed him—so foreign to him, so sexual—and he remembered how he had made other panties sopping wet, the smell of a woman’s juices on the fabric, how they would cling to her pussy before he would peel them off. Kirk grabbed at Lori’s waist, he wanted to drive up into her right now, this was a great position for fucking if only their clothing would disappear, and he wanted to fuck. It had been so long since he had fucked. But not yet, not yet….

He pounced on her breast—or maybe she presented it to him and then shoved it into his mouth—and let the taste of it fill his neediness for now. He thrust up and she rode him, crooning as he did it again and again and he would go mad if he didn’t have more of her, if they didn’t get naked and he could push into her….

“Oh, yes, Jim!” Lori cried with her hair streaming free, as he tongued her nipple furiously. “I know you’ve wanted it all along.” She lurched forward, breathing hard, and curved to grab his head with both hands while still keeping her tit securely in his mouth. “You’re the kind of man who wouldn’t have forgotten a thing.”

Yes, he remembered everything, everything…. Except…. Except…. Who he really was.

His tongue slowed, then stopped. Now he could hear beyond the sounds of their conjoined lust.

He’d said fine words to Lori days ago in his office, but who was he, really? He had thought he was the person who had stood on the bridge of the Enterprise and persisted against any odds to salvage a mission. He had thought he was the man who would work to the very last second to save the lives of his crew. He had thought he was the man who would wait for his lover, because they loved each other.

Was he truly a man who abandoned hope?

Slowly he released the nipple from his mouth, letting himself take one last lap of it on the flat of his tongue, and then he sat back against the cushion, away from it.

“Jim?”
His hands slid reluctantly from around her trim waist. He didn’t know what else to do with them, and so rested them, palms up, on the couch.

“What’s the matter?” She pushed against his erection again, but without certainty.

He closed his eyes as another thrill coursed through his body. Orion’s hells! She felt so damn good, and he was so hard, and it would be so easy to flip her over on the couch, tear her panties away, and plunge into her. It was what she wanted, after all. No one would blame him. Hell, Spock wouldn’t blame him….

It was the hardest thing he’d done in a long, long time when he finally found the word that he’d been searching for since they’d entered the house together.

“No.”

He opened his eyes because he owed it to her to see her reaction and deal with the emotional aftermath.

But it seemed there wasn’t going to be one. She stared at him for long moments, and then her spine, that had straightened in their mutual frenzy as she’d mounted him, slumped into disappointment.

Her mouth worked twice before she could speak. “Because…?” Then, before he could answer, she swiftly followed with, “It’s not nice to get a lady all worked up and then just…leave her.”

There was a beautiful woman, half-naked, sitting on his cock, her exposed breasts were bobbing before him, and…all he could think of was that if he ever had the chance to choose between her and Spock, there wouldn’t be a contest.

He didn’t really want her. Lori was a substitute and ultimately only a willing body; he’d been fooled by the artificial emotion that had grown between them when he’d rescued her. He’d wanted a fuck, but he knew what lovemaking enhanced by love felt like and how it encompassed everything. Did he really want to use his body for just a fuck? Maybe a few years ago he would have, but not now.

There might come a day when he would do this again, maybe with Lori or maybe with some other woman. If he ever got the message from Golgotharen that he feared, and when he had recovered from it, he would find a way to live his life again.

But not now. Right now, there was no change in the condition of the lover he had sent into the gaping maw of Golgotharen, and that meant that he and Spock were…together. Master Healer Versin had accused him of having no ties that bound him to Spock, and he had thought then that what they shared were ties of the heart. Weren’t they real?

Nine months of celibacy. Nine months were, after all, not a very long time. Not even a year. He could wait much longer than that. That’s the kind of man he was.

“Lori. I’m sorry. This was a mistake.”

She reached for her bra where it had been flung on the armrest in their uncaring haste to disrobe her, and she shrugged it on. Then her blouse after that. As she buttoned it, head down, she said, “No explanation? I deserve one.”

“I’m…not free.”
That brought her head back up, and she looked into his eyes for long seconds. Then, slowly, tenderly, she leaned towards him, and she bestowed a loving, closed-mouth kiss upon his lips.

“You, James Kirk, are a very good man,” she murmured. “I wish you were mine.”

*****

Fahtima Gabon sat at her desk in *The Galactic News* office in Phoenix, working on a schedule of interviews she and Randy would be conducting over the next few weeks. Someone clearing his throat brought her head up, and she saw two figures standing several feet away, in oddly stiff attitudes. One was a pale human male wearing the blue and white uniform of the UFP, and behind him stood Randy, who seemed to be distressed. She frowned, and saw that the name on the stranger’s nametag was Lieutenant Julius Eisenberg, Security Forces.

“Yes? Can I help you?”

“You’re Fahtima Gabon?”

“Yes, I am.”

The man advanced until he was right up against her desk, and he touched his forehead in a strange motion of respect.

“I am sorry to be giving you this news, ma’am, but I must inform you that your cousin, Hamza Machar, is deceased. You’re listed as his next of kin.”

“D…d…deceased? Hamza?”

“Yes, ma’am. We need you to come claim the body.”

Fahtima put a hand to her mouth; she felt all the blood drain from her face. She began to cry.
Spock had learned many things since he had awakened from his dark, painful sleep.

In the first few cintels of his residence in Golgotharen, when he still resided on the hospital floor for very ill patients, he had become aware of how precarious his life force was. Every day Deverans instituted a meld, and not only for the pleasure that both patient and healer experienced within it. They strove for sri'tekt; only during that state of open receptivity, of fluid response to a partner and from a partner within a mental joining, would Spock’s hippocampus linkages be stimulated. And without that:

“Your physical condition will deteriorate, as happened before,” Deverans said matter-of-factly one evening while he was helping Spock prepare for sleep. Typically they dismissed Shon earlier in the day. “For now the surgery performed by Versin still holds, but as that procedure has not ever been performed in that way before, we do not know how long it will remain effective. Eventually the structures will atrophy again if we cannot animate them.”

“We will do it,” Spock said as he pulled the sleeping shirt over his head. He could not imagine sliding back into the subterranean depths from which he had emerged. Something akin to panic gripped his heart at the thought.

That small smile that Spock found strangely intriguing appeared on the healer’s face again. “Your statement is illogically optimistic, Spock, but I cannot disagree. Of course, the two of us will do it. And after that, we will be able to achieve much more.”

*****

Just a few cintels later, in the season of Tasmeen, he learned he was half-human.

He had suspected something made him different from the other Vulcans he had encountered so far in the artificial world that was Golgotharen, and so he had asked Deverans directly late one afternoon when the healer had stopped by Spock’s room simply to check on his condition. There had then been a considerable delay while Deverans went to consult with Master Healer Versin on whether such information was permitted to be conveyed. The master healer, it seemed, was very interested in Spock’s case.

“Is it my father or my mother who is human?” Spock asked when the healer came back and answered his question about what made him different.

“Your mother is human,” Deverans informed him, and then he offered his arm to help Spock from the chair to his bed. Soon Spock would be able to make the transition himself, as he was improving daily, but Spock wondered if the healer would cease what had become pleasing habit between them. “However, your physiology is primarily Vulcan, and you were raised there.”

“My mother still lives? And is my father alive?”

“They are both still alive.”

Spock wondered what they thought of their son, incarcerated above the planet. “Is it this mixed heritage that is feared by the other healers? You spoke of it as beautiful and non-Vulcan. Is this what you protect me from?”

Spock never failed to ask, he never failed to push, for someday he was convinced that Deverans
would reveal all his truths to him. Why not make that day come sooner? It seemed illogical to allow him to develop a new self in a vacuum, without his past as a guide. He was deeply suspicious of the fact that everyone in any authority here operated in a conspiracy to deny him his past, and so Spock was ever more determined to reclaim it. Half-human? For some reason, the information did not disconcert him at all. It settled naturally within the data he was gathering about himself.

Deverans did not answer him, but Spock had expected that. It was a game they played that they both enjoyed. The two of them played several games; each knew he did, neither spoke of them, both took pleasure in whatever contact with the other that he experienced. Within the constricted life Spock lived in Golgotharen, it was all that he had.

*****

As the season of Tasmeen turned to cooler Kareel, the environmental controls of the space station on which he resided mimicked the change. At that time, Spock learned that he had great skill in the repair and use of computer systems.

The food replicators for the upper fourteen levels of the main structure malfunctioned, and meals for patients as well as staff were delayed by hours. Spock, who was by then somewhat mobile, saw no reason to wait upon the work of others to repair the machines. He found the orbital facility’s main computer center, with a physical effort and a limp that annoyed him because even after weeks of recuperation he had still not achieved his full strength, and offered his services. After a flurry of discussion over the internal comm lines to which he was not privy—although he heard the master healer’s name—the technicians welcomed him. Little more than an hour later, all food replicators were back on line and functional.

This incident provided another piece of information about himself. He was building an image of who he was, working with what felt familiar and right as well as what did not. Problem-solving, he suspected, was integral to his personality. Could he have been a computer specialist on Vulcan? Immediately he rejected the possibility. The person he was now would be bored with such a position, for he detected a strong streak of the individualist in himself. He had wondered how he could have been content within the barriers that surrounded Vulcan culture as he perceived it here. Nothing felt comfortable to him on Golgotharen, as if he were wearing a very tight skin that he was not accustomed to.

Surely there had been something more to his life than mere computer knowledge? Yes, he was sure of it.

After the replicator malfunction, he worked in the computer center when his therapy schedule allowed and when one of his more taxing sessions with Deverans did not leave him too drained to be of use, for he could not tolerate idleness. Always he tested the boundaries of his knowledge. Within a short time, it became apparent that he was the teacher, not the pupil. Master Healer Versin came to the center one early morning to acknowledge the contributions he had made to Golgotharen’s efficiency, and that was the first time that Spock met the man.

Spock did not like Versin on sight. Not his tall, thin frame, not his forcefully expressed words, and not the self-satisfied, proprietary look in his eyes as he observed Spock.

That, too, Spock tucked away as possible insight into who he was.

*****

When the season of Kareel seemed as if it would never end, Spock discovered that he was far more
impatient than any other Vulcan he met, healers, staff, and patients alike.

“Spock, Spock,” the physical therapist T’Cana complained. “Why must you push yourself? Take the time for your strength to return. There is no need to exceed the stated goals for each day. We are in orbit, in space. Where is there for you to run? Out one of the airlocks?”

She filed a complaint with the master healer over his behavior, and Versin actually contacted Spock by visual comm to reprimand him. Spock remained silent during the lecture—he stood still with his hands folded behind his back—but he resented what was said. The healer must be respected for his knowledge and for his position of authority, but Spock felt Versin had no right to criticize behavior that he himself found only logical.

After that, in one of their daily therapeutic melds, Spock once again attempted to reach further than his partner-of-the-mind advised, and he was once again utterly frustrated when he did not succeed.

“You must be patient, Spock. Is this time spent here with me, as we strive for your full health, truly so distasteful to you?” Deverans asked.

“You have seen my truth in our joinings,” he said as austerely as he could, for Deverans had experienced his impatience in full measure. The sooner Spock fulfilled the goals set out for him—psychic rehabilitation, physical strength, emotional control—the sooner he would be given his true self. At least, that was the only chance he saw of it happening. Surely the senior healers who feared what he silently harbored within himself would not allow Deverans to release it if he were not well.

Spock was sorry for the look of hurt in the healer’s eyes, and he made a special effort at the next meal they shared to be congenial. He never wished to hurt Deverans, who had given him so much, who wished him only well, and who was his friend and possibly more. But the need for self-knowledge drove Spock. He had to know himself.

*****

To Spock’s frustration, he learned that the elementary control that he strove for with such determination—far less than what he needed for sri’tekt—was easily achieved by even debilitated Vulcans. For example, other patients were comfortable in the artificial climate of Golgotharen, which he assumed mimicked that most commonly found on the planet; Spock alternately was cold or hot because he could not regulate his metabolism. Though he would not complain, seldom was he comfortable as he walked the halls and tried to learn all the secrets of his prison.

Alone in his own mind, he could not detect his heart rate or his blood pressure, and he could not speed the healing of his body through mental effort. The smallest bruise resisted his efforts. But Spock would not allow himself to be discouraged. He drove himself, and Deverans, too, even on the days when he was tired, even when Deverans had other commitments that made it hard to find time to meet. Spock did not know how much time he had; he felt that every day, every hour counted.

And finally the day came when Spock managed to regulate his body’s temperature within the meld: a day of celebration. His own joy was muted through the intensity of his effort, but Deverans’ exultation was perfectly clear, as was fitting for two who were joined as one, and Spock reveled in it.

//spock, my friend. t’hy’la. see what you have done. well done!/

Emotion that could only be expressed in a mental union reverberated under Deverans’ words: pride, excitement, a sense that at last they were making some progress. Under that, fear for
Spock’s life, and a rich fondness for this so-unusual patient that Spock observed and tucked away into his memory.

//you have guided me so far. i acknowledge your contribution to this achievement.//

And he reached out—thus—and there was another unique connection that they had not managed before: time when there was no trying for a goal, reminiscent of Spock’s first, neediest days, when all he had wanted to do was exist within their joining.

That was the first time Deverans called him *t’hy’la*.

But their happiness—they called it satisfaction to Shon, to T’Cana, and in the official report that Deverans wrote, but each knew his own emotions—was short-lived. Many days passed with no other progress, no matter how hard Spock tried and how much Deverans sought various pathways to lead him further into fuller psychic communion. When guided by Deverans, Spock was able to do in a minimal way what other Vulcans did without effort. Outside their joining, though, he remained mind-blind.

The goal of stimulating his linkages was still far away.

*****

As Kareel finally gave way to the planting time of Sikar, Spock learned that he was a creature of the body as well as the mind.

Always there had been an element of the sexual between him and Deverans, in their teasing of one another, in their awareness of the body, in the way that they sought each other’s company. Spock accepted this because that was the way it had always been since his birth into this world. *Cor yhr mahr*. He did not know where this awareness between them would lead, but he had put aside any close examination of the minor stirrings of his body until other issues were resolved—or at least until he knew he would live to enjoy a life of the body.

But one morning in the sleepy drowsiness of almost-waking, his demanding erection called for his own hand, and he was stroking himself through the fabric of his sleeping pants before he was fully awake.

It was the pleasure that jolted him aware. He stared down the length of his body with a sudden realization. He had tested events and people, his own likes and dislikes, situations and reactions, but he had not tested his own body. It simply had not occurred to him to perform self-stimulation.

It seemed that he truly was getting better.

*Well, getting better, getting better...*.

The words sounded in his thoughts, and he was startled into stillness. Someone he knew had said that. In a totally different context. Not on Vulcan. He probed his imperfect, suppressed memory that nevertheless sometimes jostled him with some out-of-season image. What was the tone of voice? Male? Female? Vulcan? Could the speaker be human, like his mother? There was a jocularity in the tone that he remembered—it almost sounded like Deverans when the healer was teasing him—and a familiarity that threw him into a sudden state of yearning. To be known so well.... Like knowledge within a bond.

Male, definitely male, and with that insight Spock’s penis stirred within his grip, lengthened more so that it rubbed against his clothing, pulsed with a wave of raw excitement. He stroked himself as if doing so would make everything right, would bring everything back to him, desperately, while
he urgently grasped at the fading wisps of a vague impression….

But nothing more came to him…except that those words, that tone, excited him past bearing. His
body roared into life and demanded more. He fumbled with the drawstring of the sleeping pants,
then broke it in his impatience to shove the pants past his hips. He grabbed for his penis, felt its
heat and expanded shape against his palm, began to squeeze himself again with one hand and roll
his testicles with the other, but he thought only of that voice, that tone…and a body to go with it.
Surely there was some exciting, demanding, exasperating body that went with it? He strained to
see, but nothing came to him. Then he would imagine one…..

Images blossomed before his inner eye that he had not considered before, rapid-fire, one after the
other, sensations that he must have known at one time but forgotten: the strength of a man’s sure-
fingered hands, the certitude of a man’s voice, the rippled muscles of a man’s broad shoulders.
Spock felt cool, exquisitely smooth skin beneath his fingertips and moaned aloud at the ghostly
sensation. A man’s strong hands caressed his chest, reached for his nipples with assurance. A
tongue was within his mouth, taking, giving, moist, delightful. Warmth beneath him, a body
moving, chest heaving, legs widening with the tilt of an inviting pelvis, a voice calling his name….

*Spock!*

With a groan that the walls of Golgotharen undoubtedly had never heard before, Spock arched up,
gave himself one final twist—there!—and achieved orgasm.

Seminal fluid flooded across his fingers. It had accumulated for a long time.

Many minutes passed as Spock allowed his heart rate and his breathing to return to their normal
levels. He wondered: had anyone ever called his name like that? Or was he simply wishing
someone would have the need for him that he had just heard…or imagined.

He wanted to be needed.

A disposable paper product for skin care was on the table next to his bed, and Spock sat up and
took one to wipe his ejaculate off. Then he took another and another, for his emission had been
copious. Somehow he knew that this was not normal for him; typically the product of his orgasm
was less than…. Less than…. Less than what? Less than whose?

He knew nothing.

He couldn’t ask Deverans, who surely would know because the healer kept his memories. The
healer would not speak of his past…and the ambiguous relationship between them prevented Spock
from asking, anyway.

But…. Who was the one who called his name?

Frustrated past bearing, Spock swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. He closed his
eyes and sought control. He had no choice. He had to stay at Golgotharen, for there was no other
place to go that offered the memories he was determined to regain.

*****

One evening, after he had returned from hours of physical therapy and then a stint in the computer
room, Spock settled into a chair in the sitting room where Deverans usually initiated their melds.
By unspoken agreement, they had transferred the site of their joinings away from Spock’s bed and
the new private room he inhabited as soon as he was mobile. T’Khut radiated a baleful presence
through the artificial windows. Deverans sat opposite him.
“Tonight we will attempt direct stimulation of the linkages,” the healer told him.

Spock contemplated the hands in his lap. He knew why this extreme and difficult step was necessary. His condition had stabilized at much less than optimal status. They had gone so far as to see if other, senior healers would be able to advance Spock’s recovery where Deverans had failed, but none was able to establish even the most cursory of contacts. “You have no aura,” one of them had accused him before the attempt, as if it were his fault. It was Deverans or no one for him, it seemed.

After a few moments to compose himself—for he didn’t want to die if they continued to fail—Spock lifted his eyes. “What do you estimate are the odds of success?”

“They are difficult to calculate, my friend. But if we persist, we will be successful.”

Spock observed the healer fondly. “That is an emotional statement, Deverans. Quite illogical.”

Deverans’ face softened into a small smile, an expression that Spock rarely allowed himself but that seemed to reside naturally on the healer’s features. “I will confess that I am not always as logical as our elders would wish me to be.” He became more serious. “Especially where you…your treatment is concerned.”

Spock bowed his head again. Yes, he knew this. The shape of the space between them was pleasing…and compelling. He wondered if Deverans was about to speak the ritual words…and hoped that he would not. Spock wasn’t ready. He was uncertain. The memory of the voice he had imagined when masturbating unsettled him and continued to propel his nighttime self-stimulation.

Deverans broke the pregnant silence. “We should proceed to your treatment tonight. I regret what I must do. There will be pain.”

Spock jerked his head upwards in the Vulcan equivalent of spread hands. “It is no matter. I will endure what must be done.”

But he didn’t want to endure. He wanted to improve, to advance, and then to act. That, too, he felt was a fundamental part of his personality. He knew how to endure, he seemed to have the knack of it, but there was so much more to life, surely.

Spock bowed his head towards Deverans’ outstretched fingers, submitting to the healer’s touch.

*****

They tried mightily that evening, only to fail. Spock emerged from the meld shaking, colder than he could ever remember being, and with his reserves of energy depleted.

The next day he sought out Deverans to insist that they try again. They sat in the sitting room just past mid-day, and when they surfaced from the imperfect net of shared consciousness, drained and unsuccessful, it was almost time for the evening meal.

On the third day, Deverans refused to try again. “I don’t have the strength, Spock,” he confessed. “We must wait.”

“For how long?” Spock asked, and in his restlessness he stood to pace a few steps away.

“Perhaps a few days,” Deverans replied. “I regret my inability to proceed as quickly as you wish.”

Spock turned around to regard him, reining in his impatience. Deverans’ face looked pinched
around his expressive dark eyes, and Spock was suddenly struck by how much the healer had given
him—given and given and given—and how very little Spock had been able to extend in return.
And he had offered many emotions of the most negative sort: frustration, impatience, even
selfishness.

“I beg forgiveness,” Spock said. “I occupy your time and your energy when there are others who
need you as well.”

The healer bowed his head in agreement. “And the master healer will not be pleased if I am forced
to ignore my duties to others because of my efforts on your behalf. Be patient, Spock. We will try
again later.”

Spock retreated, abashed at his ego-centric attitude, but still determined. He had a great sense that
the universe was proceeding in its path without him, that people he knew would be forgetting him,
and that the life he had led before was receding into the distance, never to be regained. That life, he
was sure, had been worth keeping. Whose vigorous, needful voice did he remember? Who called
for Spock? Something—or someone—was compelling him to try to remember. Was it the one who
tantalized him, who always seemed to remain on the other side of the horizon of his awareness?
Who had “Spock” been in his real life, and who had known that being?

The only way to that life was through srí’tekt, to the advances he might make beyond it, and then
to the ability to convince the healers to release his former self. But the promise of life itself had to
come first.

He prowled the depths of the computer center and worked on machinery that was already in perfect
condition. Undoubtedly because of his depressed emotional state, and because he had yet to
achieve the control the healers seemed to expect of him, he could not help but remember the time
when he had been trapped in the great darkness, pressed into no-being-at-all. Usually he rejected
those memories as being too painful to contemplate, but now he recalled in vivid detail the
loneliness, the despair, and the conviction that he was soon to die.

Was that to be his fate? To die completely alone….

Spock’s hands poised over the floor cleaning machine that he had been reduced to servicing. No.
Not alone. There had been something… someone… there with him.

He hid his hands in the front pouch of his utilitarian overalls, the better to concentrate solely on his
thoughts. Spock suddenly recalled a distinct, dynamic personality, not a wish-fulfillment, not a
fantasy, but someone obviously outside his own self…and yet a person who had nevertheless been
within him when he had been condensed to essence. That being had comforted him. Yes, he
remembered existing next to that vibrant soul who somehow had managed to find him even in the
depths of his despair. They had discovered time that was worth living, because there were two
when before there had been one.

Then…. They had said good-bye. A distinct shock ran through Spock, and he leaned over as if in
pain. In real pain at the memory. So long he had not remembered and made the connection with the
ghost lover who had come to him in his solitary bed. Deverans had blocked the memories of his
life before his injury, but there had been nothing preventing him from recalling what had happened
in the time of his long struggle.

Deverans had said he had no bondmate. Then who was this person? He must be the one who called
for Spock. If they did not share the intimate connection of a bonding, then why did he call?

Spock refocused on the prosaic image of the cleaner in front of him. That was real and solid and
needed reassembling. He did not know what these memories said about his grasp of reality.

Who had the truth? He did not know.

He gave the healer one more day to recuperate, and then immediately after the morning meal he and Deverans sat opposite each other again, although this time they were in one of the consultation rooms with equipment to monitor their well-being. The healer’s hands approached the contact points, and Spock bowed his head within that grasp.

Deverans warned him. //we will not stop today until we are successful. will you follow me?//

//i will follow you, deverans//

//i do not wish to cause you pain.//

//i know. but pain is inevitable. in this procedure and in life itself.//

//i wish you a lifetime of fulfillment, spock. i will do everything i can to ensure your continued life and well-being.//

This was Deverans’ sincere pledge to him. Affection washed over him, and Spock could not help but gather it in with satisfaction.

//i know. i wish to express gratitude. if we are not successful, still i honor you and all you have done for me.//

//no talk of gratitude is necessary between us.//

//then let us proceed. i am ready.//

Nine hours later Spock was ejected from the meld the way a leaf is ripped away from a tree by a whirling wind. He spun around and around and finally began to perceive his own body again. That noise: that was his open mouth desperately sucking in air after a titanic effort. Where was he? His hands clutching…yes, the healer’s neck and waist as Spock leaned against him, that solid body the only thing keeping him from slipping off his chair onto the floor. He could feel the warmth of Deverans’ skin as they pressed against each other, cheek to cheek.

“Did you feel it? See it?” Deverans whispered, as if he could not summon the energy for a louder sound.

Sri’tekt. They had done it. Done it!

Spock pulled away from their embrace at the same time Deverans did, only to find himself still very close to the healer. Spock gazed into the eyes that were gazing back at him, eyes that were filled with an emotion he had not seen anywhere else at Golgotharen, but he knew what the emotion was. Part of his past? Part of his future as well? The wild exultation of the moment compelled him to allow it when Deverans moved towards him and pressed their lips together.

Spock knew this feeling, for he had rediscovered it in his body not long before. His friend’s lips were dry and cracked, not pliable after their long effort, but they were expressive and kind, and this man’s lips fit well against his own. There was something vaguely familiar about them…and Spock knew with certainty that he had kissed a male like this before.

“T’hy’la,” Deverans murmured as they drew apart, and his strong, sensitive fingers stroked the side of Spock’s face. “You will live.”
Now he had a future.

*****

The next day, Spock was approached by one of the medical technicians with a message. He was summoned from the computer center to the room where Versin Z’mastlpxpz conducted most of the facility’s business. Spock had never been anywhere near it, and as he made his way down the long hallways and up the high stairways, he could not help but speculate on why he had been called. Surely Versin was not going to present him with another reprimand. Congratulations over the previous day’s success seemed unlikely. Perhaps a consultation on what procedures could be employed next to enhance his psychic faculties? Despite the satisfaction that had suffused him ever since emerging from the meld, Spock was not fooled; he was still severely limited in his abilities. There was much more for him to accomplish before he could advance an argument to receive his memories back.

Deverans was waiting for him when he arrived at the anteroom, and soon they were summoned inside together. Standing next to Versin in the windowless room was Healer T’Kah, whom Spock knew from her occasional interest in his case.

“Peace and long life,” intoned Versin and T’Kah.

“Live long and prosper,” said Deverans, and Spock said the same.

The master healer gestured towards four chairs that were grouped around a low, round table. “Although Spock is much recovered, we will not tax his strength today. Let us all be seated.”

Spock watched the other two as they took their seats across from him, assessing them...almost as if for danger they might represent. The habit surprised him, for habit it was indeed. Versin did wield great power over him, but why would the process of observing for signs of strength or weakness feel so familiar to him?

Versin began by gesturing to T’Kah. “Senior healer T’Kah has agreed to be witness to this meeting. I begin by reviewing Spock’s condition.”

He touched the surface of the table, which came to life with raw data and charts. Another motion and the screen split in two, one half facing each pair. Spock leaned in to examine the display. He had not seen this representation of his status before. Hungrily he observed the numbers and charts, the equations and conclusions, realizing that he absorbed the symbolic representation of his condition easily, as if this were a second, natural language for him. He saw the account of what had happened the day before and was impressed that Deverans had composed his report so quickly.

“Spock, you have regained only twenty-two percent of the psycho-mental function you had before your injury.”

This was true. The measurements that indicated his lack of success were simple lines of black and white; they told nothing of his desperate efforts, of Deverans’ unswerving support, of Spock’s slow realization that no matter how hard he tried, his efforts were seldom rewarded.

Versin went on. “Your progress is even more limited, as you can only enter the morantz when your partner is Deverans. T’Kah has strong psychic skills, and I wish for her to confirm this.” He looked at the other senior healer.

“Will you agree to a meld?” she asked Spock directly.

It really was a formality for her to ask at all, and Spock honored her because of her courtesy. “Of
course,” he said.

T’Kah leaned over the table and matter-of-factly reached for the contact points. He could not help but feel some small flicker of hope. T’Kah was senior and accomplished, and it was possible that she....

He felt the tips of her fingers press against his skin. She held her fingers there, her eyes slowly closed, and she entered into the measured breathing of a healer exerting great effort. Spock watched her with his mortal eyes, for there was no stirring in his mind. If they had truly been in communion, T’Kah would have been shocked at the surge of disappointment that tightened his chest.

T’Kah regarded him with compassion he did not wish to tolerate, and then she returned her hands to her lap. “I regret to report that there was no contact.”

“Yes,” Spock said. He cleared his throat. “I know.”

T’Kah said to Versin. “Spock is untouched by my efforts. There was only the smallest hint of any activity and, as you know, there is no aura at all.”

Deverans put in, “But Spock has also accomplished much on the physical side. He is at approximately ninety-four percent of optimum. He has but minor motor difficulties with his left arm and leg, and they will soon—”

Versin interrupted him by tapping on the table again. Other charts appeared. “Of that I have no interest. There was never any doubt that the physical would be regularized if the mental could be stabilized. I have observed from your reports that the two of you achieved sri’tekt yesterday.”

Deverans did not appear to be nonplussed by the master healer’s attitude. “Yes, that is true.”

“Normally that would be considered a good sign. However, the two of you did not accomplish this goal through normal means. A direct approach was required that took much effort and caused pain. That is not recommended.”

“I deemed it necessary as time passed without improvement in other areas.”

“I understand why you felt such an extreme measure was required. Recent progress has been minimal. Last night, I examined the data you provided on the sri’tekt experience, Deverans. There was considerable resistance. Blockage.”

The younger healer focused on one of the tables of figures. “Yes. Each time we made the attempt. Here. And here. And here.” He pointed along a time scale. “It is almost as if the points of contact are not a smooth table, as expected, but an irregular screen mesh with minimal places for joining.”

Versin sat back in his seat, apparently satisfied, an attitude that Spock found most disturbing. Why would Versin find satisfaction in their difficulties, their failures?

“Did you maximize your efforts?”

Deverans was uncomfortable with that question, Spock could see. “It is possible that further attempts will be more—”

Versin stopped him with a stroke of his hand. “Enough. Do not speak of what is unlikely when there is no data to substantiate your supposition. I ask again, have you maximized your efforts under current treatment protocols?”
“Yes,” Deverans said, down to the table.

“Further attempts at sri’tekt, which you will need to make on a regular basis in order to assure the patient’s health, are not likely to be different in substance?”

“That is correct,” Deverans said. “There is a fundamental scarring in Spock’s mental projections, perhaps as a result of the surgery, perhaps because of the initial injury, that interrupts the efforts at joining.”

Spock looked from Versin to T’Kah and back again.

“I do not see, then, how we can say that you have truly achieved success in re-animating the patient’s connectivity centers, as you claim in your report, when the results are so limited and confined to only one partner. You have failed in the primary objective for this patient, although we have doubled the time allotted for his treatment. Is this not true?”

Spock, surprised to learn about the timing and dismayed to hear an admission of defeat, turned to the healer, but Deverans would not meet his eyes. “This is true.”

“Official records will reflect this reality,” Versin stated.

Silence greeted this pronouncement. Spock had little interest in records...and then he asked himself why Versin had bothered to say anything about the subject at all. His eyes narrowed, but the master healer did not seem to notice his reaction.

“Let us speak of Deverans and his duties. You are required on other cases, as you have many talents. Spock and his problems have monopolized you for too long. The good of the many must take precedence over the good of the individual, no matter how unique that individual’s case might be. Since the proposal I am about to make to you both will conclude official treatment, I believe that—”

“One moment,” Spock said. He could scarcely believe what he had heard. Conclude? He had hardly begun! Not even two seasons had passed. He was ready to fight for improvement for much longer than that.

Versin looked at him as if to humor a half-witted adult. “Yes? Do you have something to say, Spock?”

Spock gripped the arms of his chair and strove for calm and a logical approach. He didn’t understand why what was clear to him wasn’t obvious to the others. “Since we have failed to achieve the primary objective for me, would it not be logical to change the protocols under which I have been treated?” He challenged Versin by looking him directly in the eye. “It would be logical to give me back my memories of myself and see if conditions change.” He paused to give his next statement emphasis. “That is, if we assume that achieving full psychic functionality is truly the goal here.” What other goals did Versin have?

The master healer’s lips tightened. “Protocols are not to be questioned.”

T’Kah put in, “You do not have complete knowledge. It is the judgment of your treatment team that such a decision would have debilitating consequences. The relationships of your past contributed to your illness.”

Spock was keeping his emotional reaction well in check, although he felt his anger rise. He wondered, fleetingly, if full Vulcans experienced the range and depth of emotion that he did. He believed that he had great experience of emotion.
“We will not discuss your suggestion further. We move to the purpose of this meeting,” Versin went on. “I propose a plan that has a ninety-four percent chance of maintaining the psychic health you have now that will also allow you to make Golgotharen your home. Not as a patient. Your efforts in the computer center are most welcome, and you can continue—”

Spock made an effort not to inhale in obvious dismay. Continue to live at Golgotharen? Indefinitely? When all the universe went on without him and those who had known him before forgot him? He could not. Could not!

He was standing with clenched fists. He was dismayed at the knowledge of his emotional display and forced his fingers open. “That is not an acceptable course of action. There is no logic in this!” He could not keep the tone of his voice from rising in indignation.

Deverans was now up next to him, and he actually put a hand on Spock’s elbow. But Versin was observing him, a hard glare in his eyes.

“Now you see why we have instructed Deverans to keep your past from you. You have not changed, Spock, from when I knew you before. Your past is destructive, and your behavior here is one indication of that.”

Spock shrugged off Deverans’ hand. He did not need the support that only made him appear weak. “You do not have the right to keep my own experiences from me.”

Versin rose slowly, taking the time to arrange the robes of his office—a long red tunic embroidered with elaborate silver symbols, over heavy navy blue pants—before he spoke. “Spock. You must not speak of rights. I see that the contamination of your hybrid genetics has spread further than I had thought, that it persists even under the circumstances we have designed here. Our duty is to do the best for you by exercising our judgment.”

Spock had been right to evaluate Versin as a dangerous adversary when he entered this room. It was apparent now that he and Versin had formed a negative relationship before, and that Versin was intent on pursuing it here. What was it that he had done to so offend the master healer that he sought retribution under the guise of assistance? Why was Versin intent on incarcerating him at Golgotharen, half-healed and totally dependant on the will of those he did not trust?

Spock straightened his shoulders. The master healer would learn that he, too, could be an adversary.

“I will provisionally accept your judgment on the matter of my memories, as there is little I can do about the matter.”

Versin seated himself with as much ceremony as when he had risen. “That is true. The block that Deverans maintains cannot be overcome. But perhaps it would assist you in reconciling yourself to this situation, Spock, if I were to tell you something that someone you once knew said about you.”

That riveted Spock’s attention. But whatever Versin said had an underlying, less apparent motive to it, Spock was sure.

“I knew you before you came here,” Versin began, tilting his head to speak up to where Spock was standing. “I also knew one of your associates, who held you in high esteem. This person said to me, in private, that nothing was more important to him than for you to regain your wholeness. By this he meant, of course, what makes you Vulcan. We could not accomplish this goal if we were to relinquish your memories to you. Your associate even promised to do anything in his power to help you, if we were to ask him. So you see, it is not only the healers who believe this is the best course
of action for you to pursue.”

Spock hoarded every word; he would remember them all. For now, he would not give Versin the satisfaction of seeing him react further. “I hear your words. Now, speak to me of this proposal.”

“Vous are not the healer here,” T’Kah put in.

Spock seated himself. “But I am the patient about whom you speak, for whom you have collected this data.” He looked at the table; he had no time to examine all the figures in detail. Then he realized that he had the computer skills to retrieve the records whenever he wished, for he could override any security locks the healers could devise. He did not think they knew that…. Why had that not occurred to him before? It seemed that parts of his personality were emerging all the time. What else could he do? “Healer Versin, I am interested in what you have to say.”

“Very well.” The master healer settled his hands complacently in his lap. “Vous are not bonded, Spock. Deverans lost his bond partner two cycles ago. You are each inclined to the other by virtue of the congruence of your mental states. I propose a bonding between the two of you.”

Deverans sat up straight but did not speak. Spock remembered the kiss and all of Deverans’ kindnesses. But….

“There are benefits and drawbacks. The primary benefit is that I postulate Deverans will have greater access within the meld. His contacts with you will be more effective and can be initiated not as treatment but as part of the normal interaction between bond partners. The achievement of sri’tekt will be accomplished more easily, with less effort and pain, and perhaps eventually within daily contact. You may not ever be capable of the mind touch with any others, Spock, but bonded to Deverans it is possible you will manage somewhat more than the twenty-two percent connection that currently limits you.”

T’Kah took up the explanation. “The drawback is the same minimal twenty-two percent joining currently between the two of you. We do not know if this will be sufficient to fulfill Deverans’ needs when his Time comes, if there is never any improvement. We must be very sure of that, must test to ensure your union will be sufficient. And, primarily, we do not know if it can be established at all.”

Spock evaluated the idea. “This is what you propose instead of restoring my memories at this time.”

“Correct,” T’Kah answered. “In a way we do change the parameters of your treatment.”

“Spock has a great desire to leave this facility,” Deverans put in. “I would like to accommodate that wish if I can. Perhaps he can visit the planet’s surface occasionally?”

Versin bowed his head. “Once he is bonded to you, perhaps excursions will be possible, so long as he can easily return.”

T’Kah extended a restrained hand towards Spock. “It is for your own safety, you see. We consider your best interests, Spock.”

“And if I do not agree? Or if the bonding is not possible or safe for Deverans?”

Versin appeared to take satisfaction in his bluntness. “Then the sri’tekt will continue to be achieved with great effort. It is possible you will not be able to reach it with time. After all, Deverans must find a partner some day, and I cannot predict the effect this will have on his ability to link with you. If you refuse to pursue this opportunity, it is likely that you will never be anything more than a
mental cripple, confined to your own thoughts like the most unfortunate beings who have ever sought our help. Or you will die much sooner than you might have.”

Events were happening quickly, and Spock was determined that he would not be forced into any action before he had a chance to consider options. Deverans, in the meantime, was looking at him with hope.

“Spock, this appears to be a logical plan.”

Too logical. Too easy. Too attractive, given his affinity with Deverans. Too likely to result in him being incarcerated in this place of sorrow. Spock did not trust anybody. Not even Deverans now, because he cared too much.

He stood and included the three healers with his words. “I will consider all you have said.”

All of it.

Spock stalked out of the room and closed the door behind him.

*****

After a day of agitated reflection, as he went about his daily routine of eating, working, but for once not seeing Deverans—for, true to his word, Versin had suspended all therapy sessions—Spock considered bitterly how Versin had manipulated him. A bonding between him and Deverans had almost been inevitable, given the healer’s lack of a bondmate and Spock’s great neediness, given the isolation of Golgotharen and how all of Spock’s hopes were pinned on his relationship with Deverans.

Late that evening, he tried to calm his raging thoughts as he walked to the community library, where he was permitted restricted borrowing privileges. He did not wish this joining. Despite the lure of finding a safe harbor in Deverans’ mind, of being known as deeply as he felt they would be known to each other even in a minimal union, there was still something about the idea of sharing mental intimacy to that depth, permanently, with Deverans that felt…wrong. As if it were a betrayal of something fundamental that Spock could not name but felt in his soul. The same way that he felt an elusive presence from his past that he could not name or see, some man with sure fingers who touched him and called solitary passion from his body.

He attempted to shrug the feeling away, for indeed it had no foundation in observable fact or experience. It was like—He stopped in his tracks. It was what the humans called “intuition.” Intuition….He grappled for some image to link to the concept, for he felt as if there should be one, but nothing emerged. Most of the time, when he had such elusive feelings, nothing emerged. He continued to the library, thinking that Vulcan philosophy and modes of conduct did not admit such an ephemeral notion, so this must be a manifestation of his experience of humans. Surely he’d had some, at least with his mother. But this intuition was not logical, and should not affect his analysis of a joining with Deverans.

He and Deverans had danced a fine dance around each other, maintaining the decorum of patient and healer while developing a true and supportive friendship…until they had kissed. That had broken barriers between them. Did the healer have perspective now or was it overcome by desire? Was this bonding the only option?

It was, Spock realized grimly, so long as Versin was the voice who gave the orders, was the healer to whom Deverans and all the others owed their allegiance, and was the enemy who somehow was determined to keep Spock firmly tied to Golgotharen.
Spock turned an about-face away from the library. He had made a decision, and he was not inclined to second-guess himself. His path lay towards the apartment where Deverans lived.

Spock had never visited Deverans. There was an unspoken discouragement of too much interaction between healer and patient that the two of them had, from the beginning, consistently violated. He had to consult the computer before he found the crimson door that separated Deverans’ public and private lives.

Spock raised his hand to knock and almost could not bring himself to connect with the hard steel. The thought of lying with Deverans in a conjugal bed—for that was one potential outcome of this visit, perhaps one that Deverans would expect—twisted his stomach.

He stood there with one hand against the doorjamb, trying to regain control. This was juvenile! Overly emotional and illogical in addition to that. There was no reason why his body could not follow any decision his mind might make. The reality was that he held great affection for the healer, had accepted his affection in return, absorbed it, and used it to help him in his recovery. They each had implied to the other what Versin proposed.

Spock swallowed and knocked loudly.

The healer’s expression betrayed pleased surprise and nothing but welcome when he opened the door. He had obviously been relaxing preparatory to sleep, for he was wearing an informal pullover shirt of red and white checks and a pair of loose white drawstring pants, but it was apparent he was delighted to see his patient. “Spock.” He stepped back and extended a hand towards the room behind him. “You are welcome in my home.”

Deverans lived in a small three room apartment: a living area with a hodgepodge of chairs and settees in a monochromatic brown, an office area through an archway to the right, pristinely featuring a severely styled desk and several cases for disks and hard copy print-outs, and a bedroom that Spock could barely glimpse through an archway on his left. He advanced until he stood in the middle of the living room.

Deverans was right behind him. “Will you be seated, Spock?”

The hard emotions still consuming him wouldn’t allow such relaxation. Spock almost whirled around as if to confront a threat instead of facing his friend. “No, Deverans, I will not. Is it truly your wish to bond with me?”

Deverans searched his face. “I think you know it is, Spock.”

“Then you approve of this course of action the master healer has laid out for us?”

The healer spread his hands. “Approve? Of the way he has gone about it? I do not know that I would go so far as to say that. Accept? Yes. It is a logical course of action. This may be the only way to give you back the mental life you have lost, Spock. Without me, where do you go? Eventual decline is inevitable.”

Spock could see the reason for it, which was why Versin had been able to present his suggestion without guile or guilt. Very reasonable….

Deverans was looking at him sadly. “You do not agree.”

Spock dropped into a cushioned brown chair and steepled his hands before him. “It is not that I do not wish to bond with you, Deverans. Obviously, the option has been before us for some time, and I have considered it. However, there is something I cannot name that prevents me from embracing
The healer’s lips twisted as he brought a small chair to sit facing Spock. “From embracing me.”

Spock regarded him soberly. “We have embraced within our minds often enough. You have seen the honesty of my affection for you. And the embrace of the body that we shared was very pleasing.”

“I would have you as my bond partner, Spock,” Deverans said softly. “Will you not have me?”

“I…do not know.”

“I have seen none other in the years since Sandor died who has caught my interest as you did from the very beginning. And you know we are uniquely compatible.” Deverans leaned forward in his chair with his hands clasped between his knees. “Remember the pleasure we encountered in the very beginning, when you were so uncontrolled and reacted with such need? Since then we have been more decorous in our joining because of the great tasks we needed to accomplish, but that could be ours again, Spock. There are very few of our people who can enter into a bonding knowing that such satisfaction awaits them.”

The memory was enticing…and simul-taneously off-putting, as if it were a forbidden pleasure that was somewhat disgusting or obscene. Were Vulcans meant to share such pleasure, Spock wondered? Was that why he couldn’t quite bring himself to think of himself and Deverans together in that way?

“I….” Frustrated, Spock actually jerked his head back. “Forgive me. My thoughts on this subject are not ordered.”

“I would forgive you much, Spock. T’hy’la.”

Spock ignored the endearment that only increased his discomfort. “I seek your help, healer,” he said formally.

“Speak and I will listen.”

“I cannot examine this issue in an impartial, logical fashion because of the unstated coercion behind it: the enticement of regaining my memories if the bonding is successful, and if my psychic pathways become clear as a result. If that inducement were removed, then I believe I could give the suggestion the attention it deserves. Healer Deverans Mashtlevtlnts, son of T’Nar and Solan, will you release the block that you have imposed on my memories?”

Deverans stared at him. “You ask me to violate my vow as healer.”

“No. Not that. I—”

“Yes, that!” Abruptly Deverans got up and weaved an erratic path among the furniture. “I am a member of the staff at Golgotharen. I am a member of the team of healers who want only your good. I am subject to the authority and knowledge of those more experienced than I am, those who direct your treatment.” He turned towards Spock and spoke to him from across the crowded room. “You do not know what you ask me to do.”

Spock got to his feet. “Deverans, I—”

“Do not speak. Listen to me.” Quickly the healer covered the distance between them until they were face to face again. He rested his hands on both of Spock’s upper arms. “I told you once before
that I did not completely agree with the assessment of the others. You are a unique individual, complete in yourself, reacting to the forces and genetics that shaped you in a honorable way. Always honorable! Never less than that, Spock.”

Spock fought to keep an emotional quivering from his voice. “I do not know. I rely upon you to tell me. You are my portal.”

“I would be so much more than that to you, my t’hy’la,” Deverans said intensely. “I name you that although you have never called me the same. I accept you totally. Who you are now, and who you were then. I respect you, I admire you, I am awed by your achievements and your strength of will. I bow before the circumstances that have enabled me to help you as much as I have, and those same circumstances have made us mentally compatible when no one expected such a thing to happen. Surely our minds are meant to dwell together, so that we can give each other the comfort and solace that are the hallmarks of the most successful unions. To not bond is to spit upon a great gift that the universe has bestowed on us.”

The healer’s fingers lingered against the sleeves of Spock’s shirt until they finally fell away. “I would do anything for you, Spock, except relinquish who I am. I am a healer. I cannot give you your memories unless I am directed to do so by Master Healer Versin.”

It had been unfair of Spock to ask at all. He realized that as he saw the pain in Deverans’ eyes. “I…understand,” said Spock. “I beg forgiveness for placing you in an untenable position.”

“Between us, is it necessary to ever beg forgiveness?” Deverans whispered as he drew near again.

“No,” Spock quietly said. He would not stop what the healer would do….

Again, Deverans reached for him. The kiss was soft, shockingly, emotionally tender, and it pulled from Spock so many emotions. He owed this man his very life.

“I would serve as your partner in the Time,” Deverans intoned the ritual words.

Spock drew in a shuddering breath. Regardless of his deep misgivings, this was logical…. “Let us at least determine if this is possible. I promise nothing, but it is logical to at least see if the capability resides within us. Join with me in seeking.”

Deverans’ fingers sought the spark points. “My mind to your mind.”

//t’hy’la. some day our union will be so much greater than this.//

//let us see if what i offer you will be enough.//

//it must be. i want no other.//

The way to the healer’s bonding center was well-trodden. They were there in an instant, for Deverans knew how from his bonding before, and he had great control, as all healers did. Spock’s would be more difficult to locate.

Stillness, and a hush except for the pulsating presence of Deverans within and around him. Truly, they were most compatible, for there was pleasure everywhere their minds met. Spock remembered how it had been before and knew it could be like that again….

//you distract me deliberately.//
//an illustration of what could be.//

//not if i am not able to bond at all. or if i cannot give you what you need.// Spock was fondly admonishing. He could not put more severity into his communication, for he was aware of Deverans’ desire for him too clearly. It glowed and pulsed. Beautiful. Spock could scarcely believe it, that such an emotion, precious and private, was for him, when he himself was so unsure. He examined his own self; nothing corresponded exactly to what Deverans offered him. His feelings were pale compared to the healer’s passion. //i said no promises.//

Soberly. //i understand. you have doubts, and i see as well unmet needs. i will not play versin’s part as one who coerces. if we bond, it will be through your free will.//

//i honor you, my friend.//

Spock concentrated. Where? He cast about, needing to be the leader in this search, but he was not sure…. Yes, here. And here, faint impressions of occupying a similar space before, like footprints in sand. Perhaps as a result of his childhood bonding, which he’d been told had not been fulfilled as expected. Another move—not a step, not a physical dislocation where two beings overlapped one another—but simply a shift from this perception to that perception. Behind and within him, Spock sensed the healer’s support and growing animation. Yes, this was much closer to where they needed to go….

Their joint awareness constricted to a tunnel, and then narrowed further to a dedicated, inquiring point, and Spock was reminded of how it had been in the time when he had not known himself at all, in the great darkness when he had been nothing but a singularity of existence…except for that one who might have been there with him.…

And with the thought, suddenly he was there, and excitement exploded within him like a legion of stars streaking across the sky. Yes! This was a different mental landscape than Deverans was urging him to find, but a place he recognized, nevertheless. It had been so dark before when he had been trapped amid nothingness, but now there was light and eagerness. Here was his bonding center…almost. One twist away from it, as if here there was the waiting room where the two partners could rest against one another and anticipate the ultimate joining.

He and Deverans, brought with him perforce, were in the same small space

\textit{this small space}
where there was just enough room
\textit{just enough room}
for him and for Deverans
\textit{for me.}
\textit{For me.}
For him and for Deverans
\textit{and for you.}
\textit{For me and for you.}

The distinct dynamic personality he had thought he had said good-bye to, had thought might be a figment of his imagination during a time of great need, had thought he would never see again, was there. This was the one who called for him! Spock surged away, away from Deverans, away from the meld that had taken him so far, and it was easy because of the many times Spock had blazed his own trail, ranging far ahead and away from the healer’s guiding presence. Now he rocketed towards that indistinct figure that drew him as nothing ever had before.

And stopped. Something held him. Something prevented him from going closer. He could have
shouted out his anger. His disappointment. His own inadequacies would not stop him!

Behind him Deverans was attempting to strengthen their blending and pull Spock back to a focused awareness of just the two of them, but Spock ignored him and instead tried to stretch towards the glowing essence that seemed to perceive him not at all. He struggled for a word that would catch this one’s attention and flailed about like a man seeking something precious he had lost. He had lost this one! Why would this one not hear him? How could he not know that Spock needed him?

And suddenly he found a word that seemed to spring up from somewhere deep: //beloved.//

He would not call the name, the endearment, for the shock of it, the rightness of it stopped his frantic reaching. A stillness came over him. He had been known. Something uncoiled in Spock’s being, something that had been ignored for a long time, all the time he had been at Golgotharen. It floated around him like a fine mist, and slowly he began to walk through it. He lifted his face and felt the moisture of memory descend. On Earth—on Earth? On an autumn evening as he had been walking in Paris—in Paris?—anticipating seeing… seeing….

He wanted to remember! Beloved?

//beloved!//

A fine wind began to blow through the tops of trees. Trees? Not as Vulcan knew trees, but profligate, moisture-filled Earth trees, their scent mingled with the sting of cool weather. In the distance was a house, and he knew he had visited there once, not very long ago. Leaves whirled all about him in the recesses of his mind, his feet scuffed them and he watched them drift. He saw that there were still a few left on the mostly bare limbs, and terror gripped him when he realized that shortly, in the changing of the seasons, all of them would fall to the ground.

The remaining leaves were singing a song…. Spock strained to hear what the words were, what the melody meant, but the tune faded in and out of his perception. When the leaves were gone, so would be the reality of what he could barely make out here.

//beloved!//

The form of the one he needed stood beneath the trees, too, but his eyes were lifted to the darkening sky, looking for something. His lips moved as if he were calling a name, but Spock could not quite make out the word amid the deepening shadows.

And then Deverans was next to him.

//you have found him. i told the master healer that you might do so and that all our work might be undone if you did. he did not believe me, but i know you.//

//i must go to him!//

//you cannot. the way is impassable. see?// Deverans tried to direct his awareness to the disintegrated path that stood between Spock and the unknown one. //there and there, disjuncts that not even all the seniors would be able to repair. he is trapped too far away from you.//

But what Spock cared for was that form, that demanding, exasperating form that called to him.

//no!//

//yes. i know this is difficult for you, spock, but it is logical to turn away. let us continue to seek a union that will be rich and true between us, that will be life-giving to you. i do not want to see you die, spock.//
//how can i seek my future without him?// Knowing that what he needed, wanted, was within him but just beyond his grasp….

//this is not your future, spock, this is your past.//

//i cannot believe that.//

//do you reject logic?//

//i cannot rely upon your logic and you deny me my own. without my memories i know only that…../

Abruptly Spock pulled away from Deverans, stifling his next thought, but the healer would not allow it. He exerted all his might, and Spock was swept away from the apparition and into a communion that excluded everything except for an awareness of each other. It was as if they stood with foreheads touching and hands entwined.

Resignation. Sadness. //you do not want to bond with me. you wish only to recover yourself. let us be honest with each other./

//it is true. i honor you, deverans, but—//

//but there is someone else who draws you in a way that i never can and now you have seen his image. i saw your passion in the memories i keep for you, and foolishly i hoped you would learn to give that to me. i should have known better. such a man as you are is not for me.//

//you said i have no bondmate, but who else could this be?//

//the one who was. he is lost to you. you cannot re-establish your bond with him now; the way is broken.//

//i must be with him.//

//you and he were not even joined in the way of the humans. your desire is illogical. if you reject me now, you condemn yourself to an uncertain future. you make a desperate decision, spock.//

//you speak as if i have a choice.//

//let us end this joining. we must make another way for you. you and i together is not to be.//

Spock felt the meld beginning to thin, and he knew that in a few moments the leaves would fall and the trees that sang their siren song would be gone. Without Deverans to take him here, he might not ever find his way back to the one he must know. With a wrench Spock twisted, as he struggled to escape the sterile embrace of the reality that waited for him in the concrete world. He reached a hand to that someone else whose voice he had heard before….

//beloved!/!

There, almost out of sight, the figure wavered as if in a misty dream, as Spock paused on the threshold between what-must-be and what-might-be. His loved one turned to him, and Spock strained to see his face.

//come to me!/!

The one who resided deep in his psyche, so close to the bonding center, spoke in the resonant, sure voice of memory.
You will never forget me.

Try not to forget me.

Try.

And then, a whisper calling him, as if from light years away, not from within the meld but very, very real: Spock. I wish you were here.

Spock opened his eyes as the meld dissolved to find himself standing in Deverans’ apartment at Golgotharen.

He remembered.

“Jim,” he sighed.
I am keeping watch over his body during this long afternoon.

In the filtered sunlight that washes through the fabric of the white tent where I sit by his side, Hamza looks the same as he always has, with his sharp cheekbones and nose and his blessed, delicate mouth. I do not want to think of what the embalmers have done to him to make him seem as if he were merely sleeping. Though it seems that he could turn over and rub the sleep from his eyes, then jump up and berate me for something I have left undone around the house, I know he will not.

He will never take me to travel among the stars, as he promised.

I close my eyes and force myself to think it. Hamza is dead.

He has been dead for many days, for before they released his body to me I was questioned, which I know was the real reason for my summons. For two days I listened to their words; I did not call for a lawyer, and I told them most of the truth of Hamza’s anger. If they did not believe me, then from my long years of sorrow and from my sudden anger on Luna, I knew how to change the perceptions of their minds.

So I waited and waited as they spoke and I distantly heard myself answer, and my grief grew as deep as the sky filled with the trackless stars. When they finally gave him to me, I realized they must have performed an autopsy. Of course they would do that. What would they find if they took my body apart, seeking differences?

I brought him home to the compound. Hamza’s father died years ago, and so I had to ask my own father to wash the body this morning. I would have caused even more scandal than I normally do if I had done it myself, as I wanted to. I was not his wife, he was not my husband, and that is the only time appropriate for a woman to wash a man in the view of my people. They hold to the ways of the Eternists. Bad enough the looks of the children as I walked down our one paved street. Tales have been told about me, probably to frighten the misbehaving ones into correct behavior, though I have been gone for years.

It is hot in this tent where they have laid him out. It is hotter in my heart. My heart flames.

How can such emotion be restrained? I will burst from it. I stand and go over to the flap that opens to the land behind my father’s house. I push it aside and breathe, hoping to ease this tight, dread-filled feeling in my chest, but the air over the land wavers in the heat and I am not eased. I want to run. I want to shout. I want to hurt someone.

How I hate Commodore James Tiberius Kirk.

I clutch the supports that form the doorway and close my eyes as I sway and think about how much I hate him. He has taught me what Hamza could not.

The Starfleet officers who accompanied me to Vancouver were very correct. They were supportive and sympathetic and told me almost nothing with their words. “There was an altercation with Starfleet personnel,” some lieutenant commander said. “Mister Machar resisted arrest. He was declared dead at Saint Francis Memorial.”

“Saint Francis? He was working in Peru. He only came home once a week.”
“Yes, ma’am, we know that. But all this happened in San Francisco.”

“How?” I asked as he led me towards the morgue. I don’t know how I controlled myself; I spoke as if I were only mildly curious.

The junior officer looked at the older one as if in warning, but the man said, “I’m sorry to say, ma’am, that he tripped and fell and hit his head. You’ll be getting the examiner’s report soon. There’s a significant skull fracture that’s listed as the cause of death.”

But it was easy to dip inside their minds. I would have violated their very souls and most private secrets to uncover the truth, I would have left them savaged and idiots without compunction if that were what it took. But I didn’t need to: the answer was on the very surface of their thoughts. They spoke to me and yet tried to keep reality from this small, inoffensive woman whom they did not know could stop their hearts in an instant. They both were aware that my cousin had been murdered…and by whom.

I do not know what my cousin was doing in James Kirk’s home. I know Hamza hated him. Surely Kirk must have done something horrible to force Hamza into action.

I stare out over the landscape that I remember well, towards the ancient dragon tree in the field where I kept goats for so many years while I waited for Hamza to rescue me. It probably has not grown a single centimeter in a hundred years; it merely endures. I do not think I can do the same.

I see the irrigation ditch that makes raising millet possible for the compound. That is where I skipped across the water when I was twelve, when I thought that my genital mutilation would free me.

I am not free of anything. The memory of my dearest cousin weighs me down like the iron heart of a dying star.

I go back to his body and drop next to it. Where is my Hamza? I search again for that touch of his essence I knew so well, but there is no trace of it. Where has his soul gone?

I do not believe in the Eternists’ god or any god, but I want to. I grope for my partner-of-the-heart’s cold, lifeless hand and grab hold of it. How I want to believe! I more than anyone should know what happens to the spirits that depart the body, for I have witnessed more deaths than most. I caused them. All the wailing cries of those caught by the explosive in Paris, I heard. Pren’felit’s last moments, I witnessed. But I perceived nothing except the vaguest hint of immensity.

I stroke the skin on Hamza’s hand. Within hours it will be covered by the wrapping and then the Earth’s dirt. Is that where you are, dearest one? In some immense place even I cannot plumb? Let it be so. Let it be so.

It would be a better place than where I am now. I am adrift. Nothing feels real and I find it hard to form words out loud. I could barely explain anything to the elders when they reluctantly gathered to greet me and accept my cousin’s mortal remains.

“Hamza,” I whisper as I bow over his body. No more tears come from my eyes, but my heart is crying. What will I do without him?

The house is mine but I do not know if I can bear to live in it alone, not with memories filling every room. In the kitchen where someone ate with me who did not fear me—and where he had sex with that woman.

I forgive you.
In the sitting room where he talked with such enthusiasm about his plans that he was so sure would give humans their rightful place in the Federation—and where he struck me and I fell to the floor.

I forgive you.

In the bedroom where I lay and intruded into the minds of his lovers so that I could feel his hands upon me when he touched the women.

Please, forgive me.

I release his hand. No more, no more for me the simple pleasure of being known for who I am and accepted despite that. Only Hamza ever really understood the life I lead. I am truly alone.

Because of James Kirk.

I gaze at the specks of dust that float in the air over Hamza’s body, but instead I see the face of my enemy. Who is he to do this to me? How dare he wrest my life from me? I remember his sorrow when we talked of Spock so far away on Vulcan, but it is nothing, nothing compared to my loss!

Ever have I been forced to keep the truths of my life secret, but I cannot keep my hatred secret. I will erupt like an exploding star at the right time and the right place and I will make James Kirk suffer.

Hamza had always intended to remove him from the world. I will do it for him, my last gift. I have already killed so many. What is one more insignificant man?

I will see how he dies.

I leave the tent and walk the distance across the land to where the goats are grazing. When I get there, I go to the tree that has stood sentinel over the land for uncounted years, and I snap off one of its spindly, leafless branches. It is so easy to do; there is no weight to it. I grip it hard in my palm, and I lift my face to the sky. Hiding behind its limitless blueness shine the unseen stars that I will never know.
“I’ve reserved the tickets already.” Bob Wesley, who had put on a lot of weight since he and Jeanine had separated, stood in front of Kirk in the cafeteria line at Starfleet headquarters. He pulled an enormous slice of banana crème pie from the servo and advanced to the payment slot.

“It’s the opening game of the minor league season,” he continued, “and you’re not going to miss it.”

“Says you and whose mother?” Kirk asked without humor, and he lifted his tray to lead the commodore to a table over by the windows. He unloaded one roast beef and cheese sandwich, one bowl of fruit, and one glass of iced tea and sat down to a view of the skyline of San Francisco. It was a gorgeous mid-October day with a piercing blue sky and not a single cloud. He gestured towards the view. “It’s not the right weather for hockey.”

Wesley took the seat opposite him. “The Sharks don’t begin to play for another three weeks and I’m ready for some action. This minor league team is almost as good as the pros are. Is it because of Lori? I’ve noticed the two of you have been kind of quiet lately. But I’ve asked her already and she wants to come.”

“No, Lori’s okay. The testing’s in two weeks and—”

Wesley cut him off. “Did you two have a fight?”

Kirk tried not to wince. He had no intention of telling Wesley what had happened. What had almost happened. It was a painful memory for so many reasons. As soon as he’d escorted Lori out the door, he’d felt a freedom in being out of her presence and a surety that what he’d done had been right for him. He hadn’t had a second thought, especially not later that night when he’d jerked off in his solitary bed and whispered a name to the unheeding air.

Since then, he’d turned with a vengeance to the work he’d been sentenced to by Komack; he had Friday nights free now and he used them to concentrate on something that he could have some influence on, rather than wasting his time banging his head against walls that were indifferent to his efforts. He was determined to make a stand with the admiral and find a way out of the transwarp project, hopefully back into Operations, but with the third test so soon it wasn’t fair to ‘fleet to leave right now. He’d see the trial through to the best of his ability, and then he’d make his bid for escape with a clear conscience.

There wasn’t any overriding reason to make himself visible in the transwarp office anymore. The dubious plan to lure the perpetrators of the Federation Day attack into exposing themselves by going after Kirk hadn’t worked, though he’d tried to entice them. Yes, he’d tried. Instead they had Hamza Machar, incriminated by his own words but removed beyond all questioning by death, a challenge to the Federation officials who still hadn’t announced that the mystery of the bombing had been solved, though rumors were swirling.
The gruesome token the man had worn around his neck was Pren’felit’s antenna, the genetic testing confirmed that. And Machar’s autopsy had shown some abnormalities in his brain that might account for his claims that he could manipulate matter. A few of the experts disagreed. Kirk had called McCoy into his office one day and presented the medical evidence. Bones had squinted, frowned, and then nodded.

I think we’ve got our man, Jim.

Kirk tended to agree with him, but he also thought that there were still so many questions unanswered that no one would ever be completely sure. The man’s cousin, Fahtima Gabon, had forthrightly revealed Machar’s rage against the command team of the Enterprise when she was questioned, and it seemed that Starfleet’s vaunted public relations campaign had been the trigger that had catapulted Machar into action. His choice of Kirk’s promotion ceremony as a target hadn’t been a fluke after all, but Kirk had shrugged the heavy weight of responsibility from his shoulders. He couldn’t be responsible for the man’s prejudices.

Kirk picked up his sandwich and bit into it with a savage snap of his teeth. Wily Nogura, recently released from stasis and recuperating at his home in Osaka, had been right in predicting the Eternists would make something of his and his former first officer’s relationship; he’d just gotten the timing wrong.

Kirk forced himself to chew and swallow more temperately. No sense in choking to death in the middle of San Francisco because his restlessness and sense of impending action gave him that up-on-his-toes, let’s-get-this-done-with feeling. It was only sexual energy, he told himself. Though he’d read somewhere that celibacy got easier the longer it was practiced, that wasn’t true for him. Especially during the last few days, he kept thinking he was going to jump out of his skin.

“No,” Kirk said to Wesley, “Lori and I haven’t had a fight. I’ve decided a little distance is a good idea.”

Wesley grunted. “You’re too damn stubborn.”

“An excellent trait in a starship captain,” Kirk managed to say lightly. Nothing was Wesley’s fault.

“You’re not a starship captain right now, Commodore, you’re in charge of the most important development project Starfleet’s ever undertaken. Are you ready?”

They were scheduled to have this conversation in their official meeting later in the week, but if Bob wanted to talk about it now, too, Kirk would let him. What the hell, everybody in the senior officer’s cafeteria had top security clearance, and even if they wanted to listen in on what the former wonder boy of Starfleet was saying, the hubbub of the lunchtime conversation would drown out his puny words.

“As ready as we can be with this schedule. I’d still like another six months.”

“Not a chance and you know it. We gave you the new location and you won on the larger ship, so don’t complain. Besides, this way there’s at least an outside possibility the Enterprise will get those new engines before she’s commissioned again. Her captain will like that.”

Swiftly Kirk glanced up at his friend, but Wesley wasn’t giving anything away; he returned Kirk’s stare blandly. But this was the first indication that Wesley, at least, believed Kirk’s dream of re-achieving command of his ship in another two years had a chance of coming true. Did he know anything concrete? There wasn’t anybody better at picking up headquarters scuttlebutt than the iron-haired commodore, and Kirk hadn’t made a secret of his desire for another five year mission.
Frustrated, Kirk turned back to his sandwich. “The engines are already installed on the Acacia,” he said shortly. “She’s being loaded right now into the belly of the Star Traveler.”

Wesley chuckled, totally unaware of Kirk’s mood. “It’s going to be some birth. Thorny.”

Kirk ignored his tepid joke. “Once we’re well into the Oort Field they’ll separate and we’ll see what happens. You know I don’t like inviting the press.”

“Publicity is just as important to Starfleet as to any other political institution. I think it’s a good plan to have the media along. The first two trials went smoothly and this one will, too.”

“You hope.”

“I have a transwarp coordinator by the name of James T. Kirk who tells me it will.”

“Bob....”

“There isn’t any justification in excluding the press anymore. If we didn’t host them on the Star Traveler they’d find their own transportation and get in our way. How do we keep reporters away from a project that’s going to revolutionize space travel? Transwarp drive will be on every starship within seven, eight years. We’ll pull the cruisers into port on rotation and install it so everybody’s updated. This is going to be great for Starfleet, for exploration, for the expansion of the Federation.”

“Whatever you say.”

Wesley squinted at him and was suddenly serious. “Jim, are you trying to tell me something? That your people aren’t ready for the trial? Is there a legitimate reason for postponement?”

Not a word of caution had been raised in any of the many meetings that Kirk had presided over—with the final shreds of his patience—in the last few weeks. Every senior engineer on the project was gung-ho; they each saw their chance at immortality with transwarp, the same way Zefram Cochrane was immortalized by schoolchildren throughout the Federation. Their unrestrained enthusiasm troubled Kirk; did they have perspective? The fact that last year the most brilliant scientist with whom he’d ever worked had questioned whether the entire concept on which the engines were based was suspect.... Advancing that as grounds for delay would make Kirk himself suspect because, dammit, he didn’t have any facts to back him up.

“No, Bob. No reason at all for postponement.”

“Good. Then we’re ready to go.”

“Sure.” He looked at Wesley’s plate. “You really going to eat all that yourself?”

The commodore’s mouth was already full of pie. “Yeah, why?”

Losing his lover had driven Kirk into fighting trim; losing his wife had done the opposite with Wesley. He had settled into a complacent satisfaction with his lot in San Francisco, while Kirk.... He had a fire in his belly, barely held in check by his will.

Wesley really had given up.

“Just wanted to make sure.” Kirk was finished eating and he had things to do even if Wesley didn’t. He stood and picked up his tray. “I’ll see you at our meeting.”
“Sure. Look, before you go….”

Kirk waited for the inevitable.

“Any word?”

“Nothing new.” It had been twenty-five days since he’d heard from Golgotharen. That matched the longest period of silence. What the hell was going on there?

“Oh. Well…” Wesley trailed off, uncomfortable now with solicitude that was not welcomed.

“Listen, the game’s this Thursday. See you there?”

“Maybe.”

Thursday came and, though he spent the long day dealing with details relating to the transwarp trial, in truth the project was ahead of schedule. After hours working in front of the computer screen glowing with the thirty-two different timetables required to make the test go smoothly, Kirk leaned back in his chair. He rubbed his eyes and then gazed out the windows of his office to watch the sun setting; he could just make out the glint of the light-kissed ocean. Sometimes he forgot the beauty of his home planet. He simply sat there, existing, not thinking, a brain-state not unlike when he’d lifted weights at five-thirty that morning.

But after a while, inevitably, the peace of the lowering sun faded, and he did begin to think. Worse, to feel: the anesthesia of work had worn off. He heaved an audible sigh. He didn’t have regrets about not having sex with Lori, not really. But he couldn’t go on like this. He felt as if some sort of balloon or tumor inside of him had been growing, and it would burst dangerously if he didn’t change something. It didn’t have to be sexual; he could no more imagine visiting one of the city’s discreet houses of pleasure than he could imagine continuing as he had been. He didn’t think Bones would approve of him resigning his commission and returning to Iowa, either. He could hear the southern drawl right now: Have you gone and lost your mind, Jim? Well, he’d never seriously considered that option, either.

One of his more dependable assistants, a lieutenant named Jafari, stuck his head into Kirk’s open doorway. “Sir, if you’d like to start reviewing the countdown sequence now, I’m ready.”

The man had family; he shouldn’t be working late without a good reason. They could review tomorrow. Abruptly he got up. “No,” he said, “you go home.”

Jafari looked startled. “Why, thank you, sir. I do have a few things I’d like to clear up before I leave, though.”

“That’s fine. But I’ve got a hockey game to go to.” Maybe getting out for the evening would calm his restiveness.

He beamed straight to the safe-coordinates on Fortuna Street, ran up the steps to the house, and then up again at the same pace to his bedroom. There he showered and shrugged into a pair of jeans with a brown leather belt and a crisp, button-down white textured shirt. It felt good to be out of his uniform. “Computer,” he directed, “contact Commodore Wesley.”

When the commodore’s voice emerged from the speaker, Kirk said, “I’ll be there, Bob, just in time for the seven-thirty face-off. Get my ticket into the arena system, will you?”

Right before he left, he remembered how cold it could be at hockey arenas; at ice level, even he would be chilled. So he grabbed a light-weight, navy-blue windbreaker from the hall closet and was gone.
The air taxi dropped him off in the slightly seedy neighborhood, and he observed that the minor league arena had seen better days. Inside, the concrete walls were mostly a dingy green and gray. At least the brilliant lights over the rink showed a respectable surface. It was freezing, though. They must have had a special cooling unit to counteract the mild central California weather and create the best ice conditions. He respected that. There wasn’t any sense in playing the game if you couldn’t play it the way it was meant to be contested. Kirk pulled on his jacket and continued searching for his friends.

Section G, row 19 was almost center ice, with only a few more rows behind it to the concession area, and that was where Wesley’s seats were. Kirk paused at the top of the stairway before he went to join Bob and Lori, to gather himself and prepare to meet Lori socially. In truth, they hadn’t talked much since they’d almost had sex.

But he wouldn’t let this be awkward. He made his way to where they were sitting.

“Jim! Glad you could make it.”

“Hello, Jim,” Lori said quietly.

On an impulse, Kirk held out his hand to her. He looked into her sweet eyes. “Hello, Lori. It’s good to see you.” And he discovered that he meant it.

She couldn’t have known he would join them when she dressed, so Kirk didn’t think she’d made herself gorgeous for him. She was a knockout in tight black leggings, high black leather boots, and a suede fitted jacket with fur around the collar that did everything to highlight her pale complexion and blonde hair. More than a hint of the perfume that had tantalized him for months filled his lungs as he sat down beside her.

Wesley talked to him across Lori. “Jim, I’m glad you changed your mind. This should be a good match.”

Kirk surveyed the spectators. There might have been five thousand people there in an arena built to hold ten thousand, but that still wasn’t a full house. The rows in front of and behind them were empty. “Not everybody agrees with you. Isn’t this opening night?”

“It is, but this team hasn’t built up any momentum yet. Just wait for later in the season.”

The skaters were filing out onto the ice, and Kirk turned to the contest. This…was okay. Maybe he could do this, even enjoy himself. He concentrated and tried to get into the flow of the skating. Following the swooping attacks of the forwards, observing the frantic checking of the defensemen, he was almost able to lose that persistent buzz in his veins that made him want to propel himself from his seat and do something….

The first period went by swiftly. Lori lost her shyness and started talking to him in her old way, and he began to think that they could be friends again. She was, after all, one of those sophisticated women whom he’d taken to his bed before, and that type knew how to start affairs and how to end them. Theirs had never gotten to the bedroom, but both of them, it seemed, had made peace with that. At the intermission between the first two periods, the three of them got up and went out to the concourse, where they found restrooms, an incongruous ice cream stand, and, of course, beer. They stood there sipping from the plastic cups provided, but Kirk had little interest in the conversation. He felt like pacing instead of standing and exchanging desultory words. He wanted the action to start again, though he had to concentrate to remember the score.

At his suggestion, they made their way back to their seats several minutes before the next period
started, but as soon as he sat down Kirk wished he could stand up again. Eventually the teams filed out onto the ice, the public address announcer started his talk, and the action began.

By the time ten of the twenty minutes of the middle period were over, Kirk was frankly bored and more restless than he’d been all day. The score was a lopsided six to three in favor of the visitors, and he didn’t care about what was going on in front of him. Bob and Lori would occasionally exchange a few words, but Kirk didn’t have anything to say to either of them. He wanted to leave, he wanted to do something else, anything else, but he was trapped in this social situation and couldn’t get out of it gracefully. The impulse to bolt was strong but he wouldn’t give in.

So instead he forced himself to stay seated by looking at the faces in the crowd, scanning which sections were most or least crowded, trying to estimate how he would spend ten million credits to brighten up the place…and then he caught a glimpse of a silhouette on the other side of the arena. At the top of the stairs that led down into Section R, across the ice from where he was sitting with Bob Wesley and Lori Ciani, someone stood.…

His heart thumped in his chest and he was half out of his chair without knowing it. He couldn’t see clearly that far away…and now the shadow had disappeared.

“What is it, Jim?” Lori asked. She put a hand on his arm. “What’s wrong?”

Nothing, nothing, nothing would be wrong if he’d just seen…. “I…I don’t know. I’ll be right back.” He ran up the aisle towards the concourse, taking the steps two at a time, released from his inaction at last. He felt like a fool, knowing it couldn’t have been Spock. Couldn’t have been.…

He stumbled on the top step and almost fell, but he caught himself with an outflung hand and was able to regain his balance. Behind him, from their seats, he heard Wesley’s voice asking “What’s the matter with Jim?” and then Lori calling him, “Jim!”

The concourse was practically deserted as he ran by where the program hawker was dismantling her table. She frowned and probably worried that someone was hurt and needed medical attention. No, that hadn’t happened, though if that wasn’t Spock waiting for him on the other side of the arena, he would feel like punching somebody…. He pushed himself to run faster though his feet felt heavy.

One of the beer vendors hollered at him—*Hey, buddy, need some help?*—but Kirk ignored him as he skidded around the curve that would take him to the other side where he’d seen…could he possibly be wrong? There were plenty of tall, thin men, and women, too, and he’d only had a glimpse before whoever it was had turned away. It had been ten months since he’d seen Spock; maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him and this sprint was useless, ridiculous. Just because you needed to see someone didn’t mean you would…. Besides, wasn’t Spock’s condition unchanged? Golgotharen would tell Sarek if Spock had regained consciousness, much less been released.

He kept running. His shoes slipped on the slick surface that was probably hosed down after every event; countless bottles of beer had been spilled on the floor, and there was a musty, damp smell to the place. The lighting out here wasn’t so good, either, dim and yellow. A security officer stared at him suspiciously, but to Kirk his face was a blur.

Section O. Not far enough. He was still on the curve of the building and he’d seen that man on the straight section. Sections P and Q and Kirk slowed to a jog as he peered left and right at the few people who were up here and not watching the game. People regarded him with inquiry and sometimes alarm. None of them was who he was looking for.

Section R and he slowed to a fast walk. He could see ahead to the next section, too, and there
wasn’t anybody in the concourse who he cared about. Maybe this had all been wishful thinking, maybe he needed a few counseling sessions with Bones so he could get a grip, maybe Spock was the man at the top of the Section T aisle, scanning the rows below him as if he were searching for someone….

Disappointment showed with a minute slump to the man’s shoulders, and he turned away from the ice and towards Kirk….

Kirk came to a complete halt. “Spock,” he whispered.

The name couldn’t possibly have traveled across the meters between them, not in this noisy arena where even now people were cheering something that had happened on the ice, but somehow, Spock heard him. He looked up… and their gazes locked.

It was Spock… with his warm brown eyes that had always been a haven for Kirk, where there had always been answers or support or passion and intensity that matched his own. Now the look in those eyes: Kirk would never forget these first moments of finding home again, as they settled into one another past the long time and distance that had separated them. He could feel Spock’s eyes on him. He inhaled and found that was the only movement he could make. The rest of him was stiff and rooted, even his throat that wanted to swallow in amazement and in sudden, blossoming joy.

It was Spock, looking thin in austere black Vulcan traveling clothes of tight pants and a short tunic that must have been totally inadequate for keeping out the cold of the arena… but alive! Alive and conscious and standing there, staring at Kirk as if he were desperately hungry for the sight of him.

It was Spock… Oh God, it was Spock!

Spock’s lips parted. “Jim!”

Suddenly there was no space between them at all as they moved at the same time. Their bodies connected, and each of them desperately reached for a bruising hug. To hell with their carefully constructed habits of how to conduct themselves in public; nothing could have stopped Kirk from embracing this man he wanted so much, to prove to himself Spock wasn’t an apparition….

Kirk pressed himself against the body he loved. He couldn’t get close enough. He knew the warmth of this skin! He squeezed his eyes shut and just felt: the solid reality his arms were encircling; the rise and fall of Spock’s chest against his own; Spock’s hands around his back, crushing the air out of him, and the way his lover’s face rested against his.

“Spock,” Kirk breathed, and then again, “Spock. T’hy’la.”

And Spock was whispering, “Beloved. I have found you. Beloved. Beloved. Jim.”

Kirk had to see him, and so he pulled back, and of course Spock pulled back, too, their arms moving not at all and the rest of their bodies as close together as their clothing would allow, but their gazes fell once again into a communion that demanded something more.

Slowly, slowly, there in the middle of the concourse of the Silverstone Community Arena, with a hockey game going on so near to them and curious people walking past, their lips joined as they united something precious and irreplaceable.

Kirk felt his eyelids prickle with unshed tears with the first touch of Spock’s mouth, so soft and shockingly, emotionally tender, and in this kiss he knew that Spock was telling him he, too, had suffered from the long separation: this kiss was manna in the desert to them both. The merest press of their lips together, and yet now Kirk’s heart was singing.
“I’ve forgotten how this feels,” Kirk murmured when their mouths moistly separated. But not their arms or their bodies or their hearts.

Spock didn’t misunderstand him. “I am happy, too. You taught me that before, and now, here....”

“I think I forgot how to smile this past year.”

“As have I,” and then they both proved themselves wrong, Kirk with a smile that made his cheeks ache and Spock with the small curving of lips that had always caused his captain—yes, always Spock’s captain—to spiral in towards his first officer in utter fascination.

Kirk fell in love all over again in that moment, but then he seriously took the beloved face between his two hands. “How are you?” he asked gently.

Spock nodded as if in reassurance before he answered. “Essentially unchanged, although my stay at Golgotharen has given me some time. The prognosis is uncertain.”

Kirk was disappointed, but somehow...he’d known. If there had been a genuine cure, he thought he would have known it in his own heart the instant he’d seen Spock. “Are you saying that you’re stabilized? No more attacks of unconsciousness?”

“I believe so, although.... Must we speak of this here? I will tell you more later. I wish to....”

“Wish to what?” His hands fell to Spock’s shoulders, but he didn’t want to stop touching. Spock still held him tightly around the waist.

“Are you still.... Do you still live on Fortuna Street? I should have checked.”

Kirk knew what Spock was asking. Had he given up hope? Had he left the house where they had planned to construct a planet-bound life together? Had he taken a different lover?

Kirk was glad he could answer Spock forthrightly, without pain. The last ten months of waiting evaporated like mist under a warming sun. Ten months: they were nothing. It had been easy to wait.

“Not only,” he said, “do I still live on Fortuna Street, so do you. And nobody else does but the two of us.”

The smallest of smiles flashed in Spock’s eyes. “Then let us go home, Jim.”

Before Kirk could wholeheartedly agree, another voice intruded. “Hey, buddy, looks like you found what you were after.”

It was the beer vendor who had asked if he needed any help, tipping his cap as he passed the two of them standing there embracing. He, too, was smiling.

Kirk nodded and then he turned back to Spock. “I sure have found him.”

“And I. You have no idea how I have searched for you, Jim,” Spock said with a catch to his voice.

Kirk knew there would be an explanation of that enigmatic remark, not now but later, when they were safely home. He pulled back and separated their bodies, and though he wanted to grab Spock’s hand, he didn’t. “Let’s go. First I’d better say good-bye to Bob and Lori, so they don’t think I’ve lost my mind and run off into the night. I, uh, bolted away from them like a bat out of hell. C’mon, this way.”
He took a different route to Section G, not back the way he had run so frantically, when he had scarcely dared to believe that he had seen Spock across the long distance of the rink and had actually recognized the hazy outline of his body, but forward, around the rest of the circle of the arena.

Spock walked next to him, and Kirk couldn’t stop looking at him. Spock couldn’t stop looking right back, with eager eyes, so they made uncertain progress, and once Kirk almost walked into a support pillar. He laughed and shook his head, feeling as giddy as a teenager. This was Spock next to him! Then the second period of the game ended and people came pouring out of their seats in their quest for beer, and there was no room for them to go on side by side. Spock dropped behind him, since Kirk knew where he was going, but Kirk felt the loss of visual reassurance keenly. Illogically. Of course Spock was still following him in the crush of the crowd. This hadn’t all been a dream; he could still feel where Spock had compressed his ribs in their hug, and he could hear that heartfelt murmuring of beloved. Just as they got to the top of the stairs of section G, he abruptly stopped and turned around to see…. Spock actually bumped into him, but neither of them cared. Kirk wanted to kiss him, but it was Spock who without hesitation took his hand. The connection was almost as good as a kiss. Kirk took in the sight of their fingers entwined, and he wondered if it was possible to feel any more than he was at that moment.

“Let us go to your friends,” Spock said.

They went down towards where Lori and Bob were still seated. Their heads were bent together in conversation, so they didn’t hear or see Kirk approach until he moved into the row of seats right up next to Lori.

“Hey,” he said to catch their attention, “look who I found,” and he held up his and Spock’s linked hands with pride. And a big grin: he didn’t care that he was grinning and he didn’t think he could stop.

“Commander!” Lori exclaimed, and “Spock!” Wesley said, and they both jumped to their feet.

There was a jumbled mixture of welcome home and good to see you, and Wesley reached for a handshake, then remembered and withdrew just as Spock released Kirk’s hand and extended his own, so then Wesley tried again as Spock withdrew, and all three humans laughed as finally the two men shook hands.

“Where did you find him? How did you find him in this big place?” Lori asked breathlessly.

“Something made me look up and I saw him. Or thought I saw him. Somebody seemed to be searching the crowd across the way.”

“But here? Why didn’t you call Jim on his comm, Commander?”

Spock had the grace to appear somewhat abashed. “I wished to…surprise him. But he was not in his office when I beamed there from the orbital transfer station. One of your assistants, Jim, told me you were attending a hockey game. And so I came here.”

“Logical,” Kirk put in happily.

“I still think it’s amazing that you saw him across the ice. I wondered what the hell made you take off like that.”

“You’re looking at him.”

They were all still standing along the chairs in the row, and Wesley gestured to the seats. “Let’s sit
down and see the rest of the game. Jim, you missed two goals while you were gone and—”

“I don’t think so, Bob. Spock and I are going home.”

“Of course you are,” Lori agreed.

“I have never,” Spock put in, “been interested in hockey. I believe I will take Jim home.”

“Oh, right,” Wesley said as realization dawned, and he flushed. “Of course. It’s good to see you, Commander. Have a good night.” His blush deepened.

They all said their good-byes, and Kirk and Spock began to leave. But then Kirk had a thought and he turned back to Lori.

“Commander Ciani,” he called.

She looked down the row at him. “Yes, sir?”

“I won’t be making it into work tomorrow. Probably not the day after that, either. Please log me off duty, let my superior officer know, and tell him that I’ll be able to take care of…anything that comes up. Later.”

She managed to keep a straight face and saluted him. “Aye-aye, sir.” Then she watched them as they made their way out into the aisle to disappear into the concourse. She turned back towards the empty surface of ice and sat down next to the commodore.

“Hrmph,” Wesley said. “Kirk and his stupid humor. Of course I know he won’t be in tomorrow. Are you okay, Lori? I know that you and Jim….”

“Never really were a couple. I always would have been second best anyway. I’m glad that Spock is back.”

“Me, too. Jim’s been damn moody with him gone. He’ll be easier to work with now that he’ll be getting some…. Anyway, he’ll be easier to work with.”

Lori shoved his shoulder. “Bob!”

Wesley shrugged. “Well, it’s true. What do you think those two are gonna do tonight? Damn, I’m envious. Not that I swing that way, I don’t. But you’ve got to admit that they’re both good-looking men.”

“Oh, I’ll admit that.”

There was silence between them then, and the two teams began to come out onto the ice for the third and final period. Then….

“Yeah, I’m envious.”

Lori exhaled heavily and released her dream. “Me, too.”

*****

The night sky was clear as Spock and Kirk waited, wordlessly and each standing with their arms at their sides, for the next aircab in line to settle by the curb in front of the arena. To distract himself from the temptation that was Jim next to him, Spock scanned the familiar and yet unfamiliar constellations: Cassiopeia, the Seven Sisters, Pisces glowing in the darkness. He had lived in the
darkness for too long, and now that he finally stood in memory and truth, he felt expansive and lighter than air, as if he could spread wings and float upon the merest puff of wind, the way he had moved up and down the steps of the amphitheater on Luna.

He looked over at Jim, who was looking back at him with a hunger that Spock felt, too. He preferred to be earthbound, next to the one who had been with him through everything, although for so long he hadn’t known.

The aircab landed and the hatchway swung up. To his dismay, it wasn’t one of the automated ‘cars but instead had a driver who asked without turning, “Where you goin’?”

Neither one of them answered but Kirk climbed into the back seat and punched in their address. Spock settled next to him and the cab took off.

He sat silently, not willing to speak in the presence of the driver, but Spock felt as if his whole body was trembling, yearning for any connection with Jim he could achieve. He wanted to pull Jim into his arms and kiss him, he wanted to lay him out full length along the back seat and climb on his body, he wanted to hold him, talk to him for hours and explain everything, hear everything.

All the way during the journey from Golgotharen, he had anticipated their reunion… and tested his memories with fear and wonder. Although Spock believed that his almost-joining with the image that resided within him had blasted through all of the healer’s blocks and that his recollections were honest, there was still the possibility that…they weren’t. It was possible that he had read something into his relationship with Jim that was wish-fulfillment and not reality.

Again he looked at his partner, and this time he remembered Kirk’s voice whispering t’hy’la in the arena. That word of love and acceptance had never sounded right coming from Deverans, but from Jim…. Yes, that was what they were to each other. T’hy’la. His memories were not faulty at all, but joyfully complete.

Jim was staring out the window as if he were concentrating on the lights of the city as they flew above it, and Spock allowed himself to feast on his profile. For as long as he lived, he knew this man was his. This man with the steadfast heart, the determined soul, and the agile mind. This man with eyes wide and beautiful, with muscled arms that had circled Spock’s body in an embrace that spoke of home.

This man who needed him. Even when he had known nothing on Golgotharen, he had heard Jim’s voice calling him.

It was impossible not to reach out. Spock shifted his hand from where it had been on his thigh to the space on the seat between them and rested it there. A heartbeat later, without turning away from his contemplation of the city, Kirk matched him. When they pressed the sides of their hands together without any overt display, Spock had to close his eyes against the thrill that raced through his body. He calculated how much longer before they would land.

He was off by an interminable minute and twenty seconds, but at last the cab was flying over a familiar neighborhood. Kirk had his credit disk in the slot before they had settled to the ground, and then they were hopping out as the hatch was still opening. Kirk bounded onto the sidewalk and straight up the steps of 2114 Fortuna Street, and Spock was right behind him.

Kirk went through the doorway, murmuring “Lights up,” and Spock saw the first floor of their home illuminated, but he had eyes only for his lover. At last they were alone. Spock felt something twist and change inside of him, as if he were discarding the false skin he had been forced to wear at Golgotharen, so that his real self was revealed. It was here that he could be most truly himself,
without anyone to measure how human or how Vulcan he was. He could simply be with Jim.

Kirk descended the two steps to the living room and turned around. His eyes were amber in this light and hopelessly attractive, calling Spock to fall within them, to live forever within Jim’s sight. The lush curve of his mouth: Spock remembered Jim’s lips on his in the arena.

“Spock,” Jim whispered. “Please….” He held out his arms and Spock saw that they were shaking.

With longing, with desire that matched Spock’s own. They needed each other, and they had been separated too long for anything else but this. He thought of Jim naked and a fierce possessive joy rose up in his chest. Home! Jim! Beloved!

Spock bounded down the steps and into Jim’s arms, grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him onto the floor where they landed on their sides with a thump next to the navy blue sofa, but that didn’t impede Spock’s frantic reaching for the mouth he had to have. Or perhaps it was Kirk who found his, but for a moment their bodies were motionless as their tongues sought each other.

Kirk groaned at their first contact and clutched at him harder. His blunt human fingers dug deeper into Spock’s side, hard enough to hurt, but that only convinced Spock that he was really there, on the floor of their home, not lost but feeling Jim’s tongue against his and his strong body beginning to move again. Jim threw his leg over Spock’s and brought their bodies even closer together, and a second later Spock could not help but push against him.

Spock’s penis was full and heavy within his constricting pants, almost painful as it sought to rise, but then Jim’s hand was there on him as if he knew, pulling him up within the cloth and then stroking through it with a murmured oh, yes. Spock shuddered with that caress, jerked his head back, breaking their kiss, and gasped to the air between them.

“Wait,” he managed to get out. “Let us….” He would achieve his climax in seconds if Jim didn’t stop. And he wanted to remove all of their clothing and revel in their nakedness. He pulled away from Jim’s grasp and started to tug the shirt out of his tight jeans. Jim was trying to get Spock’s tunic over his head, and they were entangled in a hopeless conflict of arms and frantic intentions.

Kirk gave up first. “Let’s do this right,” he growled, and he got to his feet, discarded his jacket, and swiftly began unbuttoning his shirt. Spock stared at him, transfixed, as the hairless chest he remembered was revealed when Kirk ripped the shirt off, dropped it on the floor, and stood there only in his jeans. Jim’s waist was narrower than he remembered it, the pectorals more defined, and the nipples that rode on strong pads of muscle were peaked and aroused. Spock’s mouth flooded with saliva as he thought about sucking on those nipples. Jim had always liked that….

“Don’t make me come down there and tear off your clothes,” Kirk threatened, but then the expression in his eyes changed. “Or maybe that’s what you’re waiting for….”

Oh, yes.

In a second he was back on the floor, straddling Spock at the waist just above his aching penis, and Spock had to exert control not to push Jim onto it. Instead he ran the flat of his palms against Jim’s chest. With each point of contact the sensation clicked into his memory, and he was able to think Yes, this is the way it was.

Jim bent forward and Spock curved his hand around the sturdy neck. Their mouths met in a kiss that bruised Spock’s lips, they were so desperate to delve into each other; but he didn’t care. He would do anything for this.
“I’ve missed you so damned much,” Jim said intensely. “Everything. The way you talk, the way you look at me. The way you touch me.” He pulled back to yank at the fastening of Spock’s pants. The fly gave way, and he struggled to get both the pants and briefs down past his hips. Spock lifted up to help him, and he felt the kiss of cool air against his heated genitals. Kirk had no regard for his comfort as he pulled off shoes, socks, pants, and undergarment with a few economical motions and threw them halfway across the room.

Spock put his own hands on himself, at the base of his column. He watched Jim, kneeling next to his ankles, swallow hard, and he knew that in another moment that mobile mouth would be on him. But that wasn’t what he wanted right now…. He wanted a different sort of kiss….

“No,” he commanded. “Off with those.” And abruptly he was up, forcing Jim back against the carpet and attacking his jeans. Jim helped by kicking off his shoes as Spock worked the zipper, and then he was completely naked.

Jim tried to get at his tunic again, but Spock growled out loud as he single-mindedly focused on the proof of human desire, standing straight and weeping already for him. For him. He fell upon Jim’s body and demanded his mouth as they struggled to match their lower bodies. Jim’s legs locked around his hips with fearsome strength, Spock braced himself up with stiffened arms, and they slid into perfect alignment, one against the other.

All of Spock’s awareness zoomed down to that one area, and he thought that he would die from the terrible, righteous sweetness of Jim’s penis against his own. He closed his eyes, thrust against him once, twice as he reached for what he needed…and everything that he’d been holding inside of himself for the long months came rushing out.

He did not call so much as he wailed Jim’s name. Emotion swept him up in a huge wave as he pumped out his ejaculate; he wanted to laugh, to scream out loud, to cry for the wasted time, to inveigh against the fates for their indifference to his needs, and to thank those same fates for this miraculous moment. He wanted to stay suspended in this time forever, but he couldn’t…. Spock closed his eyes and, limp with exhaustion and feeling, collapsed against Jim as the last eddies of his orgasm drifted away.

*****

Jim’s hand was stroking his forehead, threading fingers through his bangs, and Spock realized that he was on his side with his head cradled on Jim’s chest, the way they had rested together in their shared bed on the Enterprise. He must have fallen immediately to sleep for a few minutes after their lovemaking.

He pushed himself up on his elbow to gaze down at Jim’s groin. He was beautifully-formed, as Spock remembered, but not still erect and, judging by the amount of ejaculate that pooled on the flat belly, not only had both of them achieved climax, but Jim hadn’t moved much at all since then.

Their mingled emissions…. The symbolism of it appealed to him, and he had never been fastidious about the products of their bodies. He swirled a finger in it, and he felt not only its warmth and appealingly thick nature, but he also perceived how Jim drew in a deep breath at his touch: his stomach contracted sharply.

Spock brought the finger to his mouth, licked one side of it, and then turned on his elbow to bring the same finger to Jim’s mouth. Kirk took it in and sucked it dry. Then he pulled Spock down on him full length, where their passion for each other smeared on both of them. Spock didn’t care.

“I love you, you sexy Vulcan,” Jim murmured in his ear, and Spock kissed him, a long, sensuous
kiss that he hoped spoke the words in a different way.

With a satisfied sigh, Spock slid back to his former position, where he could hear Jim’s heartbeat.

“I can’t believe you came to the hockey game looking for me. It’s the last place I would have expected to see you. And this….” Kirk tugged on the wrinkled tunic that Spock still wore, the only article of clothing between the two of them. “You must have been freezing.”

“I do not believe I noticed the temperature at all. I was intent on searching for you.”

“And you found me.” Kirk’s arm tightened around him, then released. “But you can’t be comfortable now. Computer, raise temperature four degrees.”

“There is no need—” Spock began, but Kirk wouldn’t hear it.

“Computer, start fireplace, level five.”

There was the muted roar of a gas burner being ignited behind him, and Spock sat up and twisted around to see flames and artificial logs a meter or two from where they were sprawled on the floor. He remembered the comment he had made that rainy day months ago…. His throat constricted.

“Like it?” Kirk asked behind him, his voice not entirely steady.

Without words for the moment, Spock nodded. Then, “You were so sure I would return?”

“No,” Kirk said with sadness. “I wasn’t. Most of the time when you want something that badly, when you can’t influence the outcome at all, you don’t get what you want. Life doesn’t work out that way.”

Spock laid a hand flat against his side. “For us it has. I am here.”

Jim was up and reaching for him again, and they wrapped their arms around each other. “Stay this time,” Jim whispered. “Stay.”

Spock remained like that for a long minute, holding Jim and being held in his embrace, saying nothing but feeling everything. How could he have forgotten this sensation of belonging? Every being needed it in one form or another, and it was through the emotions of his mother’s race that Spock had finally found what would serve as a foundation for the rest of his life. This man. Even through Deverans’ control of his memory, he should have remembered more of Jim.

Eventually Kirk pulled back and gave him a small smile. “I have a lot of questions, and I bet you do, too. But I’m thirsty and we need to clean up. Want me to get you something to drink?”

Spock mock-sighed. “You humans and your need for liquid sustenance after lovemaking. I will get myself something warm to drink, yes.”

Spock got up and extended a hand to help Jim, and Kirk took his palm and rose with another knowing smile. Neither one of them wanted to stop touching. They went together into the kitchen with hands clasped, and when Kirk immediately got himself a big glass of water and gulped it down, Spock could not resist embracing his nude body from behind as he did so. When he pressed against Kirk’s bare backside, a flare of sensation tingled through his penis.

Jim pushed back against him. “Later for that,” he murmured, and Spock kissed the perfect skin of his shoulder before releasing him.
Spock ran hot water on a towel that he used to wipe his lower torso, and then he rinsed it and handed it to Kirk to do the same. It was only when he was walking back to the living room with a mug of green tea, towards the enticement of the flickering fire, that he focused on the experience of his sex organs swinging freely in the air and the odd awareness of being half-clothed. It felt... freeing, as all this evening since the time he had seen Jim in the arena had been freeing.

Jim had arranged some pillows against the base of the couch and was lounging there waiting for him. Spock stood and took in the vision of his...mate. Kirk had donned his white shirt but kept it unbuttoned, and the resulting sight of that well-developed chest gleaming in the firelight, with no other clothing at all to impede his sight, caused Spock to swallow heavily. He felt as if he was in a state of perpetual arousal. Non-Vulcan, to be sure, this simmering need for another’s body, and he was sure that if he and Deverans had bonded, there would have been nothing like this between them.

Spock settled next to Kirk and placed his drink on the table that had been shoved to the side of the couch. Kirk put his arm around Spock’s shoulder, and Spock took possession of his waist. They were close against one another, and it felt just right.

“Now,” Kirk said. “Tell me how come you’re here when I’ve been getting notices from Golgotharen that you were still in a coma.”

Spock twisted upright to regard him closely, and his contentment vanished. “The communications from Golgotharen said that? They were deceptive. I regained consciousness...” he calculated for a moment, “in early April. Six months and twelve days ago. As negative as my impression of the master healer is, I had not believed Versin would deliberately—”

“He didn’t say exactly that. All the information I got was relayed from Sarek, because Versin said I didn’t have any rights; he said we weren’t joined in any way anymore. But Sarek relayed everything verbatim immediately, and the last detailed notice we got was that they’d operated on you and you’d slipped into a coma. Since then, all they ever told us was that your condition remained unchanged.”

“So you were not aware....” He did not attempt to restrain the anger that burned in a tight spot in his chest. “That is unconscionable. You did not even know I was recovering physically?”

Mutely, Kirk shook his head.

The unfairness of it struck Spock like a blow; he could not imagine the worry that must have consumed his lover. Bad enough that Versin had waged a campaign against him, but to have callously caused the one he loved such unnecessary pain....

Spock corralled his escalating emotion. He would never be in Versin’s control again, and revenge was illogical.

“Then it is no wonder that you were surprised to see me. I came to you as quickly as I was able to circumvent Versin’s restrictions and arrange for transportation that was willing to remove me from the station.”


“I escaped,” Spock said firmly.

“You’re a runaway.”
“Essentially correct.”

“But—”

“You do not know, Jim. They wanted me to remain there indefinitely. With no memories, not of you, not of my career in Starfleet, not of myself, and little hope of regaining them. If I had not been willing to explore the possibility of a bonding with Deverans, I would never have—”

“What?” Kirk had obviously seized upon the one positive note, for his face was alight with hope. “You can bond? Could we—.”

Spock grabbed Kirk’s hand and squeezed it hard. “No,” he said quickly, for he couldn’t tolerate that hope; it hurt too much when they both wanted the union of their spirits so badly. “I cannot bond with you, and I would not bond with the healer, despite his logical arguments for me to do so.”

Kirk searched his face. “I think,” he said carefully, “that I’d better hear this from the beginning before I jump to conclusions. You said you had no memories?”

Spock released his hand, remembering the long days when he had known there was something in his past calling him but had been unable to grasp it. “So few. Vague impressions. The block imposed by the healer allowed very little to—”

“Block! This was done to you deliberately?”

Spock nodded. “I have not explained things in a logical fashion.”

“You’d better,” Kirk said grimly. “Because right now I’m this close to taking the first shuttle back to Vulcan so I can punch this guy out—Deverans, you said his name is?”

Spock’s mouth twisted wryly. “Better for you to attack Versin, who orchestrated it all, than Deverans, who I believe is innocent of anything but a sincere desire to help me, according to his understanding of what I needed.” He rested his hands on Kirk’s shoulders. “But you are the only one I want, and the only one who gives me what I need.”

He pressed his mouth to Jim’s, and it seemed that their recent lovemaking had done little to dim their need of one another, for the kiss was long and languorous. Jim fed him his tongue with abandon and a small sound of promise, and Spock took what he offered.

When Spock finally pulled away, he was breathless, and Jim had a look in his eyes that would call Spock home from much further away than Vulcan, he was sure.

They leaned back against the sofa again. Spock took up his lover’s hand and studied the fine lines on the palm, the broad strength of the wrist, and the capable fingers. Then he began to speak. He told everything, and he tried to capture the emotional experience as well of being trapped in darkness and pain for so long, of awakening to find solace in the melds with Deverans, of their growing closeness, and of Spock’s own confusion at the fleeting hints of memory that told him there was something—or someone—waiting for him beyond Golgotharen.

It took a long time to relay it all, for Spock was determined to convey the essence of it, the way they might have communicated if they had been able to merge thoughts. He forced words to do it, and Kirk let him take his time. The flames from the fireplace cast an orange, warming glow over them, but Spock felt chilled nevertheless. When he came to the joining with Deverans where they sought the bonding center, he slowed, for he feared Jim’s reaction. Spock had, after all, come so close to betraying them both. If he had actually bowed under Versin’s pressure and taken Deverans
into his mind and heart….

But Jim did nothing but squeeze his hand in encouragement. His eyes widened when he heard about the insubstantial image of himself that resided within Spock.

“You know what this is,” Spock said.


“Yes.”

After that they rested against one another in silence, in joy and in sorrow. It was close to midnight. He wondered how he could have thought Jim would not understand.

Kirk stirred. “Gri-Ta was right. You’ve kept the essence of our bond all this time. Sometimes… sometimes I did think that there was still something there. Not most of the time. But how else would you have been drawn to me for your pon farr? And tonight, when I glanced up and saw you. I’ve had this feeling all during the time you were gone, that there was something stretching away into the darkness, and you were at the other end. I’ve always called it my imagination, though, because I wanted you so much.”

“Do you recall when we were lost within the Graves Gravitational Mass?” Spock felt Kirk shift at this reminder of what he had called the most dangerous, harrowing mission of the entire five years, occurring just before they had turned for home.

“Of course I do.”

“I have always wondered how you managed to even partially withstand the psychosis it created that debilitated everyone else. No one else was able to regain consciousness; they were lost in their fantasies.”

“Except you.”

“Exactly. Me…and you,” Spock said. “It was our encapsulated bond that extended at least some protection to you, although neither of us is aware of it.”

“But…” Kirk sounded wistful. “We can’t reach it, you say? Do you think if you melded with Deverans again, that he might—”

“I do not think so, Jim,” Spock said gently. “I saw it. There is too much damage.”

Kirk bent over and kissed their joined hands; his lips on Spock’s fingers felt cool and enticing. The firelight flickered on his features. “My poor Spock. I am so sorry that you had to endure all of that.”

And Spock knew that he meant not only the long months at Golgotharen, but the years since the attack that had robbed him of his psychic life.

Kirk straightened. “All right. We go on. Tell me exactly what the medical prognosis is.”

Spock would be honest. “That is uncertain. Deverans and I did achieve sri’tekt not long ago, so I will reap a certain benefit from that, although for how long is not known. The healers assumed that I would need some regular mental contact to keep the linkages stimulated and prevent them from withering again.”
Kirk caressed his face with the back of his fingers, with infinite tenderness. “And you won’t be getting that with me,” he said sadly. “You would be looking forward to a long and fulfilling life if you had bonded with Deverans.” Before Spock could react to that impossibility, he continued. “But I won’t question your judgment. Although I’ve got to be grateful for the time that’s been given back to us because you went away, I won’t ask you to do that again.”

“Do not, Jim.”

“But….” Kirk got to his knees and, putting a hand above each of Spock’s ears, bestowed a kiss on the top of his head. It felt like a benediction, a blessing, and what it was: gratitude that came welling up from the soul. Then Jim was pressing Spock against his chest, and Spock went willingly into the soft protection of Kirk’s open shirt, to hear the blessed beating of the human heart and to find his place there.

“Thank you,” Jim whispered. “Thank you for coming back when I can’t give you what you need to live. I can’t imagine how you can give me so much, I don’t deserve it, but I promise…” Kirk’s arms around him tightened, “I will do everything I can to be worthy of you.”

“Do nothing at all,” Spock said, and his voice was muffled against the smooth skin against which he rested. “You are perfect for me the way you are.”

Kirk gave a short laugh that sounded like a hiccup, and Spock knew that he was close to tears. “Don’t be illogical, Spock.”

“I speak nothing but the truth as I see it.”

Kirk pulled back with a tiny smile to counteract the wetness in his eyes. “Then I think your time away from me has corrupted your ability to evaluate. I need impartial assessments from you, Science Officer.”

That reminder of the life they had once lived with each other on the Enterprise was bittersweet. “I endeavor to provide what my captain needs from me at all times.”

Spock raised his hand to smooth his lover’s face, and Kirk caught it in his. “Then come upstairs with me. Come to our bed with me.”

Always he wanted to say “yes” to this man.

Jim led him up the stairway to their bedroom. Neither of them instructed the computer to turn up the lights, but there was enough spilling in from outside for Spock to see. The black and white comforter was still there, and the crystal hyacinths behind their forcefield protection, and the way that Jim had always aroused him was the same, too. Soon they would join their bodies again, and this time their excitement would not prevent the care that intercourse and penetration demanded. Spock could feel his penis filling, his testicles pulling up, and he looked into Jim’s shining eyes. How he wanted this man. Not Deverans, not any other being he had ever met, but this human man.

Jim stood with his arms at his sides, returning his regard in silence, but with such open love and longing that Spock was humbled. Jim’s expressive eyes showered emotion on him; he did not need a mental joining to know all that Jim was thinking. He shared each thought: I am so happy to be with you again. Don’t ever go away. I need you….

Slowly, slowly, Spock ran his hands up the chest that was contoured and defined, reveling in the cool, moist human skin against his palms, then over the strong shoulders that knew how to bear heavy burdens, and finally down the upper arms, pushing off the shirt that Jim wore and leaving
him bare to Spock’s sight.

Jim stood and let him do it, and only when the material was a pallid pool at their feet did he move. Spock felt those fingers at his waist and closed his eyes. He raised his hands over his head and allowed himself to be stripped of the last remaining barrier between them.

“Lay with me,” Jim whispered and, with slow, measured motions, Spock sat down on the side of the bed, and his lover went with him. Jim pulled him into a kiss, soundlessly, and it was as if Spock were resting under trees, bowed over him providing comfort and shelter, promising peace and great pleasure. He lost himself in Jim’s mouth and in the way those arms came around him. He let the weight of his body take them to the mattress, and he drifted in fulfillment, because Jim was with him….

The vision he wanted to see: Jim was up on one elbow staring at him, memorizing the contours of his face. His cheek was brushed with fingertips that ran up to his brow. Spock leaned into the touch.

“I never admitted this even to myself.” Jim’s words were cushioned by the darkness, they were so soft and low. “But deep inside, I used to worry that I’d…somehow forget you. How you really look and how you really taste, how you feel. That everything we had would fade into a dream. When I saw your shadow across the arena, I convinced myself it couldn’t be you even when I ran towards you, and I thought I was a fool because I hadn’t kept the best part of my life alive.”

“You did not forget. You kept the memories for both of us.”

“Oh, yes. Here,” a finger traced the length of Spock’s eyebrow, “and here,” the tip skimmed across his lips. “I’ve got to kiss you.”

Spock rolled over onto his side and their mouths, open and seeking, met in a kiss, but then Jim reached around his waist and brought their lower bodies together. When his erection slid against Jim’s, air escaped Spock’s lungs in a long exhalation.

“So good,” he murmured, and then he pushed his tongue into the receptive mouth.

*I need to rediscover you. When we are together, life flows through me.*

He kissed the captain of his heart and time suspended itself. He sucked on Jim’s tongue and then on his lower lip, and each action uncovered an echo in his memory.

*This is the salty, delicious flavor of his saliva. This is how he grips my upper arm when I trace the lush curve of his lips; it pleases him. This is the breath he draws when he wants to kiss me back.*

Spock let himself be kissed; he wanted nothing more than to continue like this through the night, languidly kissing and being kissed by the one who worshiped him with small, moist caresses on his forehead, on his eyes, across his cheeks and up to the tips of his ears.

Jim was remembering, too. “You’re not so sensitive here,” a swipe of the tongue against the curve of his left ear, then a small pleasurable sucking of the tip, “as you are here,” down to his awakened lobe, where Jim’s mouth created a line of living excitement straight to his penis. It lifted the final centimeter and hardened to its fullness, but Spock felt no urgency; they would wait and explore each other.

He slid down the enticing body, on his side, running the flat of his tongue over Jim’s chin, along the length of his neck, and then slowly zigzagging, taking his time to re-moisten, across the broad, pleasing expanse of his chest. Jim fell back against the bed, sighing and resting his hands on the
back of Spock’s head and then, as if in sudden remembrance, tangling them in the strands of his hair.

With his nose, Spock stroked against the taut nipple that was another indicator of how much Jim wanted him. It was hard and the aureole tight and wrinkled, and when Spock licked at it, Jim hissed in sudden delight. Spock pinched the other nipple with his left hand.

“You like this,” he rumbled, and he applied his mouth to sucking. Jim let out a low moan.

The curves of his body: Spock’s hand drifted from Jim’s chest as he allowed his mouth to feast to the sounds of his love’s appreciation. The high arch of Jim’s ribcage. The sudden descent to the trim waist, arousing. And behind….

Slowly Spock’s hand inched around, encouraging Jim to roll over onto his side again, towards him, and when he did, Spock settled his spread fingers on the fullness of the rounded ass.

“You are beautiful,” he murmured, and he had to go back up to have Jim’s mouth again. But he didn’t release his possessive hold. Jim’s hand went from the hair on his head to the hair on his chest.

“And you’re the best dream I’ve ever had. Are you really here?”

“I am here. I will not leave again.”

A loving hand traced a trail down the front of Spock’s body. Spock inhaled sharply; Jim’s fingers wrapped one at a time around his erection. He threw his head back and gloried in the touch that secured them together. Yes! He was deep-rooted to this man.

Let me feed from him forever.

“Prove it to me,” Jim was whispering. “Prove you won’t go away.”

There was no mistaking what Jim wanted; from that moment in the kitchen Spock had known he would be the first to take this most intimate of pleasures, and he was not sorry for it. He nuzzled against the side of Jim’s face, working hard not to thrust into the fist that held him. The grip on him was inflaming, but he would not take the chance of spending his seed anywhere except deep in his lover’s body. “I will prove to you that I love you, t’hy’la. Where is the lubricant?”

“It hasn’t moved. One on your side and one on mine.”

Spock rolled over towards the nightstand drawer. His hand fumbled for a few moments, searching, until he found the container of flavored oil that they both preferred. It was as he had left it ten months before, half-diminished, with the marks of his eager, passion-filled squeezing on it.

When he turned back, Jim was on his stomach, his legs sprawled in wanton exposure and his eyes sparkling, gazing at Spock over his crooked elbow. Spock swallowed hard as his mouth flooded; he had never seen anything more exciting.

“Come on over here,” Jim murmured, “and fuck me so I won’t wake up and think this has all been my imagination.”

He made short work of lubricating them both, knowing that there hadn’t been anyone else inside Jim for a long time, that the way would be tight and he would have to be careful, but suddenly he didn’t want to spend the whole night just kissing Jim. He wanted to thrust himself inside and give them both what they needed.
He pulled Jim up onto his knees, but before he could center himself, Jim was turning around.

“No, wait, I’ve got to….”

He shoved and must have exerted much of his strength to get Spock, abruptly off-balance, onto his back, but in an instant Spock saw his intention. Jim bent over him. Spock shivered from head to toe, and then Jim’s cool mouth was taking in his oiled length.

“Dear God,” Jim panted between kisses and suckings, “I have missed this…. He pressed one hand against Spock’s hip, hard, to keep him in place.

Spock was paralyzed, caught by the incomparable sizzling at his groin and his desire to spend himself inside the human body. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to pretend that he didn’t feel the other hand gently rolling his testicles or the knowing, pursed lips lingering over the ridges, but it was impossible. Impossible!

“Jim!” he finally managed to protest in a strangled voice.

Jim pulled back, stripping Spock from base to tip with a last, lingering tongue-lashing that almost put Spock over the edge. He grabbed at the sheet with both his fists.

“I’m sorry,” Jim gasped. “I’m sorry. I just had to do that. Here. Your turn.”

He swiftly straddled Spock’s waist and then knee-walked until his penis jutted in Spock’s face.

Spock released his grasp on the bedding, transfixed by the sight. If he had thought he was simmering in perpetual excitement earlier, he was drowning in it now, and gladly. Jim had given him this, a way to expand his perceptions and allow the delights of shared emotion, of shared bodies. Together they had released Spock’s sexuality. Nothing Spock ever would have found on Golgotharen could compare to sharing his liberated self with Jim.

Not caring that he wasn’t bothering to leash his greater strength—when had Jim ever been intimidated by that? Never!—Spock reached behind to the lush buttocks and shoved him forward.

Yes! Jim’s bulk filling his mouth and his hands squeezing Jim’s ass…. Spots literally danced before his eyes, and his heart hammered double-time in his side. Spock squirmed on their bed in mounting excitement, and the open, arousing moans, the way Jim flung his head back and rode him, only fueled his need. He sucked on just the swollen crown of Jim’s desire as he jabbed his own yearning organ uselessly in the air, until finally he could tolerate it no longer.

“Now!” he growled, and he shoved against Jim’s chest so that he toppled over onto his back, and Spock was on him in an instant. In a flurry of motion Spock swiped again for the tube to smear more lubricant on himself, Jim lifted so that his legs were braced over Spock’s shoulders, and suddenly Spock was poised before the entrance to the arched body.

Spock caught himself. Slowly, slowly….

He looked at Jim’s face.

*I’ll always remember this night, these hours of our new beginning, how you give me everything. I love you….*

“I love you, James Kirk,” he said aloud, and then he pushed inside.

*…falling from the sky like a meteor that flames hotter and hotter, as the atmosphere tears bits and*
“I need you, Spock!” Jim cried like a wild man. “Harder!”

The grip on his arms was like iron, nails dug into Spock’s flesh, and Spock gave Jim what he asked for. He closed his eyes and thrust into the enclosing tunnel harder. This was what he had come to Earth to do, to bury himself in James Kirk.

...thundering across the sky and seeing everything laid out before him for his taking, all the kingdoms of the world could be his but what he wanted was one particular place, one cool oasis that would soothe his desperate searching....

Spock heard himself gasping in time with his thrusting. His open mouth was dry. He wanted to shout something, some words that would proclaim this glory and somehow keep it for all time, to let Jim know his tight ass was heaven and Spock would never forget these moments of frenzied action, of pulling back and pushing forward and feeling the muscles in his lower back flex, of bearing the delirious weight of Jim’s legs on him, of feeling his sparkling chenesi come alive, but there were no words in his mind, only bright, shattering sensation. He would disintegrate from this physical joy that matched the glowing happiness of his soul; no body could possibly withstand it.

Some other movement outside of his own reached his consciousness, and Spock saw Jim working his own penis furiously within his fist, even as he pushed to match every thrust into him that Spock could manage. As he watched, Jim’s mouth thinned, moved soundlessly, and then his eyes opened to stare straight at Spock. He cried out loud; liquid shot between his squeezing fingers.

“Spock! Spock! Oh, yes, Spock!”

Spock’s soul shook in a cataclysm of feeling. That voice was calling him! He replied in the only way possible. He thrust and convulsed, giving everything he had into the protection of Jim’s safekeeping.

“Jim!”

...spiraling down, down, twisting in the breeze like a feather, to land lightly on the sands. Lying back and looking up at the stars between the waving leaves of the overhanging trees. Peace. Home.

*****

Spock awakened slowly, grudgingly allowing consciousness to seep back into his languid mind and satisfied body. The surface on which he rested was soft, the air mildly cool and, in the distance, he heard the sweet call of a bird. Vulcan did not have such birds, and so he must be on Earth with Jim. One of their trees in the backyard might be hosting a family of sparrows.

He opened his eyes to find Kirk up on one elbow staring down at him, his fingers stroking the hair on Spock’s chest, over and over again. That is what must have awakened him. That, and the sunlight slanting through the drawn shades over the windows of their bedroom, one shaft of light bisecting the bed. From the quality of the light, Spock judged it to be at least nine in the morning. They had, not surprisingly, slept in.

“Hey,” Kirk said softly.

He reached up to play with his lover’s honey hair. “Are you referring to dried grass?”

“I don’t think so.”
The texture of human hair was so intriguing. Soft and yet strong, as humans themselves were. And this rounded ear…. “Then perhaps you mean our location, as in ‘hitting the hay’?”

Kirk groaned. “You have a twisted mind. I’m referring to hey, I’m glad you’re here.”

“Ah. I have not encountered much in the way of illogical human speech patterns in the past months. Good morning, Jim. I love you.”

“And I love you, even when you pretend not to understand a language you probably know better than I do. I’ve missed your humor.”

Spock’s mouth twisted. It felt so good to be talking in this familiar, inconsequential way. “Please do not accuse me of such an unVulcan trait. The healers at Golgotharen—”

“—would not be amused, I know. See what I mean?” Kirk leaned down to nuzzle against his sideburns. “These take a little getting used to. No Starfleet cut.”

Spock touched one of Kirk’s own sharply pointed sideburns. “The healers were not going to reveal my origins by adhering to such a ‘fleet tradition. I awakened with these and did not know enough to wish to change my appearance.”

“No, I guess not.” Jim pulled himself into a sitting position with his legs crossed, and Spock instantly missed their contact. “I haven’t told you anything about what’s gone on around here the last ten months,” he said seriously.

Spock pushed up on both his elbows. “I apologize for my insensitivity. I do wish to share that with you.”

Kirk caressed the back of his hand. “We had our minds on other things last night.”

Spock’s mouth did not quiver as he processed that understatement; it was time for him to reinstitute some controls over his actions, even around Jim. But he did see what Jim meant. Yes, other things. He had needed his lover’s body, and it had seemed paramount to pour out the story of why he had been away so long at Golgotharen, too. Spock chastised himself for thoughtlessness that was ill-suited to the mate of an emotional human like Jim. He should have made sure that he’d had the chance to talk, too.

“Some of it is directly pertinent to your safety. It’s a long story, though, and I want your perspective on it.”

“I will be happy to provide that at any time.”

“And I need to tell you a few things about me, too.”

“Only what you wish to share.”

Jim gave a short laugh. “If I said I was a miserable, selfish bastard much of the time, that would cover about eighty percent of it. The other twenty percent…. Well….”

“Jim. You do not need to explain anything. You are as you are, and I accept you.”

“I know you do, but—”

“Do you think less of me because of my genuine feelings for Deverans?” Spock felt sure that something similar was making him hesitate.
“Genuine feelings, eh? No, of course you know I don’t. Okay, you get the whole story, but not right now. We both should shower after what we did last night, and then…. Are you hungry?”

Spock assessed. “Not very, although this is close to a meal-time for me.” He had attempted to adjust his schedule during the journey from Vulcan.

“How’s your knee?”

Jim pulled back the sheet that covered his lower body and peered down to evaluate for himself. Spock obligingly twisted his leg so they could both see what was now the faint line of the scar.

“I am fine. Part of my rehabilitation involved strengthening it. I am at close to optimum in my physical abilities.”

“Then how about going for a run with me before breakfast? For a little less than an hour. And then we can eat and talk.”

Nothing appealed to him more. This must have been part of Jim’s regular routine and possibly accounted for his toned and fit body.

“Agreed. So long as we do not take the cable car, I am willing to go wherever you wish this morning.”

Kirk looked startled, but then he produced a rueful smile. He slapped Spock hard on the thigh. “I think we can avoid them for a while, you nut. Come on, lazy bones, get up. I’ve been staring at you sleeping for a good twenty minutes.”

It was nothing but sheer pleasure to rise with Jim and engage with him in the trifling activities of sharing the bathroom, brushing teeth, and choosing clothing. They showered separately. Spock bent over and laced on some running shoes and contemplated how, just as he had been so eager for physical congress the previous night, today he preferred to delay it. Simply being with Jim in the same room was a form of foreplay for whatever they would do together later, and that carried its own rewards.

The day was clear and bright and the sky that certain shade of cerulean that was so rare on other planets; perhaps Spock had seen its closest equivalent on Marinox V, but no sky could ever quite match the blue of Earth’s. The sun had been up for hours, and the typical morning mist had almost burned away. Kirk wore a t-shirt and blue running shorts. Spock had pulled on a pair of thin black athletic pants that he had not worn since the last six months of the mission and a long-sleeved gray shirt that said USS Enterprise in small letters on the breast. Both pieces of clothing hung on his too-thin body, and as they started off at a slow jog along Fortuna Street, Kirk commented that he’d better make sure not to let them fall off. Spock did not dignify that remark with a reply.

They had not often done this together; Spock’s primarily-Vulcan body called for other forms of exercise. But running with Jim would not harm him in any way, and it would consolidate their togetherness during this unique time they shared. Spock did not fool himself; all too soon they would return to the demands of their life in Starfleet that too often kept them apart. For now, Jim was his…and he was Jim’s.

As they ran by passers-by or others intent on exercise, Spock was not surprised to see the raised hands of recognition or greeting, to hear the quietly murmured hellos. Of course Jim would become known wherever he was.

He glanced at Kirk, who immediately turned to him. He did not know what Jim saw, but he saw a
startlingly handsome human man with flushed cheeks and a glow to his eyes as he ran. Spock didn’t think the exercise was completely responsible for that, and satisfaction bloomed in him. If the location had only been appropriate, he would have kissed Jim because of how attractive he was. As it was, Spock contented himself with falling slightly behind and observing Jim’s healthy form for more than a full block. Odd, how buttocks had never been of particular interest to him before he had realized his attraction to his captain, but now they were enmeshed with memories of great physical pleasure and driving sexual need. He enjoyed observing Kirk running…. 

When he pulled abreast of him again, Jim threw him a laughing, knowing glance, but he didn’t say anything.

They circled a small open-air market where, Jim explained, he occasionally bought fresh fruit and vegetables to restock the processor or make up a salad himself, but they didn’t stop there. On their way back, Jim led him down a side street smaller than the one on which they lived, quite close to Sluman and T’Braggia’s consulting office. Jim slowed and finally came to a stop in front of a store whose sign proclaimed “Village Bakery” and whose currently-unoccupied black iron tables and chairs spilled out onto the sidewalk.

“This place has great cappuccino. Maybe we can get some this afternoon. Wait for me out here, okay?”

Spock waited, content. He nodded courteously to the two women who hurried by him with curious looks. Even in this cosmopolitan city, Vulcans were unusual, especially a Vulcan in exercise clothing. In a short while Jim emerged from the shop carrying a small waxed bag and put a hand on his arm that felt like the caress it really was.

“Come on, let’s go.”

Back at the house Jim showered first after their exercise, and while he did that Spock went into his office on the second floor.

It was as he had left it, as if the last ten months of pain and confusion had never been. No one could accuse Jim Kirk of being a sentimental man, but still, everything was waiting for Spock to return. Spock looked up as the sound of humming came from the bathroom, and he formed a small smile such as Deverans had never seen.

He had several minutes to fill since Jim was taking a water shower, and so Spock sat before his computer. Soon he was engrossed in updating himself on the latest details of the transwarp project, and he was surprised when he felt a hand on his shoulder and then a kiss on his cheek.

“No work today,” Kirk breathed in his ear. “Not even for you, my relentless Vulcan. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

Jim had a late breakfast ready for them when Spock made his way downstairs: oatmeal, orange juice and Andorian saava juice, and two huge blueberry muffins from the bakery. The food was laid out on their dining room table, a step up from the living room, from which there was a pleasing view out onto the verdant growth of their backyard. Their two Chinese hackberry trees were doing well, he noted, their serrated leaves plentiful and healthy. The trees were starting to drop their leaves, to re-emerge in March, and Spock resolved that he would witness that sight this coming year.

But now he was hungry, so he pulled out a chair on one side of the table while Kirk took the seat at the end of it.
Immediately Spock got up again and headed for the kitchen. “Do we have any date sugar?”

“I guess so. I haven’t touched it since you left. Sorry I forgot you like that.”

The processor had kept his supply without degrading. He dialed to see what Jim had most recently stocked in the unit and then added some sliced peaches to a small dish. He brought both containers to the table.

“Thanks.” Kirk mixed the fruit in his bowl and took a mouthful. “We’ve got to call your parents as soon as we’re finished. And Bones, too. He still thinks you’re in a coma, orbiting around Vulcan.”

“I wonder that he was not able to wrest information about my true condition from the healers.” Spock had no doubt that McCoy would have been his greatest advocate and done all that he could.

“He wanted to, but when people won’t talk to you, they just won’t talk. We’ve also got to get you onto active duty with ’fleet. You didn’t notify them, did you?”

“I did not. I understand that my actions may have seemed without….” Spock considered words carefully, “…without order, but at the time I was so intent on leaving Versin’s authority that the habit of secrecy was perhaps extended by me too far. I was fortunate for my work in the computer center; it allowed me to arrange transportation without being noticed.”

“You falsified records?”

Spock nodded, not shamed in the least. No one had ever wished to leave the orbital facility with as much reason as he had. He would have used more extreme methods if he had needed to, driven by logic as he perceived it. He was aware that his logic and Versin’s were based on entirely different world views, but that did not concern him. He had to act according to his own understanding of the universe. That included being exactly who he was.

“It is possible that I am not even now missed. During the eight days before my departure I followed no set schedule and rarely spoke to others. I believe the healers left me alone to consider my decision, convinced I would reverse it. I have only been gone for five days.” And Versin would surely believe anything, even an extended emotional sulk, of the half-human Vulcan of whom he so thoroughly disapproved.

Kirk shook his head, but a proud sort of smile lingered on his lips. “I’m sure ’fleet’s going to want you in for a thorough medical. Maybe we can get Bones—”

“Yes,” Spock interrupted him. “We will do all those things. But first I wish to hear what you have to tell me.”

“All the gory details?”

“Of course. I am neither innocent nor fragile. Please speak to me as freely as you wish.”

Kirk told him first of his entanglement with Lori, sparing no detail of his emotional state at the time. Spock was not surprised to hear how the woman had inserted herself into Kirk’s life, nor could he blame her. James Kirk would be attractive to most beings, and her position working with him made him accessible to her. It seemed that she had held back in the beginning, allowing Jim a time of adjustment, even mourning, and only after it seemed that there was little hope of Spock’s return were her actions more…direct.

Of course, Spock had to read between the lines of Jim’s recital to draw those conclusions, as he seemed intent on presenting his own actions for Spock to judge. But he would not, and he said that.
Kirk flashed him a quick smile. “But you haven’t heard about later, lover. I almost slept with her.”

“Almost?” Spock quirked a brow.

“Came that close….” Kirk illustrated with two fingers showing about a centimeter apart, but then he sobered. “I know that you think your mental intimacy with Deverans is of greater consequence than anything I could do with any woman, but…. She was practically naked in my lap.”

“And you stopped,” Spock said tenderly.

Kirk drew in a long breath. “Yeah. Looking back at it now, I don’t know how. My balls ached for hours. But I realized she was only a substitute, and I wasn’t going to be happy when I woke up in the morning.”

Spock gently touched his lover’s hand. “The way you were this morning.”

“That’s right. Not that way with her.”

“Jim, I would not hold it against you if you had filled your needs in this manner with Commander Ciani. The circumstances have been extraordinary, and you have been under sustained stress. But I must confess that I am pleased that you did not completely succumb.”

“Completely?”

“There is the matter of her being naked in your lap….” And Spock was glad to see the amusement spring to Kirk’s eyes.

“Just wait until I get you there.”

They shared a kiss over the remains of breakfast in their sunlit home, and Spock felt his happiness swell as they lingered in the caress. He would remember how this felt, the kiss, Jim’s confidences, the simple joy of being together.

“I will confess,” Kirk revealed wistfully when they parted, “that I’m jealous of Deverans. He melded with you.”

“But we will make a life with what we can share, will we not, t’hy’la?”

“You bet,” Kirk breathed. Their next kiss only escalated Spock’s happiness. Here with Jim, he could allow it without being concerned about the breach of his control. This was an exceptional place and time.

Kirk pulled back, with his eyes glittering and somewhat flushed. “Where was I?”

“Expounding upon your latest plans to force yourself on me.”

Kirk shoved his shoulder. “As if you’ve ever objected. Okay, now you need to know about the results of the investigation into the Federation Day attack.”

“Results? I accessed what I could during the trip from Vulcan, but I did not see that anything conclusive has been announced.”

“It will be soon. But it’s peculiar…."

He told Spock of his night-time research alone and with Lori, of meeting Fahtima and learning of Machar’s Eternist affiliations, and of how the updated debris analysis had led to the journey into
the cave system in Peru. Spock listened intently, asking no questions and allowing Kirk to speak freely, as he had been allowed to do the previous night. He could imagine the need that had propelled Kirk to lead the team with Giotto; Jim surely must have been restless in the inactivity that Komack had imposed on him, and he would have jumped at any mission that could have advanced the investigation.

He did interrupt once. “Here?” he asked. His hand slid up under the short sleeve to expose the upper arm. “You received a phaser blast here at short range? I noticed no impediment of action last night.”

“I’m fine. It was a month ago. Are you going to let me go on or are you gonna sit there groping me the rest of the morning?”

“Indeed not. Please continue.”

Spock could see the rest of the tale was worrisome. Lines formed on Kirk’s forehead as he told of the capture of the Eternists, the investigation into what they had intended to do with the explosives, and the arrest of more than one hundred and forty individuals worldwide. The radical wing had been severely curtailed in its activities. Psycho-tricorder scans had eventually revealed two other caches of weaponry and material, and eighty-two other individuals were under surveillance.

“But that doesn’t account for—”

Spock finished: “—the method of attack used last October.”

Kirk nodded. “The captives denied it, even under scan, and the general consensus is that it’s the truth. Much as they might have had violent plans for the future, it doesn’t seem as if they’re responsible for what happened in Paris.”

“But you have more to tell me.” Spock was sure.

“And it happened right here.” Kirk pointed over to the living area with his chin, and then he relayed how he had come home from Vancouver and discovered Lori being held by Hamza Machar, of the man’s claims of responsibility, of their struggle, and how it had all ended.

“I killed him. There’s no way around that. I’ve killed other people, but not with such… satisfaction. This was personal.” Kirk ran a hand over his face and then shoved the dishes in front of him to the side. “Technically the cause of death was a skull fracture from his head hitting our hearth, but…. It’s hard for me to come to terms with what I did and how I felt about it.”

Spock did not offer easy words of reassurance. Nothing he could say would change Kirk’s perception of events; Kirk had already examined what had reasonably propelled him, and still these emotions were there. Indeed, Spock honored his lover the more because of them. He would not be James Kirk otherwise.

Instead Spock rested his hand next to Jim’s on the table. He allowed the silence to go on, but he knew that Jim felt his support nevertheless.

Eventually Kirk stirred. “So. I’m sure you see the problem with what happened.”

“Of course. If Machar did indeed possess the powers he claimed, why did he not use them when his life was in danger during his struggle with you?”

“Exactly. But we know he wasn’t the most stable individual. His cousin Fahtima seems to have been the only person close to him. You remember her.”
“Of course. An intriguing woman whose acquaintance I would be pleased to pursue. I am sorry for her loss.”

“I haven’t seen her since back in the spring, but I know she’s been interrogated a few times.”

“You did not see her in Vancouver?”

“No, I didn’t think that it would do any good. She shouldn’t know that I’m the one who…. Did you know that she and Machar shared a house? From all she’s said, it’s obvious that emotion drove him; I think there’s a good chance he abused her, though she’s never said specifically.”

Spock allowed his distress at this news to emerge by a slight shifting in his chair. He did not like to think of the fragile-looking woman who had talked with him of hopes and dreams at the mercy of the aggressive, loud man he had observed on Luna City.

Kirk saw his reaction. “I know. One other thing: she was under medical care for months earlier this year. Some sort of accident that might not have been an accident. I think her cousin really hurt her. Anyway, Machar was a good planner but not necessarily a clear thinker. Plus if a person isn’t accustomed to hand-to-hand combat, he’s not going to react the way you or I would in that situation.”

Spock put aside his concern for the woman who, in truth, had touched him in a way few others had, and he focused on the broader issue. “It is possible. Although in a life or death struggle, using an effective weapon, however arcane it may appear to us, might be instinctive. I can see why there has been no announcement concerning this. What is the consensus of opinion from those who know the details?”

Kirk spread his hands. “The autopsy showed brain irregularities similar to the Nacosians. That’s generally considered conclusive. Bones thinks so. I tend to think so, too, but there’s still this nagging doubt….”

Spock reflected, and finally he said, “It seems unlikely that we can know for sure.”

“But we’ve got to,” Kirk said earnestly. “If we’re not sure, if we didn’t get the right person or group, then you might not be safe here. Not to mention the continued danger to Federation citizens.”

Spock raised a brow. He had not considered…and now he wondered why. “You refer to my collapse?”

“Of course. Remember what you said right before it happened? That you felt the touch of another’s mind. Was it Machar? I think he’s the one who sent you to Golgotharen.”

He thought back over the minutes before he had plunged into darkness. “I would say that the mental contacts I experienced on the Enterprise and then again on the cable car were…similar. Likely the same. Beyond that, I do not know that I can draw a conclusion. I am not even sure that the communication was directed at me. I am certainly not sure that the contact precipitated my fall. The healers would tell you otherwise.”

“It feels too easy,” Kirk brooded. “And so much of a coincidence, that Machar should just drop into my lap like that.”

“As a result of your persistent work that revealed the cave in South America as the best location to investigate. Not coincidence at all.”
“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem as if anything I did really mattered. For the past year, nothing I’ve done has been under my control. It all seems so random.”

“T’hy’la. It has been a difficult time for you.”

Swiftly Kirk looked up at him. “Nothing compared to what you went through. I’m ashamed to be complaining.”

“Did we not agree that you would tell me all? Including your feelings of frustration, which are very understandable. I would consider myself a most inadequate partner to not comprehend the difficulties under which you have labored.”

“No one could ever call you inadequate. It feels so good to be talking to you again.” With the air of a man finished with a subject, Kirk placed his palms on the table and pushed himself upright. “You’re right, we can’t know for sure if Machar is the one, but the odds are for it, and I’m not going to worry it to death. What do you say we call Bones now? And then your parents.”

“In due time. There is one other subject that I would like to discuss first.”

A question formed in Kirk’s eyes, for he must have heard the change in Spock’s tone: suddenly serious.

Spock rose. “If you will come with me.” He led his lover around the table, past the bathroom and Kirk’s office, to the door that opened to their backyard, knowing he was being followed. He walked across the grass, feeling the cool air that Jim would enjoy.

He went over to where the two trees were beginning to release their leaves in the annual ritual of death and rebirth. There was a scattering of dried brown leaves on the ground; he walked on them, hearing their crunch, and positioned himself in the shade under the larger tree. Spock turned to his mystified lover.

He felt calm and determined. From the time he had stood in Deverans’ apartment, when his memories had rushed into his consciousness, he had anticipated this moment above all the others. He hadn’t known exactly how it would happen and he hadn’t planned exactly what he would say, but as he had staggered against the brown chair and put a hand to his head, as Deverans had supported him, he had felt the cutting words that had been released within the meld: you and he were not even joined in the way of the humans.

“Do you remember when we went to Iowa?”

Kirk nodded, but then he swiftly riveted his gaze to Spock’s, and Spock saw how comprehension dawned.

“Spock…” He took one step forward, and then Spock watched as stillness overcame him. He would let Spock speak.

“We once succumbed to pressure from Admiral Nogura, or rather his logical arguments, and we agreed to marry. I do not regret that we reversed that decision. But all the way from Golgotharen, I have asked myself why we never initiated such a course of action ourselves. The bond is denied us, but there are other ways to join our lives for whatever time is left to me.”

Spock took up Jim’s hands; his own were gripped hard enough for him to know human strength.

“James Kirk, I have no wish to deny what you are to me. Will you join with me in the human way, uniting our lives formally in the way of your people? Will you marry me?”
Jim’s sober eyes were searching his face. “Because the healer never told you about us and he wouldn’t acknowledge the emotion that joins us already?”

“No. Because this is the next logical step in my regard for you. It is difficult to put into words.”

“Emotions often are.”

“You have not answered me, Jim.”

Jim took a sustaining breath. “Can you really doubt me? Not this time because of Nogura.”

“No.”

“And not because of Versin’s scorn.”

“Negative.”

“For….”

“Only for us.”

At last Jim drew closer, so that they were only centimeters apart and their arms were trapped, bent, between them. His always mercurial eyes were golden in the dappled shade of light and dark, and they brimmed with emotions that had once been foreign to Spock, distant, not understood, and even distasteful. But the seasons had changed, and something that had been holding tight in Spock loosened. He felt his katra lift and expand, enfolding this one who was his forever.

“For us,” Jim promised against his lips. “I want to marry you for no other reason than that I love you.”

Jim gave Spock his mouth, and Spock took it, as he wanted to take all of this extraordinary man and as he wanted to give all that he was in return. He struggled to impress into memory: the warmth, the soft delicacy of their lips together, how Jim’s arm had come up to hold him, how his own hand was anchored around Jim’s neck. The bird trilling from a nearby bush, and the slight brush of a breeze in the leaves above them.

Spock stood kissing his beloved under the trees for a long time, and time and space wheeled about them. There had been the *Enterprise* and the joy of discovering each other, but then had come the attack that had severed their bond and sent him tumbling away into uncertainty and despair. So much had happened since then in the wide world, death and destruction and separation and pain, none of which either of them had been able to escape or change. But always, they had turned to each other. Jim was Spock’s magnetic center; he would always turn towards this man. When he was with Jim, the universe’s madness steadied.

Finally Jim released Spock’s lips and pulled him closer, so that their faces rested against each other. Jim murmured, “What time is it? So I can remember.”

“Twelve hundred seventeen hours.”

“A good time, I think.”

“Yes.”

Jim drew back just enough so that Spock could look on him. “A lifetime contract. I don’t want anything less.”
Spock caressed the line of the strong jaw with his thumb. “There is no other way for us.”

“And I don’t want to wait. I’d do it this afternoon except it wouldn’t be fair to Bones while he’s on duty. He’d murder us.”

“A fate to be avoided. And your mother.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “Oh, God. Yes, I suppose her, too. Sarek and Amanda?”

Spock could see that Jim was not enthusiastic about the prospect, and in truth he was not himself. Sarek always complicated matters. “No,” he said firmly. “Although we can inform them of our intentions. Surely we need no other witnesses beyond McCoy and Sarah.”

“Good. Yes. Monday? Tuesday? I can take off today and tomorrow to be with you, but I can’t spare more than that. The transwarp trial is in less than two weeks, and I should be in the office on Sunday and the whole rest of the time leading up to it.”

“Perhaps Tuesday. I will need to undergo my physical exam for reinstatement to active duty, and I would prefer to have that completed. It will likely take all of Monday for that to occur.”

“They’ll want to take you apart and then put you back together again. We’ve got to get Bones involved in that if we can.”

“Much as I have complained about the good doctor’s poking and prodding in the past, he does have an insight into my physiology that may be useful to the other physicians.”

“Okay, we’ll ask. Tuesday. In the morning. I’ve got an engineers’ meeting at noon that I can’t miss, and who knows how long that will take; it’s the last one before the test. How about if we ask Ben Friedman to marry us?”

“Preside, you mean. I am the one who is marrying you, not he. The current Academy commandant?”

“Right. There’s always a slew of marriages when the kids are commissioned, so he’s used to presiding.”

“That would be acceptable. However….”

“What?”

“No publicity. When we ask Commodore Friedman if he will be available, we insist that he inform no one of our intentions.”

Jim fervently agreed. “No publicity. If I even get a hint that Anders Andersen with his holocams is sneaking around, I’ll….”

“You will what?”

“I’ll give him a tribble and send him packing.”

Spock did not allow a glimmer of amusement to show on his face. “An excellent plan from a master of strategy and tactics.”

“Give me time. I’m dazzled by my spouse-to-be’s presence.”

Spouse. Spock had not considered that term previously, and he permitted the wash of warm
emotion that rose in him to translate itself into another kiss, this one hungrier than before.

When they finally reluctantly separated their mouths, Jim murmured, “Spouse-to-be,” and he traced the line of Spock’s lips. “I think we are going to find matrimony erotic as hell, if this is the reaction I get from you. What do you say we delay calling Bones for a little while? Go inside where I can warm you up under a blanket….”

Spock nodded, and they began to walk back to the house, their hands clasped.

“Although I know exactly what I’m going to say to him when we do get him on the line.”

“And what is that?”

“‘Bones, have I got a surprise for you.’ And then you can come into the vid pick-up. I want to see his face when he realizes it’s you.”

*****

Late that evening, after a cascade of events, all of them extraordinarily pleasing, Kirk and Spock sat together on their couch watching the fire’s glow. The computer announced: “There is an incoming message from Shikahr on Vulcan.”

Spock exchanged glances with his companion. Jim said, “Computer, read aloud.”


The fire crackled and Spock tightened his arm around the one who was his. Indeed. Nothing had changed.
On a Tuesday morning when the sun managed to glow through the usual early morning haze, a shape darkened the office doorway of the transwarp coordinator, and Kirk looked up to see the smiling face of Leonard McCoy. Smiling was perhaps too mild a term for the ear-to-ear grin that Kirk’s friend offered him as he swaggered into the room. Bones, it seemed, was happy. Kirk closed two security files that had been open on his screen, minimized another, and gave McCoy his attention. It was going to be a good day.

“You’re early,” he observed.

“Never too early for love,” the physician proclaimed, and he stepped forward so the door closed behind him. McCoy advanced to the desk, flattened his hands on the surface, and allowed that somewhat startling grin to transform into a mock-searching examination from close quarters. “You don’t look much like a nervous bridegroom to me,” he drawled.

“I’m not. Nervous, that is. I guess I am a bridegroom, aren’t I?”

Bones straightened. “To borrow a term that the other bridegroom might use, indubitably.”

“Have you seen him this morning? Thanks to you, I haven’t.”

“Yep. Besides spending most of yesterday trying to capture that Vulcan’s attention long enough so we could proceed with his physical, I released him less than an hour ago.” Bones jerked his head in the general direction of the base hospital. “Gave him just enough time to beam on home and get into his dress uniform. Did you know that half the commodores in San Francisco have been wooing him by comm line?”

“Sure. Now that Beldon’s operation is winding down, Spock’s without an assignment. You’d have to be crazy not to want him on your team.”

“I hope the assignment board gives him what he’s suited to this time. Nogura should be back any day now, and—”

“Never mind about that. Is he all right?”

McCoy took a seat and considered. “Mostly. He needs to gain more weight. His skin’s still way too dry, and though I tried hard to extract that poker he keeps up his—”

“Bones! That’s the fellow I’m gonna meet downstairs in a little while.”

“Yeah, I know. Briefing room number seventeen on floor two isn’t exactly my idea of the ideal place to tie the knot, but there’s no accounting for taste.”

“Taste doesn’t enter into it. We didn’t want to make this into a big deal, that’s all.”

“If I were going to marry Spock, that would be a big deal to me. He says he’s not nervous, either.”

“Good. Neither one of us is. By the way, if you think I don’t know your ulterior motive in keeping him overnight for observation, you’re wrong.”

“Who, me?”

“Yes, you. You’re evil,” Kirk averred with feeling. “You wanted to keep us apart last night.”
“Damn right I did. Inject a little tradition into the proceedings.”

“Tradition?”

“I hate to tell you this, Jim, but Vulcans are big on tradition. Get used to it.”

“Oh, get out, you old fraud, I’ve got work to do.” He thumbed the intercom and said, “Pierre, have the promo materials gone out yet?”

“No, sir. Another hour.”

“Then make sure this gets included. Computer, transfer file TW 137B.”

“Got it, sir. Will do.”

No sooner had Kirk punched the circuit closed than the computer announced Admiral Nkapa for Commodore Kirk.

“Gotta get this, Bones,” Kirk said, and then he proceeded to engage the admiral in a subtle conversation that nevertheless left no doubt he would appreciate Nkapa’s support in his effort to wrest a transfer to Operations from Komack and the assignment board.

The older man cut to the chase. “I won’t get involved in a bidding war for you, Kirk, but you’re wasted where you are. Never did see the sense of taking you away. Go ahead and make your move, I’ll support you.”

McCoy was shaking his head as Kirk finished. “You’re really playing the game, aren’t you?”

“Just lining up the pieces, Bones. What are you still doing here?”

“Your nuptials are scheduled for ten hundred hours. It’s oh-nine-hundred-and-twenty-seven right now—”

“I’m impressed, you’ve finally learned military time.”

“—and I am here to talk to you about marriage.”

“What?” Duty was forcing him to treat this day like any other day in the run-up to the transwarp trial—even though it wasn’t. “I don’t have time for one of your lectures, Bones.”

“Who said anything about a lecture? Although I’ve done my share of pre-marital counseling, I don’t think there’s anything I could tell you that you don’t already know, medically-speaking.” McCoy paused and leered. “Sexually-speaking. You took to, uh, male relations like a duck to water, far as I can tell. Matter of fact, you could probably give me lessons.”

“I’m not sure Patty would appreciate that.”

“Probably not. Nope, I am here for another purpose altogether.”

The easiest way to deal with McCoy would be to let him have his say. With a long-suffering sigh that was mostly feigned, Kirk relaxed back into his big chair and folded his hands neatly over his stomach. His gaze wandered over to the computer chronometer that had been patiently ticking off the minutes all morning long. Only half an hour to go.

“Okay, shoot,” Kirk encouraged.
McCoy shifted in his seat, and his expression became serious. “I wanted to say…. You know my own marriage didn’t work out.”

Kirk nodded, touched at what he felt McCoy was offering. Bones made a point of not talking about his failed marriage, usually.

“I thought we were well-suited, Jocelyn and me. I still think we could have made a go of it, except we…well, I was stubborn, and so was she. Neither of us knew how to bend.”

“And you think that might be a problem with Spock and me?”

McCoy nodded. “You’re both almighty opinionated, you know. You developed a good working relationship on the ship—”

Kirk snorted. “Good?”

The doctor gave a twisted smile. “Okay, better than good. Incomprehensible from my point of view. I don’t know how you put up with that know-it-all Vulcan, he would have driven me mad the first month. But like I said, there’s no accounting for taste.”

“So you said,” Kirk agreed dryly.

“So you’ve got this great working relationship, and it seemed like you two were more or less fine since end-of-mission, but it’s not as if Spock’s been around for much. You had, what, maybe three weeks living together in your house—”

“Eighteen days.”

“Right. And then he’s gone for so long, and now he’s back for just a few days, and here you are jumping into this marriage thing.” McCoy held up a hand as Kirk started to protest. “Now, I’m not saying it’s a mistake. Exactly the opposite. I think it’s good. More than good; it’s what you need, some permanence after all the uncertainty you went through the past year. And given Vulcan attitudes, it’s got to be something Spock needs, too.”

“But?”

“But…I’m just saying: don’t mess this up, Jim.” McCoy’s face was open with sincerity. “I speak from hard experience: playing house is not the same thing as a marriage. Especially one like you two are going to have, with a lifetime contract. Things change. All of a sudden you realize you’re in it for good, and what was fun and easy before, living with somebody, might get awfully hard.”

Kirk contemplated his old friend. He meant well, and after some hesitation in accepting that his two commanding officers were lovers, McCoy had been supportive. God knew, he’d been there if ever Kirk had needed him over the last difficult months. But…there wasn’t any doubt in his mind. When Spock had looked at him across the noise and distance of the shaded arena concourse, a world that had whirled in chaos suddenly began to make sense again. Marrying Spock wasn’t just the best way he could spend this Tuesday morning; it was the only way.

“Bones,” he said, “don’t be such a worrier. We’ll be fine. I want to be in it for good with Spock.”

McCoy lifted an eyebrow. “You sure of that? Even with that tight-assed, insufferable, inescrutable Vulcan?”

Kirk clamped his lips over any reply, but he couldn’t control a trembling at the side of his mouth.
The physician had the grace to look embarrassed as he laughed. “Oh. Yeah. I suppose tight-assed is an asset from your perspective. Let’s say hard-nosed instead.”

“You’re not discouraging me.”

“I’m not trying to. I’m just making sure you know what you’re getting into.”

“I knew three years ago, Bones. You don’t enter into a relationship with a Vulcan lightly.”

“Three years,” McCoy said contemplatively. “Hard to believe it’s been that long.”

“Three years and a month.”

The physician slapped himself on the thighs and stood up. “Okay, then. I officially pronounce you ready to enter into matrimony, so long as you don’t make the mistakes I did. The first year is always the hardest adjustment, you know, even for couples who have lived together for a while. Get over that and you should be fine.”

Kirk didn’t allow himself to think that he and Spock might not have that long; Bones, it seemed to him, was carefully not mentioning their uncertainty, which they had bluntly told him about three days before, when the physician had insisted on coming over to their house to greet, as he put it, the Prodigal Son returned.

He rose and shook the hand that his friend was offering. “Thanks, Bones. For the lecture…and everything else.”

“Happy to oblige. Marriage isn’t all a bed of roses. Newlyweds need to hear these things.”

Which made Kirk think…. “Bones,” he asked, somewhat appalled, “you didn’t have this conversation with Spock, too, did you?”

“Of course not!” McCoy pulled his hand away and walked around the desk to unhook the dress green tunic from where it was hanging. “I took a different approach with him. Come on, time to make yourself handsome.”

Kirk could only shake his head. McCoy was as capable of being a reasonable, mature, right-thinking human being as anyone, and Kirk had learned to listen to him closely during the mission, but today the doctor really had the bit in his teeth. Did weddings do these things to people? Probably all the nerves that Kirk didn’t have the physician had adopted for him.

“Yes, mother.” He took the tunic from McCoy and put it right back where it had been.

“No, your mother’s probably downstairs waiting for us already. Can’t you get a move on, Jim?”

“There are a few people around here who actually have work to accomplish. You sit over there,” he pointed, “and give me another ten minutes.”

“Once a captain, always a captain,” McCoy grumbled, but he took his seat.

When he and McCoy eventually emerged from his office, with both of them in dress uniforms, Kirk saw the question in his staff’s eyes, but he didn’t see fit to enlighten them about where he was going or why. He was mainly relieved that Lori wasn’t in her own office not far from his; she’d called in earlier to say that she’d be occupied with the general contractor most of the day, and that was fine with Kirk.
“I’ll be busy, Lieutenant, until about eleven hundred hours. Maybe a little before then.” The one shipboard wedding that he had presided over to completion had been between Lieutenants Dawson and Hunyady, and he didn’t think he’d spent more than ten minutes on the words. But he should leave some time for his mother to fuss a bit, and he imagined McCoy would have more to say. “I should be back in plenty of time for the meeting.”

“Yes, sir,” Jafari said. “Don’t forget, the engineers will be over in the Newton building, floor sixteen.”

“I’ve got it, Lieutenant.”

He walked along the hall towards the turbo with quickening steps. He had to consciously slow down so McCoy could come abreast of him. Yes, he was in a hurry to marry Spock. Why shouldn’t he be? Fewer than ten minutes to go.

They entered an empty turbocar. The door swished shut and there was the familiar drop that made him think of leaving the Enterprise bridge, every time.

“What?” McCoy asked, as Kirk couldn’t help a bittersweet, reminiscent twist of his lips.

“Nothing. Just…. I wish we’d done this when we were still on the ship.”

“Wasn’t right for you then,” McCoy reminded him. “Now it is.”

“Yes,” Kirk said. “It is.”

The lift took them directly to the second floor, and when they emerged there was Spock, exiting from the adjacent turbo, apparently having just arrived from the basement transporter station.

Spock looked good in the raw silk of the dress tunic that had always favored his coloring and slender build, but more than that, the last few days had revealed a new Spock to Kirk’s eyes: a being who was fully comfortable with himself and the decisions he’d made that had brought him back to Earth and to their joined lives, their shared bed. There was a subtle, different ease to him now that Kirk didn’t remember of his lover before, and a fluidity of movement, of expression that he found intensely attractive. Spock was settled into himself, with no tension marring his actions or stretching tight the skin around his eyes, the way he’d been before they’d been pulled apart.

Kirk advanced until they were face to face, but of course he did not reach for a hand or even consider a touch between them. Their days of reunion and frantic lovemaking had been shockingly emotional; Spock had held nothing back, and Kirk had matched him in his overwhelming relief and happiness. But that was for privacy and the special time they had forged for themselves alone.

Spock gave him an amused eyebrow that brought a rush of memories, all of them good. “Good morning, Commodore,” he said correctly.

“Hello, Commander. Ready to get married today?”

“I believe that I am. Hello, Doctor McCoy.”

“How you doing, Spock? You see I corralled your intended and brought him here for you.”

“I doubt that such an action was required—”

“Bones has gone crazy this morning.”
“—but your concern is appreciated,” Spock finished smoothly. “I have had to insist on delaying two interviews that Admiral Sertaine and Commodore Gurode were most interested in my attending this morning; it is fortunate that I am here at all.”

“Beating them off with a stick, eh? Anything look interesting?”

“Yes, the position at the Planetary Institute is available again, but I suspect it will be some time before I am formally reassigned. Shall we proceed?” He indicated the briefing room across the small lobby. “I assume that Commodore Friedman and Sarah are waiting for us inside.”

As they approached briefing room seventeen, though, the sound of voices came through the door, and Kirk stopped short of it. “This can’t be right. There must be something else going on inside.”

“You sure this is the right place?” McCoy asked.

Kirk glanced at Spock, who nodded. Then the doctor advanced, eased open the door a crack, and peered inside. Kirk caught a glimpse of Montgomery Scott in his version of formal ‘fleet attire—a kilt and tunic—and all his protective instincts arose. This wasn’t what Spock had asked for. McCoy drew back and shut away the unwelcome sight.

“Bones!” Kirk accused in an angry hiss.

“It’s not me, I swear.” McCoy held up both hands. “You both said you wanted it small and quiet, and I honored your wishes.”

Spock had deduced what had happened. “I presume this noise is being produced by our former shipmates?”

“I saw Scotty, and I guess that was Giotto next to him…..”

“I saw Penda and your mother.”

“From the sound emanating from that room, I would estimate that a crowd of approximately thirty individuals is waiting for us.” Spock never let hope get in the way of truth.

“Damn! This isn’t what we intended.”

“But it’s what you’ve got,” McCoy argued. “Give in to the logic of affection. However the news got out, these folks are yours and Spock’s friends, and they want to see you two tie the knot.”

Kirk regarded him suspiciously. “And you’re sure you’re not responsible for this? ‘Cause if you are, we can step outside right now….”

McCoy shook his head. “I make it a habit not to fight with irritated bridegrooms. Come on, Jim, anybody would think you didn’t want to make this trip down the aisle.”

“There isn’t supposed to be an aisle. It was just supposed to be the five of us. Not a…a circus.”

“So what do you want to do?”

Kirk cast an eye towards Spock. It struck him that he was the only one making the objections. “Are you okay with this?”

Spock was looking thoughtful. “It occurs to me that we may be involved in perpetrating a logical inconsistency. Marriage is a social construct intended to make apparent the intimate connections between individuals, and it is typically publicly celebrated. It is perhaps not logical that we instead
“Logical!” McCoy sputtered. “Weddings aren’t supposed to be logical, they’re all about emotion!”

Spock considered the physician gravely. “Although I am more than willing to participate in this ceremony, there is no need to cast aspersions on—”

“Cast aspersions! Spock, I hate to tell you this, but folks ’round here don’t get married because it’s the logical thing to do.”

“I am aware of the emotional proclivities of humans, McCoy. However, that is not the point. Jim, since you do not desire these witnesses, perhaps we can send McCoy into the room to speak to Commodore Friedman and—”

Kirk held up a hand. “No. No. That’s…all right.” He’d planned to say words to Spock in relative privacy, from the heart; that didn’t need to change. He would willingly say those same words in front of more witnesses. He wasn’t ashamed of what they shared, just…protective of it. “I’m actually okay with this. Heaven forbid we start out by perpetrating a logical inconsistency. I thought you really wanted a private ceremony, though.”

Spock favored him with a look rich with amusement. “Then we are already engaged in our first marital misunderstanding. I believed that you were the one who preferred a private ceremony.”

“Yes. I mean…I wanted something that Starfleet and Anders Andersen couldn’t sink their teeth into for publicity purposes, but since everybody’s here I don’t really mind—”

“Would you listen to you two?” McCoy was regarding them with what could only be described as a smirk. “What do you say we get this show on the road?”

“While I object to the use of the term ‘show,’ I am ready. Jim?”

McCoy went in first. Spock stepped up next to Kirk and side by side they walked into a small, windowless, gray-walled, utilitarian briefing room that seemed smaller because it was indeed crammed with people standing and turning to see who had come in—and then facing them with smiles. Within five seconds the entire place was absolutely silent.

A pathway had cleared in front of them, and Kirk saw Ben Friedman at the far end. He cast an ironic look towards his intended and knew they were both thinking the same thing. There was an aisle after all.

It couldn’t have been more than twenty paces to where the commodore was standing waiting for them, book in hand, and so they set out to traverse the distance together with determined strides, their dress tunics making a soft rustling sound as they proceeded. So many people were there Kirk hadn’t expected to see: Irina Hunyady and her husband Brian Dawson, Hikaru Sulu with his beaming grin seeming to brighten the whole room, the small, self-composed forms of the healers Sluman and T’Braggia dressed in shimmering gray. And closer to Friedman, Bob Wesley and a blonde-haired woman who was, of course, Lori Ciani.

Kirk’s mother was standing next to the commodore, looking like the cat who had lapped up the cream. Instantly Kirk knew who to blame for all the people in the room. Or who to thank. Since this undoubtedly emotional display seemed tolerable, even logical to Spock, then he could admit that he was genuinely touched by the show of support surrounding them.

They stopped, facing Friedman, who nodded to each of them and then opened his well-worn book that he must have used a hundred times in his tenure as Academy commandant. It seemed to open
naturally at a page; Kirk had told him a standard, no-frills ceremony when Spock had said that he had no preferences and would allow Kirk to choose the words that pleased him best.

“Greetings, friends and family of James Tiberius Kirk and Spock Xtmprsqzntwlfb.” The man didn’t pronounce the name as well as Kirk had learned to do, but he made a good stab at it. “Welcome to this happy occasion. We are gathered here to witness the promises these two beings will make one to the other that will join their lives in the revered tradition of matrimony.

“I first met Commodore Kirk eight years ago, when I had the pleasure of working with him on a mission still classified, when he commanded the Hotspur. I know Commander Spock from when he came to the Academy to brilliantly present a faculty seminar on nanotechnology, only a few months before Jim Kirk took command of the Enterprise. Their meeting and forming a command team was apparently only a precursor to this deeper commitment they are prepared to enter into today, but it was also a happy accident for the Federation at large. No one can deny the service that they have given to all the citizens of the Federation. If their personal union is one-half as successful as their professional one, they will live long and happy lives together.

“Most of you here have known them longer or better than I have, but I am honored that they have asked me to preside over this marriage ceremony.”

Friedman addressed his words to the two of them. “Gentlemen,” he said in a brisk voice that easily filled the room, “will you state for the record that you enter into this occasion of your own free will, without any coercion, and with the full intent to honor the promises you will make to each other today?”

Still facing forward, Spock spoke out in a strong voice. “I enact this contract of my own free will, without coercion, and I will honor all pledges I make to James Kirk.”

Not: to the best of my ability. Simply: I will honor. Yes, that was exactly Spock. He had, after all, come home to Kirk from Golgotharen, despite the assurance of life he had abandoned there.

Kirk spoke through emotion he hadn’t expected tightening his throat, but he made certain that his voice was even. He wanted there to be no doubt of his earnestness. “I enter into this marriage contract of my own free will. I have not been coerced in any way—” except for the fact that the world makes no sense without him “—and I will honor every promise I make.”

Not just the promises he made today. All of them.

“Lifetime marriage contracts are rare. I have never been called upon to preside over the creation of one before this. Normally I would counsel against it for the youngsters who come to me for their weddings, but I have no hesitation in witnessing such a union between the two of you. Your commitment to each other has been tested in the fires of experience and cannot be questioned. Therefore: Do you understand that the contract into which you enter today will bind you together in the lawful state of matrimony for as long as you both shall live?”

“I understand the nature of the contract,” Kirk said decisively.

“As do I,” Spock agreed. “I choose it willingly.”

Finally Friedman looked down at his book. “Then you will recite your vows in the presence of this company.”

Here it was. Kirk turned towards Spock, to find that Spock was already turned towards him with serious eyes.
Kirk felt an impulse to join their hands that he easily subdued. This was how it had begun more than five years before: looking into the dark eyes of his first officer and discovering a spark there, something that had surprised him and gratified him and fascinated him. Right there on the bridge of the Enterprise, and in her briefing rooms, and in her mess halls, and on the planets the ship had taken them to, in sunlight and in darkness, in worry or in laughter, in danger or in ease, that was where they had made the connection they were formalizing today.

The moments before Friedman spoke again seemed to last a long time, and Kirk spent all of them speaking to Spock with his eyes. Spock understood him completely, he knew, and Kirk absorbed all that Spock was wordlessly saying to him. Spock’s gaze on him was so intense, it almost felt like they were touching.

You came back to me.

You are my logic.

Kirk heard Friedman say, “Do you, Spock Xtmprsqzntwfb, agree to become the spouse of this being, James Tiberius Kirk, for the duration of your lives, with the understanding that the condition of your marriage will include mutual support whether in difficult times or good?”

Without hesitation, Spock spoke, looking only at Kirk, offering him everything. “I, Spock Xtmprsqzntwfb, son of Sarek, son of Amanda, of the clan of Surak of the high desert, do agree to become your spouse, James Tiberius Kirk. I freely give you my support at all times.”

Something that had been unacknowledged inside of Kirk—the painful memories he’d hoarded, his fear that wild coincidence would rip Spock away even as they’d found each other again—began to dissolve and drift away. Spock’s deep, rich voice, sincere beyond any doubt, sank into his soul. Without a bond or any touch at all, the connection between them was rooted deep, never to be supplanted. They would not part.

Something that Spock had refused to acknowledge—painful memories that included long days of confusion and loneliness, the illogical fear that some unnamed force would tear him away from Jim even as they’d found each other again—began to dissolve and drift away. He filled himself up instead with the look in Jim’s eyes, turned so steadfastly towards him in these solemn moments of commitment. Spock had no doubts. Jim was rooted deep within him, and they would not part.

He had not expected to be so moved by this simple ceremony of only words, not when his whole being longed for the complex and abiding connection of their minds and spirits that they could not have. But these promises, devised for humans and now adopted by a reluctant son, had a power of their own. Spock lost himself in Jim’s unwavering gaze.

Friedman said, “Do you, James Tiberius Kirk, agree to become the spouse of this being, Spock Xtmprsqzntwfb, for the duration of your lives, with the understanding that the condition of your marriage will include mutual support whether in difficult times or good?”

Spock watched as Jim, with a small but unmistakably joyous smile on his lips, closed his eyes, as if to let the words wash over him. And then he looked at Spock and spoke out loud, clearly and with conviction.

“I, James Tiberius Kirk, son of Sarah Kirk, son of George Kirk, do agree to become your spouse, Spock Xtmprsqzntwfb, for the duration of our lives. I offer you everything that I have and that I am. In difficult times I will be your support, as you are mine. In good times we’ll live together in logic and in joy. I choose you above all others.”
There was a moment of startling clarity, as if Friedman didn’t exist and neither did any of the people watching them, and only Jim stood before him. As he truly was, revealed those times in the meld, with all his flaws and all his sterling attributes, the essence of him laid out before Spock like a banquet on a table.

The moment faded.

Spock said, echoing, before Friedman could speak again, “I choose you above all others,” and because the way of the spirit was denied them, he reached out to take Jim’s hands.

He saw the surprise in Jim’s eyes and then the quick gratitude. Spock squeezed their hands together, hard, and felt the solid pressure of his human’s fingers against his. And then they parted and were separate again. Spock felt light-headed from the wash of emotion that was surging through him, but he did not regret his display. Proudly he turned towards the commodore.

Friedman was gazing down at his book, but Spock knew the signs of a human suppressing an emotional reaction. After a few seconds, he raised his head and addressed them.

“No that you have joined yourselves in this matrimonial contract, may you always strive to fulfill your commitment in the same spirit with which you have spoken today. We all bear witness to this ceremony you have just performed, and we wish you well. By the power vested in me by the United Federation of Planets, I take great pleasure in pronouncing you lawfully wedded spouses.”

Friedman looked out towards their friends and family. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you James Kirk and Spock Xtmprsqzntwlf, united in marriage.”

There was silence, as if the people gathered behind them were collectively drawing a breath, and then applause began, a few scattered hands clapping and then a growing avalanche of sound.

“I think it’s time to face the music,” Kirk murmured for his ears only.

Spock made sure that his emotion was not reflected in his expression or in the way he stood, but before he could turn towards the crowd, he was arrested by the sight next to him. With his chin lifted and his eyes sparkling as he faced their friends, Jim looked as happy as Spock had ever seen him. But Kirk was so much more than his appearance. Spock had joined himself to an extraordinary man. Gifted, driven, honorable; the Federation needed this man. As did Spock.

His eyes lingered on Jim’s profile, and satisfaction suffused him that he was careful not to reveal. Indeed, there was logic to this union.

Of course Kirk, ever perceptive, sensed his visual caress. He abandoned the crowd and returned Spock’s gaze instead. If they had both been human, now would have been the time for a kiss, something Spock could not consider, but from the brimming contentment in Jim’s eyes, Spock didn’t think he minded.

And then the two of them turned back to the smiles and approval that were being extended towards them like unexpected gifts.

Even Sluman and T’Braggia had succumbed to the human practice of producing noise by bringing the hands together. They were the only Vulcans there, and Spock was pleased to see them. Ralph Randolph’s tall figure could be seen in the back of the room, next to a dark-haired man Spock did not recognize, and Spock experienced concern that he had photographed the ceremony…. But no. It was Fahtima Gabon who used the holo-camera, and she did not seem to be present.

But so many others were, and now the crowd was surging forward to engulf them with well-
wishing. Leonard McCoy was first. He grabbed Kirk’s hand and shook it heartily, then said, “Oh, hell,” and wrapped him in a hug instead. When McCoy finally pulled back, his cheeks were wet and he rubbed at them with the back of his hand. “Damn you,” he said heatedly to Kirk, “you’d better be happy.”

“Don’t worry, Bones, we will.”

Then McCoy glanced at Spock. “Take care of each other, you hear?”

“I will always endeavor to care for him, McCoy,” Spock said, and then he barely managed to prevent himself from recoiling when the physician took a step towards him with arms reaching. He endured the embrace. The cause was sufficient for such a friend. One did not embark on a lifetime contract every day.

When he emerged from McCoy’s arms, Sarah Kirk was saying to her son, “Congratulations, Jim. You’ve done the right thing.” And she pecked him on the cheek.

It was Kirk who pulled her into a hug and then quickly held her at arm’s length. “You were the one who told everybody about this, weren’t you?”

She sniffed. “Of course. There was no reason to skulk about as if your marriage should be kept secret. It was a ridiculous idea.”

“Mothers have no respect for rank,” Kirk said lightly, and then he cast a look Spock’s way. “I think we agree with you, don’t we, Spock?”

“Indeed we do. Most logical,” Spock said.

“And you, son-in-law,” Sarah said. “It is good to see you back on Earth, Spock. You appear to be doing well.”

“Right handsome he is today,” McCoy put in from where he had taken up station next to Spock, rising up on his toes and then down, totally pleased with himself.

“Yes,” Sarah agreed, and then she surprised Spock by raising her hand in the Vulcan taal. “Live long and prosper, Spock. Welcome to our family. We’ll have a family reception in a few weeks so you can meet everybody.”

He was at least grateful that she didn’t expect them to travel to Iowa right away, as her forceful nature might have led her to arrange. “We will let you know when our schedules allow it,” he said. There would be times, he suddenly was sure, when it would be necessary for him to intervene to protect Jim from the emotional coercion of his mother’s abruptly practical plans.

Many others came to him and to Jim as they stood where they had exchanged their promises; the flow of well-wishers prevented them from moving at all. It would be unreasonable to try to escape the boisterous effusiveness that permeated the room; for humans with their openly displayed emotions, it was logical to express themselves in this way.

Hikaru Sulu and Penda Uhura came forward as a couple, and Spock watched as the beautiful communications officer kissed Jim full on the lips. He understood it meant nothing but still could not help wishing she had not. Montgomery Scott offered hearty congratulations and shook Spock’s hand. Lieutenant Patricia Bronson, now intimately involved with McCoy, didn’t touch either of them, as if she were still shy of them as her commanding officers. Ralph Randolph introduced the man he was with as his partner, Juan Camarillo.
“Best of luck to you both,” Randolph said, “though I know you don’t believe in luck, Commander.”

“I am pleased to receive your best wishes nevertheless, Randy.”

“You should thank me for entertaining Jim while you were gone, Spock. I dragged him to a baseball game that I think bored him to tears.”

“I do thank you for your efforts, but you should have known that hockey is his game.”

Kirk took a step closer to Spock, close enough so that the stiff material of their tunics brushed, and with a laugh he said, “This one’s taken, Randy.”

The reporter held up his hands in mock defense. “I know, I know. I was wrong back in the spring about fixing you up with someone, wasn’t I?”

“Definitely.”

“I should have known better. You two…. I’m glad you waited, Jim.”

Kirk smiled just at Spock. “Me, too,” he said softly, and his words made Spock think of how they had made love before their fire and afterwards watched the shadows stretch across the living room.

Right behind Randolph and his partner stood Lieutenant Irina Hunyady, obviously pregnant and positively glowing. “Mister Spock!” she exclaimed. He could tell from the suppressed action of her arms that she wished to embrace him; thankfully, the young officer had control and good sense, one reason why Spock had regarded her with favor when she was under his command in the science section.

“Sir, I can’t tell you how good it is to see you again. I’ve been praying for you all this past year. And now this....” She glanced over at Kirk, who was talking with her husband Brian. “I am so happy for you both.” As Sarah had done, she presented the taal. “Peace and long life, sir, and all the happiness in the world.”

Spock inclined his head. “Thank you, Lieutenant. May I also offer my congratulations to you?”

She blushed and gently laid a hand on her belly. “Yes, you may. We’re having a girl. I’m due at the end of the year.”

Dawson shifted his focus to Spock. “Congratulations, Commander,” he said, and he forthrightly offered his hand. Spock, by now resigned to the fact that many could not help themselves from offering some physical sign of affection, took it without hesitation.

Dawson slipped his arm around his wife’s expanded waistline. “Sir, I know you aren’t going to regret the lifetime contract. I highly recommend marriage. Irina, don’t you have something to ask Mister Spock?”

Kirk was apparently in on some joke that they had shared, for he inserted himself into their conversation and with twitching lips said, “Lieutenant, I think what your husband just told me is an excellent idea. Go ahead.”

“What’s this?” McCoy put in.

Hunyady hid behind one hand up to her mouth, but her dimples showed anyway. “Oh, dear. Well....” She took Brian’s free hand in hers. “I was wondering, Mister Spock, if you would agree
to stand as godfather to our child. It’s a tradition in my family.”

During his time of service on the Enterprise, or at least since Jim had come aboard, Spock had willy-nilly become a member of a special family unit. Given the conditions of spaceflight and their five year mission, it was impossible to prevent ties of affection from being formed among crewmembers, and, indeed, Spock had learned that those ties were of worth. On the ship, Hunyady had asked him to accompany her on her wedding day, to “give her away” in the archaic tradition that she followed, and Spock had done so with outward aplomb and inner gratitude at being so valued.

But once the mission was over and they had been grounded on Earth, it had seemed that his circle had closed, and all Spock’s restrained emotion and hopes and involvement had narrowed to one man standing in the center.

Things were different now. Spock looked over the young woman’s head, at the people who cared for him and for Jim, and he acknowledged their importance in his life and in the life he and Jim had crafted as a couple.

“Of course,” he said gently, returning his attention to Hunyady’s somewhat apprehensive expression. She did not need to know at this time that his tenure as godfather might not last long. “I would be honored. You will need to instruct me in the necessary duties at the proper time.”

“That’s the man, Spock,” McCoy enthused, and he actually attempted to slap him on the back, but Spock was too quick for him and sidestepped out of the way. Spock shot him a look that he hoped communicated his disapproval; perhaps he needed to reassess his opinion of the physician’s discretion.

No one had yet left the room; everyone was standing back and apparently waiting for something as the last of their guests greeted them. They were Commodore Wesley and the woman who had, not too long ago, sat naked on Spock’s spouse’s lap.

Commander Ciani gave James Kirk both her hands and kissed him on the cheek. “I’m so glad for you, Jim,” she murmured. “I know this is what you wanted. Please, be happy.”

“I will be,” Kirk replied. Then, with a speaking glance Spock’s way as he released her, “We will be.”

“And you, Commander Spock,” Ciani said. Spock admired her composure as she addressed him. She must have guessed that Jim would tell him what had passed between them. Surely she knew James Kirk well enough to be assured of his honesty. “I wish you all the best. You have a very special man here.”

“I thank you, Ms. Ciani. I am aware of that.”

Finally everyone had had their say. Spock watched as Jim Kirk took a step forward to address them, taking command of the situation as was his nature.

“Thank you all for coming this morning. It was a surprise to us to see you, but I’m glad that you’re here. We’re glad you’re here.”

At that Spock advanced to his side and nodded. “Indeed. We are most fortunate in our friends.”

“Thanks to Commodore Friedman for his service to us today—”

“My pleasure, Jim,” the commodore put in from his station behind them.
“—and to my mother, who apparently was the one who spread the word. And thanks to all of you for not letting the cat out of the bag about our marriage to the Starfleet Publicity Department.”

“That means nobody spilled the beans, Spock,” McCoy put in loudly, and everybody laughed.

“Thank you for that erudite translation, Doctor McCoy,” Spock said courteously, and another ripple of amusement swept across the room.

“I know that most of you are on duty and have other things to do this morning,” Kirk continued, “so we’ll—”

“Wait a minute,” Wesley put in. “You don’t get rid of us that easily. I’ve got something to say.”

Wesley had a glint to his eye that made Spock instantly suspicious. He heard Kirk next to him say in an undertone, “Uh-oh.”

“I’m not going to embarrass you, Jim, don’t worry,” the commodore reassured, in a way that guaranteed Spock exactly the opposite. “It’s just that somebody mentioned that you two planned to go right back to work today, and that just didn’t seem right to me. Does it seem right to you, folks?” Without waiting for an answer, he went on. “There’s an old Earth custom known as a honeymoon, and I think you should have one. Both of you. Together, of course. Isn’t that right, folks?” Wesley shamelessly pandered to the crowd again, which this time responded with a chorus of “that’s right,” and “I think so, too.” Spock’s foreboding grew.

The commodore went on. “So Commander Ciani has agreed to spend a few days working her fingers to the bone supervising the transwarp project while Commodore Kirk….” For a few horrifying seconds Spock feared that Wesley was about to make an atrocious pun on the word “bone” that was, as far as he was concerned, totally inappropriate for the company and dignity of the occasion, and from the long pause, it seemed that Wesley was actively considering it. Humans!

But then Wesley continued, “…takes a few well-deserved days off. Commander Spock, too, of course. You two are officially on leave, and Starfleet doesn’t want to see you back here until Saturday,” he pointed a finger, “and no arguing.”

Kirk was quick to say, “Bob, the trial—”

“—will go off on schedule because the transwarp coordinator has excellent administrative skills and it’s obvious what needs to be done over the next few days. Lori will sit at your desk and make sure everything continues on the timetable you’ve set up.”

“The meeting this afternoon—”

“Will be chaired by me. You can call in over the next few days, we would appreciate that, actually, but you’ll be back before the trial goes off. So, you’re going on a honeymoon. Spock, too.”

Kirk looked at Spock, who cocked an eyebrow back at him. The rest of Spock’s week was scheduled with interviews and presentations from various senior officers eager to have him on their projects, not to mention a formal interview with the appointment board on Thursday. All of that he would happily postpone. The few days that they had spent together already had definitely not sated Spock’s appetite for time alone with James Kirk, and he did not object to this gift. Despite Jim’s dogged resolve to lead the transwarp project as well as he could, he hoped Jim would see the reasonableness of this tradition.

Kirk did. “Well, Spock, I think we’re on leave.”
“Indeed. I am not sorry for it. Thank you, Commodore Wesley. I assume you have cleared this with Commodore Beldon? I am still technically under his command.”

“Of course. But there’s another issue here, Commander Spock,” Wesley said with a straight face that did nothing to hide the impishness behind his words. “Usually a newlywed couple takes a trip on their honeymoon, and I’m not talking about a trip back to your house. Do you two have anything planned? Besides the obvious, that is?”

Spock would never become accustomed to the way humans spoke in such a way, with such jocularity and in open discourse, about the deadly serious subject of sex and the intensely private nature of the emotions that bound him to Jim. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the stooped figure of Sluman stir as if shifting his feet in discomfort, but Spock was careful not to give the humans ammunition for any more comments based on his own reaction.

“Why is it, Bob,” Kirk said with rich irony, “that I have the feeling you’re about to tell us we have something planned?”

“Oh, not me. But I think Lieutenant Uhura has something to say about that. Lieutenant?”

Uhura stepped forward, then she motioned Irina Hunyady to stand next to her. “Yes. Sirs, I am so happy for you, we all are. Let me say congratulations again.”

Once again a somewhat gratifying round of applause filled the room. Spock had never experienced such an display so specifically addressed to him in such a personal way, but he knew he could continue to stand in the center of this emotional orgy with Jim, at least for a few more minutes. Surely this event could not last much longer.

The applause lingered longer than Spock believed it should, but eventually Uhura spoke up again. “I wanted to express my feelings in a more tangible way than just being here this morning, and as I contacted a few more people, they felt the same way. So Irina here and I put our heads together and took up a collection….”

“Go ahead, Penda, you’re doing fine,” Hunyady said when the communications officer paused and gestured towards her.

Uhura looked around at everyone as if to steel herself, and Spock wondered how his dignity would suffer with the rest of her announcement. “So, we have a gift. Something we thought was specially suited to the two of you, or at least we hope so.” The rest of it came out in a rush. “Waiting for you at the Acapulco Spaceport is a luxury Branson cruiser, a VG 277, small but perfectly spacious for two. Irina and I went to the spaceport and picked it out personally. We’ve leased it in your names for the next four days, and it’s licensed for travel from here to Alpha Centauri.” Her eyes sparkled. “Not as far as the Enterprise traveled, but Irina and I thought you might like to get into space together again. For at least the first few days of your marriage.”

Spock blinked to prevent his surprise from being expressed any other way. This gift was not only generous but also perfectly suited to his desires. And Jim would like it….

Jim did like it. His expression was priceless, a combination of astonishment and deep appreciation. “Penda.” Kirk spread his hands in that way he had. “I don’t know what to say.”

“A simple thank you will do,” Wesley boomed, “especially once we tell you that this ship is the Honeymoon Special and is fully outfitted for two newlyweds. It also has plenty of power…though I don’t imagine you two will be lacking in that department!”
It seemed that Wesley was determined to embarrass them both, but it was impossible to respond negatively at such a time. Spock controlled his reaction, and he could see Kirk was manfully trying to suppress his as well.

Spock attempted to forestall any other comment from the commodore by saying, “This is a most generous gift. We thank you all for your thoughtfulness. I am sure that Commodore Kirk and I will enjoy taking the ship to Alpha Centauri.”

“That’s Jim to you, Spock,” McCoy called out. “You just married the fellow, the least you can do is call him by name.”

“Bones,” Kirk admonished, as he had hundreds of times before when the three of them had engaged in their mock battles. “I do thank all of you. You’ve…really surprised me, but I don’t think you could have come up with a more appreciated gift. Spock, there’s a ship waiting for a crew. Are you willing?”

“Indeed, Captain, I am.”

The smile that Jim gave him then was far more personal and seductive than he had a right to be displaying in these public circumstances.

“Then let’s go flying,” Kirk said softly. Then, to Uhura, “The Acapulco spaceport, you say?”

She tossed him an identi-card that he easily caught in one hand. “There you go, sir. Enjoy.”

“Oh, we will. Good-bye, everybody.”

A chorus of good wishes, a few determined strides through the crowd, and the fleeting touch of Jim’s hand against his own. The door closed behind them. They were married.

*****

They beamed from the rental agency, where they’d spent a good forty-five minutes filling out forms and establishing identity and piloting credentials, into the sleeping quarters of the ship. The Honeymoon Special—thank God that wasn’t the ship’s registered name, as Kirk didn’t think he could use it with any decorum when contacting traffic control—was a trim and state-of-the-art vessel. But they materialized to the sight of a huge bed draped with black and silver hangings all around it, as opulent as the most decadent shore leave location. Kirk blinked, arrested by the velvet pillows and the mass of soft comforters.

Later for all that. He tossed his carry-all into the bin that held miscellaneous objects during lift-off and headed for the control room. He passed through the one other room with living and eating areas, though he barely spared it a glance. Spock was a step ahead of him, and so Kirk bumped into him when he stopped abruptly.

“What?” Kirk asked, and he peered over Spock’s shoulder.

“I believe,” Spock said, “that our friends have exceeded the limits of dignity.”

Both chairs before the instrument panel were tied around with large red ribbons accented by bows that draped over the seats. In front of the transparent aluminum window—for this was one of those ships that could actually provide a real-time vision of the space through which they’d be traveling—were two bunches of flowers tastefully tied with silver ribbon. Propped up against the console was a lavender envelope inscribed with “Best of Luck.”
If he didn’t laugh he would be distinctly annoyed, and Kirk chose to laugh. He plucked up the card and read it out loud. “Happy Wedding Day to two very special people. Wishing you love, luck, and laughter, today, tomorrow, and happily ever after.”

“If laughter becomes part of my regular behavior,” Spock said dryly, “I hope you will recognize it as an aberration that requires treatment.”

“Ah, come on, they meant the best. Look, everybody’s signed it.” He held out the card for Spock to see.

“Including McCoy.”

“Which means that rascal lied.”

“Not necessarily. All he said was that he had not violated our wishes by informing others. Once your mother had done that for him, it would have been unreasonable for him not to join the others in their… exuberance.”

Kirk hooked an arm around Spock’s neck and dropped a kiss on his cheek. “Was it too much for you?”

“Negative. I found the entire proceedings… memorable. However, I do not desire to pilot this ship thus decorated.” And Spock ruthlessly began to pull the ribbons from the chairs.

Kirk grabbed the flowers and sought a recycler, then thought better of it. He went to the bedroom and safely clipped a bunch on each of the nightstands so that they’d stay in place during lift-off, then stood back to admire his handiwork and had to shake his head. What had Uhura been thinking? Or maybe he should blame young Hunyady.

“Carnations and chrysanthemums, I believe.” Spock had come up behind him and touched a single finger to one of the delicate flowers. “Along with larkspur as accents. A most pleasing arrangement.” He turned Kirk around and joined their mouths.

They hadn’t done anything more than share a quick kiss back at the house; they’d both been very intent on taking advantage of the chance to get into space, and fifteen minutes after leaving headquarters they’d showered and their bags had been packed. Then Spock postponed all his meetings and interviews, and Kirk needed a full twenty minutes to leave instructions for his people, but finally they’d been materializing at the rental agency. Now Kirk allowed his arms to circle Spock, and he let himself fall into the feeling….

He nuzzled Spock’s newly-pointed sideburns. “You want to delay take-off?” he offered softly.

“No,” Spock husked. “But I wanted to kiss you first. Jim, I am most gratified with this day.”

“Me, too.” They stood there swaying against each other, at peace, until Kirk heard the call of the ship again. He scratched Spock’s shoulder blade affectionately and asked, “I think these engines can do better than two-thirds on impulse power, don’t you?”

“That is definitely an underestimate by the agency designed to prevent abuse of the engines by inexperienced pilots. Their declaration of only warp one point five is also undoubtedly deficient.”

“Then I say we go find out what this baby can do, don’t you?”

It was really nothing like the Enterprise. The Enterprise had never touched ground and hopefully never would, and here they were taxiing along a runway and strapping in to prepare for
acceleration that, when it came, pushed them firmly back into their seats as Kirk activated the powerful sub-orbital engines. The short, stubby wings of the Pocono Express were barely adequate to guide their ascent and would be no use at all once they were beyond the atmosphere, and Kirk hadn’t piloted a craft like it since he’d been forced to jury-rig an aircraft to get him to the super-ship orbiting over Gabriela, the Lox’teneth’nar. But he knew it was a little bit like learning to make love with someone you really cared about; once mastered, the skill remained impressed in his fingers and arms, and he confidently guided the cruiser just as he had recognized the pathways of pleasure along Spock’s body despite their long separation.

He wanted to look at that body, but it was hard to move much with the extra gravity pinning them. He made a minute adjustment of the throttle with the fingertip controls—private vehicles never quite got the fuel mixture right—and gazed instead straight ahead, out through the remarkable window.

They were now breaking through the very highest of clouds, and the wisps of white hugged their vessel before falling behind. The sky to either side was still a familiar blue, but straight ahead, as the minutes passed, the blue became azure became sapphire became dark velvet. The engine thundered behind them, propelling the craft, but inside Kirk was quiet. He was shucking more than the gravity well of his home planet; the pretenses of the past year slid away as well. Here, with Spock at last by his side and his firm determination that he would fight to get out of the transwarp office and then later for his ship…. He was more truly himself now than since he’d handed over his ship to Starfleet on the last day of the mission.

The very first star appeared, and then another and another. Far off to starboard the window revealed a larger ship than theirs, bound for Earth, probably one of the regular Luna-Earth shuttles. The engines kicked back as Spock had pre-programmed and Kirk expected, and their vessel pitched to the side. Still he did not speak. The fine crescent of the Earth’s moon slid into view, startling against the inky backdrop of space. Kirk could see craters, the brilliant shoulders of mountains, and deep shadows that never knew sunlight.

Next to him Spock moved; it was easier now that the engines had slackened off in preparation for impulse power. He adjusted a dial and then flicked a switch, and the view of Luna disappeared as the window transformed itself into a viewscreen with which Kirk was more familiar. The image of Earth behind them replaced the moon, retreating visibly. The line between daylight and nighttime was marching across the Atlantic Ocean, dividing the planet into bright blue seas and shadow. Beautiful.

Spock made another adjustment and Earth disappeared. Luna was center now, and Kirk watched as a brilliant star—it must be Sirius B—winked out as it was occluded by the satellite’s mass. The ship was still rolling to achieve the flight path they’d agreed on, and so Kirk waited, waited, watched the darkness, counted the seconds, and just when he expected, the star appeared again on the other side, still shining as it had shone for millions of year and would shine for millions yet to come. A different sun than Sol, but still, sunlight shining on them both.

It had been such a long time…. Kirk was astonished to think that he had literally been earthbound since that one trip to Luna; how could he have stayed away from this exhilarating beauty for so long? So many brilliant sparks of light were coming alive, hundreds more with every few seconds. Spock was there next to him, and together, in silence, they sat as the ship took them deeper into the soothing arms of space, where Kirk felt truly comfortable.

Eventually Kirk stirred. “This is…. I wonder if Penda really knew?” His voice was hushed.

“Ms. Uhura is a most perceptive person. Jim, I wish to alter our flight path somewhat. If you have
no objections….”

“What? No, go ahead.”

Kirk watched as Spock entered a few figures into the nav-comp, and though he was curious, he didn’t want to ask. Although, now that he thought of it…. Of course.

Twenty minutes later, the artificial gravity of the Pocono Express was anchoring them to the ship, the sub-orbital flight engines were stilled, and they were proceeding on impulse power. They’d exchanged only a few words, which suited Kirk, because they were getting closer and closer to Space Dock, and just beyond it….

It had been almost a year since he’d seen her. The Enterprise was cradled in girders, one nacelle was completely separated and floated to the side, and the sensor array was missing from the engineering hull, but she was more beautiful to Kirk than Earth had been. True home. He’d found himself in her center seat, discovered that his true calling, as he had always suspected, was to lead a crew of men and women in the service of the Federation, protecting and expanding the borders and finding new life and civilizations. He’d discovered more about himself: that a thin, logical, half-human man could fill his arms and his heart.

There was no guarantee he would captain his ship again. If he managed to convince the Admiralty, he was just as likely to be assigned to the Exeter or the Hood or one of the others. If that happened, then so be it. But he would always remember this first love….

A finger on his chin turned him away from the sight, and there was Spock, unstrapped from his seat, capturing Kirk’s mouth in a gentle, closed-mouth kiss that said many things: none of them needed to be expressed in words.

Over the next four hours they took their little ship in a huge arc above the plane of the elliptic, and they discovered that she was indeed capable of almost ninety-two percent of impulse power. She handled like a dream, was very responsive to the controls, and was equally quick to respond to computer guidance.

“There is a point three six percent deviation from plotted commands,” Spock observed as he used the high grade sensors to track their progress above the solar system. “More than I expected. Perhaps I will be able to determine the cause….” He busied himself with computations, and Kirk regarded his bent head with a reminiscent, amused smile.

There were strict rules about when a ship like theirs could engage warp drive, which was one reason Kirk had taken her out of the usual space lanes to where there was little traffic and more freedom to maneuver. When they finally were able to enter into warp, the Express shot away with palpable power. It was unusual for such a small vessel to be so impressively outfitted; Hunyady and Uhura had leased a true gem.

“Warp one point three,” Spock intoned, his gaze riveted to the instruments. “Warp one point five. Warp one point seven five.”

“Let’s level her out at two. That should get us nowhere fast enough.” They’d mutually agreed that Alpha Centauri, with its close resemblance to Earth and busy spaceports, would not be their destination. Instead they’d plotted a path straight out towards no place in particular. They’d make a giant loop and in four days be back where they’d started.

Spock was considering the instrument panel. “This is a fine vessel, despite its name.”
“The Pocono Express? What’s wrong with that?”

Spock raised a wry eyebrow. “That is part of the joke played on us by our friends. The Pocono mountains near the east coast of the North American Confederation are traditionally known as a honeymoon location and have been for a few hundred years.”

“You amaze me. How come you knew that and I didn’t?”

“Perhaps because you have actively avoided information related to marriage before.”

“And you haven’t?”

“I am interested in many things. As I was saying, this is a fine vessel. I would not be adverse to owning one like this at some time in the future.”

“I don’t even have an aircar for home, and you’ve got us sinking several hundred thousand credits in something we’ll hardly ever use?”

“I do not suggest an immediate investment. However, there may come a time when such a purchase will be logical. Besides, I can see you have enjoyed piloting it.”

Kirk nodded and then stretched his arms to get the kinks out. “I have. But now it’s time to let her go on her own. Do you have the auto-pilot programmed?”

“Indeed, I do.”

“Engage, then. Deflectors and warning system?”

“Activated. Although the rest of this vessel is excellently equipped, the shields are significantly underpowered compared to what we are accustomed to. They would not be capable of withstanding even a glancing strike from a Romulan warbird.”

“All I’m asking is that they deflect any asteroids that come our way while we’re doing something besides piloting.” Kirk swiveled around in his chair so that his knees pressed against Spock’s sinewy thigh. The warmth, the solid reality of it felt more than good. “Commander, I suggest we retire to other, equally enticing areas of this ship. If memory serves me correctly, this is our wedding night.”

“Late afternoon,” Spock told him. “It is seventeen hundred twenty-one hours, San Francisco time.”

“Long past end of alpha shift, then. Time for something to eat and then…..”

To his exasperation, one of the entries in the food processors was prominently labeled “Wedding Cake.” “Is there anything on this ship those women haven’t monkeyed with?” he growled, but he was only half serious.

But Spock, it seemed, was totally serious, because he got up and went through to the bedroom, then disappeared into what Kirk presumed were the sanitary facilities. When he reemerged and sat down again, he said, “There is not any sign of Lieutenants Uhura or Hunyady’s handiwork in the bathroom, although I am surprised to report that there is a real water setting for the shower.”

“I’m shocked there isn’t a heart-shaped tub.” Kirk forked up some baby arugula salad that had emerged from the processor attractively arranged with marinated goat cheese.

“As you are well aware, such an arrangement would be impractical. Even a water shower is an
excess I had not expected.”

“I suppose there’s just enough water in the tank and it’s almost constantly recycled.”

“That would be the best approach, yes.” Spock was scanning the processor entries. “Ah, I see something you might like. Please, close your eyes, Jim.”

Kirk smiled as he followed orders; there was something subtly erotic about hearing his level-headed, logical companion issuing such a prosaic command in a perfectly ordinary voice when he knew Spock was about to do something outrageously thoughtful—and probably sexy.

“Open your mouth. Bite.”

He complied and discovered a cool, pleasing combination of flavors as he bit down on some sort of ovoid…. He swallowed with pleasure and identified, “Strawberry dipped in chocolate. Am I right?”

He opened his eyes to see Spock nodding but with, unfortunately, no more strawberries in sight.

Kirk quickly dialed up the recent additions to the processor. By God, those women had done more than add wedding cake, they’d produced a gastronomic festival, and most of it seemed to be vegetarian. Well, that was good. As close as he intended to be to Spock for the next four days, he didn’t want his consumption of animal products to come between them. Four days without meat wouldn’t hurt him. “Uh, do you like apricots?”

Spock nodded again.

“Then close your eyes.” He punched in the command. “Open up.” Spock was way too far away, so Kirk hitched his chair so they were knee to knee, then he carefully fed Spock one Belgian endive petal stuffed with dried apricots, soft cheese, and toasted almonds. It sounded good to him….

He loved watching Spock chew, test the flavors, and swallow with apparent enjoyment. “Good?”

“Most gratifying.”

“There’re lots more where they came from.” Kirk wrapped his arms around Spock, then swooped in for a quick kiss. “You know,” he said in a low voice, “food can be an erotic stimulus.”

There were those long fingers tangled in his hair again. Kirk sighed and sank into the sensation; he’d missed this caress, the ordinariness of it.

“I am aware of that.” Spock’s voice was low. “However, I don’t know that I require any more erotic stimulus than is currently here with me.”

“Ummm. You say the nicest things. Spock?”

“Yes, Jim?”

“I don’t want tonight to be rushed. We have a habit of getting over-excited and rushing to finish things.”

“That is true, although I believe our recent lovemaking in that manner is understandable. I could not resist you after such a long separation.”

“But now we’ve got all this time, no interruptions…and tonight is special. So.….” Kirk pulled himself upright. “I’ve got an idea. I’m hungry, you’re hungry or you should be, and we’ve got all this food and plenty of time to enjoy it. Let’s make up a tray and take it to the bed.”
It took them quite a while to make their selections, and Kirk thoroughly enjoyed the process. He discovered that spicy mango salsa appealed to Spock in a big way and that Spock didn’t know of his distaste for blue cheese. At last there was a satisfactory collection of finger food on the serving platter, and Spock carried it to the big bed.

Kirk stripped off the bedspread so they could put the tray up by the pillows, and then he started work on the filmy draperies that hung all about. “Okay with you if we pull these back? I don’t want to eat dinner in a cave.”

“Agreed.” Spock was pulling off his tunic. Then his boots and socks came off, and finally he lounged back on one elbow clad in his black t-shirt and pants. The pale skin of his subtly muscled arms seemed to gleam in the low light as Kirk dialed it down, and then he made quick work of ridding himself of everything except his pants and briefs. He crawled onto the mattress and matched Spock’s pose, on his side, though he was careful not to tip the plate of food over.

“Me first.” He reached up over his head to pick up a miniature corn cake, dipped it in the yellow salsa it had come with, rolled over onto his back, and deposited the food directly in the middle of his chest. “Come and get it.”

With a gleam in his eyes that was anything but a protest, Spock nibbled a path from Kirk’s left nipple to the cake. Kirk tucked his chin in so he could watch his progress, then tucked his hands behind his head, to accent his desire for them to proceed in a leisurely fashion.

Spock went along with his plans. His lips made a slow journey over the mound of Kirk’s pectoral muscles, pausing to occasionally kiss or swipe his tongue over the smooth skin, moving back over the path he’d already taken, then forward again. By the time he finally claimed the corncake with his busy lips, Kirk was breathing more heavily than watching somebody eat dinner usually caused him to breathe.

“Delicious,” Spock pronounced when he had finally chewed and swallowed. “And the appetizer was pleasing as well. A bit too much cumin, I believe. Now it is my turn.” He selected a mini-vegetable springroll and, rolling over onto his back, placed it between his teeth.

“Oh, no fair,” Kirk accused. “I thought we were going to be avoiding erogenous zones.”

“At no time did you delineate such a rule,” Spock said after removing the food so he could speak. “Besides, surely you have noticed by now that I am somewhat orally fixated. If you wish to sample this food, please come and kiss me.”

Kirk didn’t need to be asked twice. He suspended himself over Spock on stiffened arms and slowly leaned down, gazing more at the dancing gleam in his lover’s eyes than at the gastronomic temptation, and finally succumbing to laughter as he managed a single lick. “Don’t look at me like that! I’ll choke and then you’ll be sorry.”

Spock took a firmer hold on the springroll with his teeth and promptly closed his eyes.

“That’s better. Ummm.” The enticing odor of spices made Kirk’s mouth water, and he bit off more than half in one bite. The rest, darn it, he’d have to burrow into Spock’s mouth to get….

Five minutes later they had rolled all over the bed in a clinch that had taken them perilously close to dipping Kirk’s head in the serving platter and had suspended Spock’s over the edge of the mattress, but despite Spock’s coy resistance, Kirk had finally managed to get the last morsel from his mouth.
Kirk sat up and pushed the hair off his forehead. “At this rate it’ll be midnight before we get a decent meal.” He felt rather proud about that.

Spock was already choosing from the tray again, but his bangs were disarrayed from when Kirk had repeatedly played with the short strands, and to Kirk he looked...breathtakingly attractive. But he had on too many clothes.

“Goat Cheese Crostini or Sesame Glazed Vegetables on mini-skewers?”

“Hey, it’s my turn now.”

“You are hungrier than I am, I am sure. The crostini or the skewer?”

“The skewer, I guess.”

“Very well.”

Spock twisted so that he was sitting up against the headboard and next to the tray, with his long, black-clad legs stretched out before him. He selected two items and leaned down to insert them precisely between the toes of his left foot.

Kirk groaned even as he was laughing. Nobody knew about Spock’s evil sense of humor like he did; most people probably assumed that their relationship was somber, logical, and intense, but not playful. Well, it was all those things, or could be. Everything. Nobody had ever made Kirk laugh more than the fellow who rarely cracked a smile and was now observing him with a challenging lifted eyebrow.

“You devil,” Kirk swore sincerely. “So it’s a foot fetish now, is it?”

“Not I.” Spock shook his head but then wriggled his toes. The mini-skewers danced in what might have been construed to be an enticing way. “But I thought perhaps you might enjoy a little digital appendage with your appetizer.”

“Just possibly.” Kirk crawled up next to his lover’s feet and plopped onto his stomach, stretching out so that one of his feet was satisfactorily wedged up into Spock’s armpit. “You know, this stuff is a little messy. I’m going to have to lick you clean to make sure we don’t get this all over the sheets.”

“I suppose that will be necessary,” came Spock’s long-suffering voice behind him, but Kirk was already nibbling.

No, he didn’t have a foot fetish, but it was possible that they’d ignored this erotic zone in the past to their detriment, because Kirk enjoyed easing out the food with his teeth and tongue and then leisurely cleaning the toes that had supported it with audible licking and suckings. Spock had long, narrow toes with a few small hairs growing on them here and there, and the similarity to sucking the long, slender cock was not lost on Kirk, who got so involved with the middle toe that he almost forgot he was eating, too. The fact that the foot was naked while the rest of Spock was clothed seemed to fuel his enthusiasm... Spock didn’t seem to mind; by the time he got to the second appetizer, Spock had slid down flat on his back and a few fingers were rounded into the bedding. The toes of his other foot, Kirk observed, were curled tight, so as he chewed the final offering, he grabbed that foot and began to stroke its sole.

“Jim!”

“I thought Vulcans weren’t ticklish.”
“It is unwise,” an audible swallow, “to generalize across an entire species, especially when you know I am not typical. Please, will you come up here?”

It took them more than an hour to eat and caress their way through bruschetta with cannellini beans and basil, parmesan crisps with goat cheese mousse, corncakes with spicy mango salsa, and a second helping of the endive petals that seemed to be Spock’s favorite. Although that might have been because Kirk tucked the petals in the waistband of his pants and Spock had the chance to nuzzle the clothing-covered erection that had been clamoring for some attention since before the goat cheese mousse.

At last there wasn’t much left on the platter, and Kirk was thankful. He was actually still hungry, for both food and a chance to get all of Spock’s clothes off, as he rolled onto his elbow and regarded the lover who had a smear of mango salsa on his cheek.

“What do you say we take a break? Wait a minute, let me get this….” He pulled Spock towards him with a hand on the back of his neck and licked the salsa more or less clean. “And I think there’s some here, too….” He rolled a willing Spock onto his stomach and pulled his t-shirt out from the pants. The wrinkled surface of the chenesi on the small of the back were revealed with an extra tug, and Kirk promptly laved the twin glands with the flat of his tongue.

Before Spock could release the sudden air he’d inhaled in protest—or maybe for some other reason—Kirk pulled away and ran a lingering hand over the finely shaped ass. If he’d ever been happier, felt more free, or more satisfied that he’d be spending another three and a half days cooped up with one person, he couldn’t remember when it had been. And they hadn’t even begun to really make love…

Spock rolled out of his reach with a sparkle in his eye. “I thought you said you wanted a lengthy dalliance? You will not get it if you continue to tantalize me in that fashion. I agree to a suspension in the proceedings.”

The neglected salad tasted fine chilled with a little lemon along with risotto and spinach, and Spock found that there was one serving of terwitum available, which he promptly dialed up and ate with sides of avocado and chango mild peppers. Kirk was happy to see Spock actually enjoying food; it was an indulgence he rarely allowed himself, but the Spock who had returned to him was willing to release that extra little bit that made a big difference. Not that McCoy wouldn’t think that the poker wasn’t still firmly in place, but Kirk could tell. Or maybe it was this commitment thing….

“I think we’re going to need to extend some thank yous when we get home,” Kirk said as he leaned back in satisfaction. “All this food is extraordinary.

“Agreed. It was most considerate of Lieutenants Uhura and Hunyady to include the terwitum and the other Vulcan delicacies in storage, although it is somewhat disconcerting to be known so well.”

“That’s Irina,” Kirk said definitely. “She’s one of your biggest fans.”

After eating, they agreed it was necessary to check on the ship’s progress, and they spent an engrossing, enjoyable period of time making a minor course correction, double-checking the sensors, and establishing once again how responsive the ship was. It seemed as significant to Kirk as the extended foreplay they’d just enjoyed; maybe this was another form of it. Certainly sitting in the pilot’s seat clothed only in his pants and having Spock next to him in bare feet and all in black was enough to keep him in a simmering state of arousal, but it struck Kirk that it was more than that. Here was a reminder of the subtle courtship they had conducted on their ship: the looks across the bridge that had started out so innocently and had grown to be so important.
He abandoned the controls and locked in the auto-pilot, causing Spock to turn towards him with what he could only call seductive eyes. But he’d seen that look a hundred times before….

“I am going to take a shower,” Spock murmured when their mouths finally separated. “Our experience with the food…. But after that…..”

He let Spock go in first while he changed the sheets; he didn’t want to make love on a bed spotted with cheese and soy sauce, although he would always remember the freedom of it all. He noted that there was an ample supply of bedding in a drawer built-in under the bed, enough for enthusiastic honeymooning youngsters or…a former starship captain in love with his former first officer. Damn, it was embarrassing, this excess and location so directly pointed towards satisfying their lusts, but gratifying at the same time. He stuffed the sheets into the ‘cycler and strode into the bathroom.

Normally the shower facility on a ship this small would be miniscule itself, but the designers of the Pocono Express had anticipated them and of course provided a stall large enough for two. They weren’t going to take advantage of it now, though. If he got into that shower with a wet, slippery Vulcan, nothing would stop either of them from rushing pell-mell into what he wanted to savor instead. Kirk took off his remaining clothing and let it fall to the floor, then stood there and watched the obscured movements of washing and rinsing through the steamy shower door.

In another minute Spock emerged. “Hello, spouse,” Kirk said, and he stepped into a full-body embrace, his nakedness up tight against the tempting wet body of his favorite person. They shared a sloppy kiss—off-center, enthusiastic—and then slid apart.

“I will meet you shortly in the bedroom,” Spock intoned, and Kirk chuckled at how ordinary that sounded.

He quickly washed, rinsed the suds off, and then grabbed a towel as he strode towards the bed… where the sight of Spock sitting naked, cross-legged, and composed stopped him in his tracks. Spock had released a few of the hangings that had annoyed him before; they draped softly, producing an effect not like a cave at all, but more like fingers reaching to almost caress along Spock’s shoulders and arms in unexpected sensuality.

The lights had been dimmed even more, but he could still see the lean, lithe lines of his lover’s body, the flow of muscle and sinew, and the scattering of dark chest hair that angled down to the brownish-red thicket between his legs. Bones might think that Spock still needed to put on a few pounds, but to Kirk’s eyes he was…just right. A beloved body waiting for his touch…. And he did want to touch.

“Come here.” Spock held out a beckoning hand, and Kirk advanced to take it with anticipation gathering in his throat and his groin.

Spock gently pulled him into his arms, and then the two of them fell back into the soft cushioning of sheets and pillows, but when Kirk lifted his head for a kiss, his lover forestalled him with a finger on his lips instead.

“Watch,” Spock whispered. “Computer, retract skylight.” And then he rolled over and looked up.

There was another transparent aluminum window on this ship. A panel over the bed slid soundlessly back and the darkness of space was revealed.

“Computer, reduce lights to ten percent.”
Spock’s soft command brought out the stars’ light, and Kirk stared up, transfixed. He knew that, since they were in warp, what they were seeing was the computer’s best estimate of the view, but the illusion worked. One far end of the Milky Way was spread out across a quarter of the window, dusty scatterings of light that were mighty suns, some of which he and Spock had visited. Others harbored planets and sheltered beings they would never know. Some of the motes of light were far more than stars, they were galaxies in their own right, too far away for the Federation’s wanderings, or nebula, fiery furnaces that would become the birthplace of stars that could swallow up a starship in a blink. Then there was the hint of a comet, far off to the right, and all the other celestial objects that populated the void that wasn’t really so desolate: meteors and Graves Gravitational Masses and micro black holes that no one could really see.

Once, within the meld, he and Spock had made love on a blanket of stars. This was the next best thing; they would give each other pleasure with the stars shining on them.

Spock’s arm around him tightened, and Kirk groped for the other hand until their fingers entwined. They lay there, together, in silence, as the progress of the ship slowly took some stars out of their view and brought others into sight. He didn’t try to identify their patterns or locate which patch of the sky they were seeing; it was enough to simply exist next to Spock and fall into the light.

“I remember,” Spock’s deep voice rumbled in the darkness, “when you told me about scanning the sky when you were a boy. From the wall on your property with Sam.”

“And I remember you telling me about your first telescope.”

“Is this part of what we share? That we both find this….”


Abruptly Kirk’s view was obscured when Spock rolled over on him and kissed him, heavily. “You,” Spock said, and his breath rested gently on Kirk’s lips.

Kirk stared up at him, at his strongly masculine features framed by a crown of stars, and his throat was full. “Beautiful,” Kirk murmured, and he gave Spock his mouth again.

But not yet, not quite yet. He had been planning…. “Wait a minute,” he said softly. “I need to get something.”

Just moving out from under Spock’s weight on him was an inducement to stay where he was instead. Spock lifted up barely enough, so that their legs, their chests, and especially their groins dragged against each other as Kirk pushed himself to the side. He closed his eyes at the tacky slide of Spock’s shaft along the line of his own pubic hair, but he did manage to finally sit up on the side of the bed, inhaling through his mouth. He reached back without looking and caressed whatever it was his hand came in contact with: the minor swell of a man’s hip.

He stood with a small stagger, but got his balance to detour over to where his bag was within the restraints that had kept it safe during their escape from Earth. He dug inside and found what he wanted, then, knowing that eyes were on him, hid it behind his back as he walked to stand next to the bed.

“Roll over onto your stomach.” Kirk watched as Spock stretched himself out with trust. Kirk had always thought the body of a naked woman, stretched out on her back, was one of the most beautiful sights he’d ever seen, and he would always, he supposed, think so, but the sight of Spock like this…. His alabaster buttocks gleamed in the dim light, compact and neat, rounded perfectly in
a way that never showed through his clothes, but in nakedness giving him a symmetrical and appealing form. The dip down to the chenesi, the wrinkled skin of the organs that would achieve full arousal only with the next pon farr, but that even now provided some pleasure of the body. Kirk remembered guttural and inarticulate cries when his fingers stroked the secondary testicular system and made Spock’s body writhe in abandon. Then the gradual broadening of Spock’s leanness to his shoulders, strong and willing to take on many burdens. Kirk wanted to remove all burdens, and he had tried, to the best of his ability, but the currents of fate had been too strong. He couldn’t. He could simply give something instead.

He kneeled on the bed and rested one hand on a buttock’s warm, yielding flesh. “I want to do something for you. Okay?”

Spock had his head on his folded arms and looked over at him. “What?”

“You’ll see.”

He leaned to kiss where his hand was on Spock’s ass, a soft, closed-mouth kiss that he allowed to linger, so Spock would feel his wet lips and how he moved his mouth, and the body beneath him tensed and then released.

“Whatever you wish,” Spock whispered.

One final caress with trailing fingertips, and then Kirk went up and over, so that he straddled Spock below the waist. He saw his cock, partially-erect, as it seemed it had been for hours, with its head just above the chenesi, and so he maneuvered so that it rested on the wrinkled skin that Spock loved to have stimulated. One hand on either side of the organs, and he stroked himself across, riding….

“Ahhh,” Spock breathed out, and Kirk didn’t know if it was the sound of his lover’s pleasure or the physical thrill that lanced through him that made his whole body come alive. It was the movement, like fucking already. Even his shoulders tingled…. He watched as he posted back and forth, releasing one hand to hold himself so that he rubbed to maximum effect. The underside of his cock against this part of Spock….

“Feels so good,” he groaned.

But that wasn’t all he’d been intending. The abandoned bottle of skin lotion was where he’d dropped it on the bedding, and soon he was warming some cream between the palms of his hands.

Again he felt Spock tense with the first rounded strokes across his back and up to his shoulders. And then release with a sigh, Kirk hoped of satisfaction.

In silence he worked. In big circles across the muscles of the shoulders, digging deeper as the cream disappeared, feeling the pliant tissue relax. Down with his fingers along the ridges of the spine, over each prominent bump, and then around the delicate skin of Spock’s flank, where little shivers and indrawn breath showed Kirk the reaction he wanted. For the moment he bypassed the chenesi; he had the feeling any more attention there would have Spock rolling over and grabbing him in one of the lightning fast moves only his Vulcan was capable of, and then where would his sweet seduction go?

He shuffled his way down so he was sitting over Spock’s knees. As he took another dollop of lotion, Spock stirred, lifting his ass in unmistakable invitation.

“Yes,” he said.
That was all. Kirk applied his love with gentle strokes around and around, enjoying the feel of the rounded flesh, the way he could cup his hands about it, and loving that he, only he, had permission to touch this man in this way.

He reversed his position so he could reach the long legs and, yes, even the toes. Spock wriggled them as he applied the cream, and Kirk could feel a soundless chuckle that would never be released audibly.

He slid off his perch to the side and ran one hand straight up the inside of the left leg, from ankle then slowly up to knee, then up the length of thigh, pushing so that Spock shifted and angled his leg out, exposing his testicles. Impossible to resist. The sight of them peeking out from between the juncture of the legs, resting against the sheet, smaller than a human’s balls but demanding touch….

Spock would like this….

Kirk buried his face in the folds of his lover’s body, just reaching the wrinkled flesh with his tongue.

“Jim,” Spock moaned into the pillow, and he shivered all over.

The temptation to reach around and hold the proof of Spock’s desire was great, but he was only half-finished, and so Kirk pulled back and, by pressure on his lover’s hip, urged Spock over onto his back.

But he didn’t stay there. Spock came up with seeking arms and lips and enfolded Kirk in a bruising kiss that told him exactly how much his gentle massage had been appreciated.

“I could never forget you,” Spock promised as his arms tightened. Kirk pushed his cheek against Spock’s chest, then nuzzled against the side of his chin. Spock almost-had-forgotten, almost-had-never-come-back. The fact that they were together again…neither one of them could explain how it had come to be. How easy it would have been for Spock to bond with the healer.

As if hearing his thoughts—and knowing what they knew now about the bond buried deep, it might be so—Spock said, “Only you.”

“Only you,” Kirk echoed, and he surrendered himself to Spock’s mouth, to his insistent seeking tongue, to the warmth of the strong arms that held him. Their lovemaking over the last days hadn’t eased the hunger in him. God, he had missed these arms, Spock’s eyes, the way they talked, the feel of this body against his own, and his own arms clutched his lover in sudden need.

It had been a long time since Spock hadn’t met his needs with understanding. “I am here,” Spock told him.

“And I’m going to keep you,” Kirk said roughly. “You understand? Keep you.”

Spock’s fingers were against his face, stroking, inflaming, and Kirk kissed the palm.

“Yes,” his lover said. “Let me show you…. Let me do this for you. Will you sit on the side of the bed?”

Kirk was lost in the feel of the sensitive skin between thumb and forefinger against his tongue, the heft of his lover’s hand resting in his own. “The side?”

“Let me do this,” Spock repeated. “Put your legs over the side.”

Ahhh…. Kirk looked up swiftly. Lust rushed through him and he had to swallow hard. It had
always been one of his very favorite things to do with the male lover who just happened to have been his first officer, the man who served him on the bridge and now would serve him in bed…. It was a slightly-guilty pleasure that Spock had seen early on in his mind and never hesitated to fulfill, without judgment or resentment.

“Okay,” he said unsteadily, because he wanted it.

Kirk leaned back on his elbows with his legs dangling open over the bed and his erection jutting stiffly…and Spock got off the bed to stand upright. He turned towards Kirk, slowly pulled his fingers up the length of his shaft, until, when his fingertips lingered over his slit, he went down to his knees. He did it gracefully, slowly, deliberately, with the air of someone who knew exactly what he was doing and did so without coercion. With no holding back.

He leaned forward, showing Kirk the top of his head and the long elegant length of his back, with the hint of the dark crease at the top of his buttocks. Kirk tensed; he could feel the breath from those hot lips, and the urge to thrust up to complete the connection between them was hard to resist. But this was Spock’s gift to him, and he held himself still.

Again deliberately, the hands in which he would gladly put his life came up, one of them to take Kirk’s own hand in a tight grip, and the other to settle neatly against the small of Spock’s back, over the chenesi. Kirk inhaled sharply. His head lolled back as the scene burned itself in his mind.

“Oh, God, I love you,” he choked out to the stars above as Spock’s mouth took him in. “God, Spock!”

Nothing existed but his cock and Spock’s mouth and the wet heat—applied with love—that was sizzling straight into the pleasure centers of his brain. He wanted to convulse, he wanted to howl straight up to the stars, but he held himself still, because beyond anything, he wanted Spock to continue what he was doing.

And he wanted to look. That was the whole point, to see this restrained, private man do this to him. Kirk forced his head back upright and his eyes open. Spock’s own eyes were closed as he went down and then up on Kirk’s stiff column, his lips carefully pursed around his teeth, and it felt unbelievably good. To see Spock’s head bobbing, see his lips go all the way to the pubic hair, to feel the heat of his mouth engulf him totally, and then the contrast of the cool air as Spock slowly moved up and released him, and to be holding hands with this extraordinary being through it all….

“Oh, that….”

Spock holding only the swollen crown in his mouth, laving it with his tongue, and then to have Spock look up at him: Kirk’s heart thumped hard. It seemed to turn itself inside out and every fine emotion he had ever felt jumped into his throat and demanded expression. The hunger in Spock’s eyes, and the love, and the satisfaction…. He wanted to laugh out loud at all the humans who had ever said that Vulcans had no emotions, or that they never conveyed them, because Spock’s soul had always been in his eyes.

But he couldn’t laugh and he couldn’t speak, not with Spock sucking him and his cock feeling like it was swelling to gigantic proportions. His balls were already drawing tight in the final run-up to orgasm, and if he didn’t stop this, now, he would erupt into his lover’s mouth.

“Oh, yes,” Kirk groaned, and his elbows buckled so that he collapsed back against the mattress. Yes! He wanted to shove into Spock’s mouth, to pump into it, and so he did, and Spock rode him easily, and it was going to happen, in another few strokes, another minute, he could feel it….
With a titanic effort of will, Kirk shot upright and rested his hand on his lover’s sleek black head. “Stop,” he managed to choke out.

Spock stilled, but he kept possession of the yearning stiffness in his mouth. Kirk slid his fingers through the dark hair, over the tip of an ear, and traced the outline of his penis bulging against Spock’s cheek.

“If you keep going I’ll come, and I don’t want to yet.”

Finally Spock relinquished the cock and rested both his hands around its base. Kirk bowed over him, taking in the fine scent of their joint arousals and the faint hint of the shampoo Spock used. He ran his hands all over Spock’s shoulders and along his upper arms, using the touch to reground himself somewhere other than his throbbing groin.

“You,” Kirk breathed, “have the most incredible mouth.”

Spock straightened then, and there on his knees he pulled Kirk into a brief, almost-violent kiss, and then he took Kirk’s chin in his hand.

“You,” Spock said roughly, staring into Kirk’s eyes, “are mine now. No one can come between us. No one will.”

“That’s right,” Kirk said, and he took Spock’s mouth as hard as his own had been taken, pressing their lips together and stabbing his tongue inside. Emotion flared hot and heavy in his chest, and when he tore his mouth away from the kiss, he grabbed Spock’s shoulders, heaved him up and around and pushed him back onto the bed, where he belonged. He threw himself on top of the whipcord body, all angles and dark hair on the pale skin, and he held Spock down with hands on each of his upper arms as he stared into the beloved face.

“I need you,” he said harshly. “I need you so much. Do you understand? It was hell without you. I hated it, hated myself for being so miserable, for not being able to be happy without you, but that’s how it is with me now.”

Spock gripped Kirk’s side hard.

“I didn’t know who you were, but I still wanted you. You were the faintest hint in my thoughts, but still I heard your voice.”

Kirk shook him with the intensity of his words. “You’re never going to get rid of me.”

“I need to be with you for as long as I live.”

They were vows as honest and real as the ones they had exchanged hours before, and Kirk could see that Spock knew it, just as he did. They merged together into another kiss, and Kirk released himself so that their bodies joined, chest to chest, cock up against cock, legs tangled, and as he had done when they had first come aboard the ship, he lost himself in the feeling.

After a long while, Spock rolled them over onto their sides. His face was flushed, and Kirk had never seen anything so beautiful. Spock traced the arch of his eyebrow with a fingertip and said, “I cannot wait any longer. Let us proceed.”

Without waiting for an answer, he rolled away and picked up the lubricant that he must have placed on the nightstand earlier. He squirted some out into his hand and then slathered it with decisive, quick strokes all over Kirk’s eager cock, with the last little bit for Kirk’s tight, electrically-charged balls.
Kirk heaved for air but managed to hold himself still throughout. “Oh….” He didn’t protest or suggest something else for this night. Whatever Spock wanted….

….was easy to know when his lover turned over onto his stomach and raised his ass high.

“Oh, yes,” Kirk breathed. He was up on his knees in a flash, but he was able to control his lust to do more than plunge inside without thought. First.…

He squirted the lube directly onto the chenesi, and Spock responded with an immediate gasp and by dropping straight down to the sheet. Kirk was on him right away, rubbing the lotion in with the tips of his fingers, the way he had learned Spock loved it best, against the grain of the grooves, tripping lightly over the indentations until he heard what he wanted, needed to hear before he could take his own pleasure.

“Jim! That is….” Spock wriggled against the bedding, pushing against Kirk’s fingering. “More,” he demanded, and Kirk gave it to him, loving the way this affected Spock and how he didn’t hesitate to reach for his own pleasure.…

…the way he reached now around his back to grab Kirk’s hand and, coming up to hands and knees again, pull it around and under him to where he was already weeping pre-ejaculate.

Perfect! Spock’s cock in his hand, the ridges fully flared out and stiff, quivering the smallest bit in desire, as Spock’s whole body was starting to quiver. Perfect! Kirk pressing his own cock against Spock’s ass, not aiming for penetration yet, just aligning it up along the crack, so that he was almost enfolded by flesh he loved as much as anything in the universe. He thrust a little…. Perfect! The chenesi under his fingers as he drove this incredible man crazy with lust. Spock started to rock back and forth, taking Kirk with him. Perfect!

And…too much for both of them. “Jim!” Spock hissed, “stop or I’ll…” and Kirk knew that he had to plunge inside, right then.

A few moments of struggling as he slapped on more lube, as his fingers frantically dipped in to at least make an attempt at preparing the tight sphincter, as Spock’s head and shoulders dropped to the bed to present himself at the best, most accessible angle, and then.…

Kirk felt as if the top of his head were coming off as he slid into wet, gripping heat, not stopping to allow Spock to adjust to being stretched and filled, but all the way in, so that he grounded against solid flesh. He groaned out loud, but not louder than Spock was groaning, and the sound of their mingled voices inflamed him even more. There was no way he was going to stop, no way he could, despite all he’d said about wanting to savor the sensation and his plans for a slow, prolonged loving. He grabbed Spock’s hips and began to thrust as if he couldn’t move fast enough, get deep enough, as if he had a burning need that could only be slaked by boring deep into this irreplaceable body and returning there again and again…. The truth.

A minute, another minute, and then another he rode his lover, gasping, watching his cock disappear into and reappear from the heaving body, listening to the sounds of lust that proved how much Spock loved this, loved him, loved what they were together in bed as much as he loved the life they would make everywhere else. The feel of his loved one moving beneath his hands, the flex of muscle and bone against his palms, the dipping and twisting of Spock’s shoulders as he gave way entirely to sensation.…

Kirk’s balls drew up tight, he could feel orgasm just on the other side of thought, but he wanted to take Spock with him. He reached down and around to find Spock’s hand already there, he pushed it away and grabbed as a deep rumble began in Spock’s chest. The ridges rippled in the way he had
felt before, and his lover gasped out loud and froze.

“Come for me!” Kirk challenged, and he cupped his hand around the cockhead to feel the strong spurting against his palm.

“Ahhh! Ahhh! Jim, I….”

The sound of his name on his lover’s lips was enough to finish him. Kirk didn’t even have time to pull back and thrust again before he felt himself rushing to completion. He poured himself into Spock’s body.

As Kirk was still coming, Spock collapsed to the bed, and he followed, driving forward as hard as he could to keep himself encased, and finally feeling the last echo of pleasure as he lay with his entire weight draped over Spock’s insensate body.

Insensate…. Not just relaxed in the aftermath. There was something wrong….

Abruptly Kirk pulled his cock out without regard for its sensitivity. “Lights up,” he said urgently, and he peered down at where Spock was buried nose first in the pillow, a position no one, even someone overcome by sexual exhaustion, could assume comfortably.

With care he turned Spock so he could breathe freely, but he was unmistakably unconscious, and Kirk’s throat closed up with fear as he frantically picked up a wrist and groped for a pulse. He had seen that slackness of features before, on the Enterprise and then again on a street in San Francisco. No! Not now, not again, not so soon when they should have had years….

He didn’t even have a medical tricorder, but there must be a medical kit of some sort on board. And he could call for help. Bones might be able to beam aboard on a relay through Space Dock, or if not that then he could send the ship to Earth at the fastest warp she could make. Kirk was up and searching for the kit when he was stopped.

“It’s all right,” came Spock’s thready voice. “I’m here. I’m back.”

An hour later all the lights were out, and the blankets were on Spock’s side of the bed. They’d left the skylight open, and as his spouse slept, Kirk stared up at the stars.

He didn’t know how to pray, and he didn’t know that he believed in a God to pray to. How to ask for more time when there was no one to ask for it? How to wrest more time for them from a universe that had already proved to be uncaring? That day on the Lox’theneth’nar when Spock had been attacked, a chain of events had been set in motion, and nothing Kirk had been able to do since had stopped it. Like a hurricane blasting into a forest, stripping the trees of leaves, snapping off the branches, toppling the strong tree trunks that nevertheless did not have strong enough roots—that’s what the march of time had done to them.

Kirk rolled over to watch the masculine profile and the slow, even breathing of the man he’d married that day. Their roots were deep. They’d have to be deep enough. They had to find a way to beat this.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Like Comets

The briefing auditorium on the Star Traveler was inadequate for the number of press personnel who had accepted the invitation to attend the third transwarp trial, and so there were only eighty-two of them in the large room, which was unlike anything Spock had ever seen on a space-going vessel. Starships like the Enterprise did not use space so profligately without specific need, such as in a shuttle bay, but the Traveler had been designed for one purpose and one purpose only, and that was to promote Starfleet and, through it, the Federation. Hence the size of the briefing auditorium with its four tiered rows of stations that stretched in a semi-circle around and above the central stage on which he, Jim, and other members of the transwarp team now stood. The physical environment, Spock suddenly realized, was not unlike the Featherstone amphitheatre on Luna, but the silence he had enjoyed there, and his conversation with Fahtima Gabon, were parsecs away from the ambitious noise produced by the reporters determined to wring every gram of news from the situation.

He scanned up to see Ralph Randolph seated behind one of the computer stations on the third row, and standing behind him was Ms. Gabon. Spock had not yet had the opportunity to speak with her, but he hoped that would be possible in the short time before the test commenced. He might not have another chance to do so.

“…why we’re all the way out here in the Oort Cloud? The other tests were conducted well within the Earth’s solar system.” An aggressive stringer from The Sirius Times asked the question from her seat on the first tier.

As he had answered all the other queries during this press conference that had already lasted for thirty-seven minutes and some seconds, Kirk fielded this one smoothly. He stood next to and not behind the podium, with his hands tucked neatly behind his back. An array of administrative assistants was grouped behind him and to one side, waiting their turns to address the needs of the media. Spock and one additional technical person stood on the other side; the rest of the engineers and scientists were already at their posts in the control room or actually on the Acacia itself. Before the briefing had begun, Spock had exchanged a few words of greeting with Lieutenant Jafari, who had directed him to the hockey arena; in the curious way that the perception of time expanded and contracted according to the emotional perspective of an individual, that conversation with the lieutenant seemed to Spock to have taken place considerably longer than fourteen days before.

Kirk was once again explaining what the members of the media already knew; Spock judged that the reporter was after a direct quote from the transwarp coordinator instead of relying on the materials they’d all been given. “As you know, the Oort Cloud extends from past Pluto to almost halfway to Alpha Centauri. Once you get above the relatively dense core of the ecliptic plane, the comets are widely scattered, more than tens of millions of kilometers apart. We are actually outside the official boundary of the Oort sphere, where the density is considerably less. We’re a good two light years from either Earth or Centauri, in an area that comes close to duplicating empty space. We deemed this to be the best location for our test today.”

“You’re implying that there’s a safety issue, Commodore.” That was Li from The Shanghai Herald, who had interviewed Jim a year earlier in Paris.

Kirk shrugged. “There’s always one in any experimental venture, which is why we have experiments. But nothing unexpected or alarming. If you’re concerned, Mr. Li, we do have a warp shuttle leaving the area in….” Kirk glanced around as if to find a chronometer on the wall, but
there wasn’t one.

“Sixteen minutes, forty-two seconds,” Spock supplied from behind him.

“Thank you, Commander,” Kirk said. “Sixteen minutes.”

“I think I’ll stay,” the man said without humor, although there were a few chuckles from around him. Li Liangyu, Spock, surmised, was not well liked by the other reporters who usually covered such events.

“If there are no further questions….” Kirk surveyed the group, daring anyone to speak up. “Those of you with Class One credentials are welcome to continue to use the facilities here, though we’ll have to restrict each station to just one individual. Others can move out to the Churchill room, which has a portable screen almost as large as this one and all the hook-ups you’ll need.” He gestured behind himself to a viewscreen that was easily five times the size of the one that had served them on the Enterprise. “The trial is scheduled for fourteen hundred twenty hours. A little less than an hour and a half to go. I turn you over to Commander Zeng, who I am sure will take excellent care of you.” He nodded at the older woman who took his place and then left the platform. But there were reporters waiting for him on the floor, hoping for a private word or a quote restricted to their media outlet only, and Kirk quickly was surrounded by a crowd of men and women, all of whom seemed to be talking at once.

Spock made his way off the stage and then took up a post by the doorway in case any of the reporters required further explanations of a technical issue beyond what he had already supplied earlier in the briefing. Lieutenant Commander Davidson, the chief engineer on the project, had happily ceded to Spock his position of press advisor so that he could supervise the countdown that had been ongoing for several hours already.

But no one, for the moment, seemed to require Spock’s expertise. He folded his arms across his chest and waited, aware that even so he was an object of interest. He was familiar with the sensation, as it seemed to have followed him much of his life. Since they had beamed aboard the ship five hours previously, he had been the recipient of several quizzical looks, two instances of muffled laughter, and no fewer than eight seemingly sincere congratulations on the change in his marital status, as if the formality of the ceremony had made some significant difference in his relationship with James Kirk. Commodore Andersen had sent him and Jim a scathing message that rambled at length about “missed opportunities,” but there had nevertheless been some publicity. With the Eternists in disarray because of the actions of their extremist wing, no political assault such as Nogura had anticipated had emerged, but still Spock was aware of his status as a symbol: the non-human—or at least not completely human—male sexual partner of the Starfleet officer most in the public eye today. His marriage with Jim reflected the union of the Federation, or at least that was how one commentary column from The Galactic News had portrayed it. It was most fortunate that they had been unavailable for interviews while on the Pocono Express.

Once they had reluctantly landed their small haven of a ship, he had learned he was on temporary detached duty under the command of Commodore James T. Kirk, an arrangement he had embraced. They probably had very little time left together, and if they could mingle their public duties and their privates lives, that would maximize their contact. He craved that contact with Jim.

He was, in truth, also intensely interested in the outcome of the transwarp trial and had spent many hours assimilating all that had been done over the past year; it made for an almost-effective distraction from the inevitability of his fate. Of his death. Of his lover’s inevitable pain. Jim had questioned him extensively on the trans warp even on the last day of their honeymoon—a unique experience that he privately cherished, discussing warp drive dynamics while lying naked in bed
and watching the stars wheel overhead through their open viewport. What other mate could combine what he needed so perfectly? Once back on Earth Spock had attended many meetings and participated as much as he could, as the engineers put the final touches to their plans. That had been difficult, for of course the others resented him and the special relationship he shared with their director.

And so he was present on the *Star Traveler*. Jim had asked him to serve as download coordinator for the data that would be streaming in from the engines to their instruments. It was a not-necessarily-essential position that nevertheless would allow him to supervise the event as a whole, without needing to focus on any single strand of information. Besides that function, his task was to stand by James Kirk’s side. And to worry the theoretical underpinnings of transwarp. The equations that represented the new drive’s warping of space and the conditions of a Graves Gravitational Mass were similar but not identical, and not one of the project’s engineers were as concerned as Spock was. He suspected none of them really believed the readings the *Enterprise* had taken while trapped by a GGM. The mass was one of the galaxy’s rarest objects, and a fluctuating gravitational constant, such as they had observed, did indeed require a stretch of the imagination. He had no choice but to watch and wait, and then he would attempt to provide some perspective and explanations if this test today failed.

“Commander Spock.”

The subdued voice of Fahtima Gabon commanded his attention, and Spock released his severe posture to turn towards her. Today she was clad all in white, in spotless pants and a long-sleeved tunic with flowing sleeves, and her dark skin and luminous eyes were highlighted by the contrasting color, making her appear quite striking.

“Ms. Gabon. It is a pleasure to see you,” he said, aware of the warmth in his voice.

“And I must say the same. I had thought never to see you again, but I am glad that I was wrong.” She spoke in the same measured way that he remembered, as if she chose each word with care.

He noticed the heavy bag slung over her arm. “Are you to work from the auxiliary room?”

“Yes. Randy will stay here, but I’ll get all the video feed that we need from the equipment there. Are you well?”

He nodded and said, “Well enough.”

What could he say? That his outer appearance of equanimity was at odds with the emotions he fought to control? That in the past week there had been two other lapses in consciousness, both of them in Jim’s presence, and that it seemed the time left to him was not long? That his heart ached and his body feared, that he managed well during the days but at night had experienced nightmares where he awakened trembling, dreaming that death would repeat his long sojourn in pain and wrenching loss, only this time never to end? That Kirk had cursed fate and held him even when Spock tried to jerk away from him, and Spock’s pain doubled and tripled at the thought of what his death would impose on the one he cherished?

It was worse this time. Now he believed the prognosis. He watched Jim fold his lips over the urging to return to Golgotharen and knew it was the greatest gift he could be given, this forbearance: such an ironic contradiction. They made love each night fiercely and fell asleep wrapped in each other’s arms, as if to hold tightly enough was to keep the monster at bay through the darkness, and each morning Spock awakened to find Jim still touching him.

He successfully prevented negative emotion from shading the days they had. The work on the
transwarp had helped, as had his determination to seek out Gri-Ta, the Danarakh leader who had witnessed his disability from the beginning. Immediately after the transwarp test, he planned to take a leave of absence and follow his desperation to wherever she was, to see if she could help. If he lasted that long, Jim would accompany him.

No. He couldn’t say any of that to Fahtima Gabon. He would not speak of it. “And you?”

She cast her gaze to the floor, as he had seen her do before. He contemplated her bowed head and the wisps of hair escaping from the sheer head covering she wore. “The same.”

Gabon was no more forthcoming than he had been. “I see.”

Her head came back up and she spoke hurriedly. “I am surprised to see you here. I did not know you were associated with this project.”

“It was believed that I could contribute here until I receive another assignment.”

“Then you would not be able to speak on the record during an interview.”

Spock nodded gravely. “That is correct. I cannot represent the project as I am so lately attached to it. I am sorry I cannot offer you an interview that would assist your career.”

She made an odd movement with one shoulder, a restrained shrug. “It does not matter.”

“Have you had interesting assignments in the time since last we spoke?”

“A few. I have had three interviews published under my name alone. Nothing recently.”

“Nevertheless, you continue to advance in your career, as Mr. Randolph predicted you would the first time we met.”

“I do not know that I will ever meet Randy’s expectations. You and I have not met in a long time, since our conversation on Luna.”

“That was your first trip off-planet. Am I correct in assuming that in the time I was gone you did not have the opportunity to travel off-Earth, as we discussed you wished to do?”

She looked startled. “You remembered,” she murmured.

A few other media personnel walked by where they were standing near the doorway, giving them passing glances that held a modicum of curiosity, and Spock became aware that they should move to a different location. “Then this must be but your second trip from your home planet. If you have the time from your duties, I would be pleased to serve as your guide to this area of the solar system. There is a viewscreen I could activate in the forward recreation room.”

“I would like that,” Fahtima said.

He went with her first to the Churchill room where she unloaded her equipment. Spock helped arrange it and connect the system to the one offered by the ship, a simple process that he nevertheless took pleasure from. He had not worked in this way on board a space-going vessel in some time, and this activity reminded him quite vividly—and sadly—of his days on board the Enterprise. Whether he would survive to serve on her again was questionable, but he did intensely hope that someday Jim would regain the command for which he was so well-suited. It brought comfort to Spock to think that Jim would at least have that satisfaction.

Fahtima straightened abruptly. “Are you finished?”
Spock established the final connection and nodded, surprised at her tone of voice. “Yes. Let us go.”

They passed by the auditorium again, and Kirk was finally emerging from it. He regarded them with mild surprise but not a trace of the hesitation that Spock knew he must be feeling to be encountering the cousin of someone he had been forced to kill.

“Ms. Gabon,” Kirk said as they all stopped in the hallway. “You’re looking well, much better than when we met in the spring.”

“Yes,” she said coolly. “My health has improved.”

Kirk exchanged a lightning-quick glance with Spock. “Are you enjoying this assignment? I presume you’re here with Mr. Randolph and The News.”

“That is true.”

Into an awkward silence, Kirk said, with sincerity coloring his voice, “I’ve heard of the death of your cousin, Ms. Gabon. Not so long ago. Please accept my sincere condolences on your loss.”

“My loss,” she echoed after several uncomfortable moments during which Spock was unsure she was going to respond. “Is that not a most unusual perspective? Yes, I have lost my dear cousin,” her voice trembled on the word, “but Hamza lost his life. I do not think the two can be weighed equally. It is to Hamza that you should be speaking.”

She knew, Spock realized, although it took no great intellect to come to that conclusion. Somehow she knew that it was at Kirk’s hands that Hamza Machar had died.

And Kirk realized it, too, of course. “If I could bring your cousin back to life, to talk with him, I would.”

Fahtima looked directly, steadfastly at Kirk. “The world is filled with good intentions, but somehow we never can fulfill them, can we? I have many good intentions myself, but I find that I…I am less than I wish to be. Commander Spock, I must go back to my duties shortly. Could we please continue? I would be most interested in seeing a comet.”

It was alarming that somehow Gabon had unearthed the truth of her cousin’s death. She was an investigator-after-the-truth in her role as reporter, and so she would have the means and the opportunity to uncover secrets, although those held by Starfleet Security should have been safe from her. He wondered where the breach in security might be and had to abandon his speculation because he lacked data. So he agreed to Gabon’s request. “Of course. Commodore, if you will excuse us. I will return shortly.”

In silence they made their way to the small, elegantly appointed recreation room, which this close to the testing time was otherwise deserted. At the far end, past a few warm wood tables and comfortable padded chairs, a viewscreen was set in the wall. Spock manipulated the rudimentary scanner in an attempt to locate some comet that might be within range and finally was able to focus on a tumbling chunk of ice and rock.

“But I thought…this is a comet? It’s dark.”

“Indeed. This far from the sun, there is insufficient energy to allow a halo or tail to form.”

He watched as her dark fingers, with blunt fingernails, traced the image on the screen. “I hadn’t thought of that. Of course, that’s how it is. Can we predict which of these comets will fall into the inner solar system?”
“A few are tracked, but the majority cannot be. These objects are but weakly bound to Sol. Passing stars, a molecular cloud, or the tidal forces of the galaxy can disrupt their orbits to send them either in towards the sun or outwards into space. The calculations are too complex to make it worth predicting.”

Her fingers curled as if to scoop up the image. “So dark now…. And potentially so bright.” Her eyes were liquid in the low light. “Like us. Like sentient beings.”

This woman never seemed to speak to him of trivial matters. “Yes. Much depends on our environment. Some individuals never have opportunities.”

“And others make their opportunities. As you have done.”

“And you as well.”

“No. I have done nothing. Commander Spock, I apologize for my outburst against Commodore Kirk. I had not intended for you to…. I apologize.”

Spock allowed himself to consider various replies before he settled on, “I have been subjected to far more emotional displays; it is forgotten. But I must also say to you, as the commodore did, that I regret the death of your cousin—”

“That you,” she choked out, and her eyes closed in sudden, obvious pain.

Uneasily he observed her. This quick descent into displayed emotion was unlike Fahtima’s usual calm, self-possessed demeanor. “I did not have the opportunity of meeting your cousin formally, but I observed him with you on our trip to Luna City, and I surmise that the two of you were close.”

“Yes,” and she half twisted away from him.

“We lived together in the same house. We were raised together as children. He used to—” A sob revealed how much of her composure had fled. Her shoulders shook as her hand came over her mouth and she attempted to muffle her crying.

Spock took a step closer to her, but he did not wish to touch her. He had never understood how in these situations the touch of even an almost-stranger could be soothing to humans, plus there were complications in the way he and she had related to each other before. Nevertheless, here was a being who suffered, and he knew how to give a human what might help. He raised his hand so he could lightly rest it on her shoulder, but before he could make contact, she gave a convulsive sob and wrenched further away from him. He could only see her curved back and bowed head; she could not have known he had intended to offer comfort. Spock’s hand fell to his side, and he merely said, “Ms. Gabon…. And then he listened to her cry.

After a minute she spoke again while wiping away her tears with the back of her hand. “He used to keep me company in the field where I watched my father’s goats. He wrote to me after he left us. I don’t know how I’m going to….”

She broke down again, shuddering, and Spock helplessly wished that there were some other human present on whom he could lay this emotional burden. He had not expected this of her.

“I’m sorry,” she keened. “So sorry for this.” With deep gulps of air she fought for self-control and regained some of it, although intensity was etched in her tear-stained features. “Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive.”
“Yes, there is. You don’t know…. I do not wish to do this to you. Forgive me, please.”

“It is nothing. You are in pain.”

“Yes,” she said in a low voice, “I am. That explains it all. I am well-acquainted with it.” She bleakly said, “I have not spoken of him to anyone since…it happened.”

“Then I am honored to hear your words.”

“It is so hard without him.”

“Your loss is great. I grieve with you.”

Her eyes lifted to his and stayed there, filling with wonder as she searched his face. He did not know what she was looking for, but he held himself still for her perusal, as she had once done the same for him a year before at the lunar amphitheater.

“You truly do.” Her voice was expressive. “I can see that you truly do grieve with me. How is that possible, in a Vulcan who professes to control emotions? How can you give me so much?”

“I….” He did not know what to say that would not be too revealing. There was a fascinating tug and repulsion between them. “Many things are possible, including my understanding of your difficult situation.”

“Understanding? No. No. None of us truly understands the other. We are locked away in our silences. I never truly understood Hamza, and he did not really understand me. He didn’t, no matter what I might have told myself.”

Spock remembered the Medusan ambassador’s horror at the solitary lives led by non-telepathic individuals: all those who could not experience the group, hive-like existence of the Medusans. And although he did not want to, he thought of the intense pleasure of making contact with Jim’s mind, of sinking into his essence and merging with him as a lover sinks into the body of the beloved…. Fahtima Gabon unsettled him.

“We communicate as best we can. When we are confronted by limitations, intelligent beings do what they can to make themselves understood, through whatever changes are necessary.” As he and Jim had done. A wedding instead of a bonding. Words instead of essences. Minutes instead of years.

“Changes,” she challenged. “I remember you told me before that you believed it was possible to make enormous changes in one’s life. To start things new. I don’t believe that. We are what we are and we cannot change.”

She spoke through her grief, although he did not understand the depth of her feeling for her cousin, who perhaps had abused her and was certainly responsible for attacking Jim and almost killing Lieutenant Commander Ciani at the least.

Fahtima shuddered and pulled her head scarf more tightly under her chin, so that her features were shadowed through the gauze.

“No,” she whispered. “No.”

“Yes,” Spock said as gently as he could. How to reach through this woman’s despair? “There are ways to change. You will learn to live again without your cousin’s presence, as painful and impossible as that might seem now.” As Jim would learn.
“We do not understand each other.” She released her hold on her scarf, her fingers lingering as if she did so with an effort. “It makes no difference. I am sorry to…to separate you from the commodore. I will leave now. Good day.”

He was left watching her fleeing form with narrowed eyes and wondering at the words they had shared, apparently without truly communicating. She had always been something of a mystery to him, but this conversation was frustrating in its obscurity. There was an undercurrent he was not completely comprehending…. Surely it was only that she made him uneasy.

It occurred to him that she was the only individual with whom he had had a private conversation this day who had not congratulated him on his marriage. Perhaps this exchange could be attributed to…. No. There had not been a hint of jealousy.

On the viewscreen, the comet he had found for her, that had surprised her with its lifeless darkness, still tumbled in the void, although no one saw it. He clicked the machine off and followed the woman.

*****

The control room for the trial was at the opposite end of the ship from the bridge, tucked in at the base of the Traveler’s disk, an afterthought in a ship that usually had a diplomatic or propaganda purpose only. One of the projects on which Kirk’s engineers had worked was outfitting the space there with all the equipment they’d need to receive and interpret the data from the Acacia, once she’d launched and initiated the transwarp drive.

It was something of a relief for Spock to make his way from the turbulence of Gabon’s passions to bright lights, efficiency, and to where Jim Kirk was calmly overseeing the countdown. Kirk acknowledged his entry with a nod from across the room, then went back to a consultation with the senior engineer, Lieutenant Commander Davidson, who had grown gray in his years of service to the transwarp project and whose taut cheek muscles displayed how much this day meant to him. Suppressed excitement permeated the air, in the way the many engineers and scientists sat tensely at their stations and in the low-voiced commands that occasionally were issued, but that emotion was familiar to Spock. He was familiar with the anticipation that surrounded a new discovery or the enhancement of a mechanism that could prove of considerable value. But on the Enterprise, those enhancements had often been made in the middle of a crucial mission, when death had been threatening, and success had meant saving lives. This trial carried no such promise.

Spock found his own station at one end of the closest row. Men and women sat in two long rows, the stations facing each other, with ample space between for their coordinator to pace and with a large viewscreen at the far end of the room from Spock. It currently showed the Acacia. She had disengaged from the belly of the mother ship more than three hours previously and had moved off to a safe distance. He began to run a check of his equipment, but occasionally he glanced up and witnessed Kirk’s slow progress towards him.

The commodore worked his way across the room, stopping to peer over the shoulder of one engineer, to exchange a comment with another, and Spock saw that he left confidence in his wake, in that way he had, that all excellent commanders had of encouraging their people and creating the conditions for them to perform their best. Kirk had not asked for this assignment, and he had no special aptitude for the science that was at its heart, but even here he was…noteworthy. Standing in a room filled with brilliant people, in his ordinary green wraparound Starfleet uniform, his vitality and presence still filled and dominated the space. No, Spock was not overestimating his impact because of partiality and familiarity; he was still able to evaluate situations as a scientist and according to his heritage as a Vulcan.
Kirk came up to his station then, leaned over the console, and greeted Spock with a small and unmistakably affectionate smile. His eyes, though, were sad, as they had been since Spock had regained consciousness the first time on the *Pocono Express*.

“Report, Commander.”

“Data link in place. Awaiting transwarp data stream with calibrated instruments.”

“Excellent. Not much longer to go. A credit for your thoughts just now.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’ve been watching you. Something crossed your mind that seemed to please you.”

A few years before, such a comment would have produced acute discomfort; now it gave him bittersweet pleasure to be so well known. “I am sure I have not engaged in any such unsuitable behavior. I have merely been considering your successful leadership on this project, and I have experienced satisfaction at a job well done.”

Kirk gave him a look that said he understood all that was beneath the words, and then he became serious. “We’ve got a security problem with Ms. Gabon, don’t we?”

“Unfortunately, I am forced to agree. She should not have known of your involvement in her cousin’s death.”

“Either somebody’s been talking when they shouldn’t have, or she’s hacked into the Starfleet system. We can’t ignore it either way.”

“Yes. We must address this at our first opportunity. Report the situation at the least.”

“We probably won’t have much time before we leave to find Gri-Ta, so reporting it will have to do. Have you located where the Danarakhan people settled?”

“I will confess that the demands of the transwarp coordinator have prevented me from having the time to instigate such research.”

“That coordinator,” Kirk said lightly, though there was still a shadow in his eyes. “He’ll have to slack off on his demands.”

“No,” Spock said immediately. “Do not....” He needed Kirk’s attention now—and his caring. “You know that I do not object to any of your demands.”

“All right.” Said quietly, for just the two of them to hear. Kirk straightened and rubbed a hand to the back of his neck, as Spock had seen him do countless times before, and he changed the subject. “I wonder if Ms. Gabon knows exactly what kind of person her cousin was? To be responsible for the deaths of all those people, and to hate the way he did....”

Spock gratefully returned to their former topic. “It is unlikely that she would see Mr. Machar from that perspective. She considers him a loving relative.”

“Did you learn anything useful from your talk with her?”

Spock considered. “Negative. She is highly emotional and grief stricken.”

“I’m sorry. I know that you and she are friends.”
“Perhaps. Her emotional state is troubling, and if I could help her I would.”

Kirk favored him with a slowly-forming, eventually enigmatic smile.

“And now I will ask you what you are smiling at.”

“Oh, nothing. You. If you weren’t already married, I think I’d make a play for you.”

Spock half-turned away so the curve of his lips that he did not care to restrain was nevertheless not too obvious. “Most reprehensible of you. You, I must point out, are married, and so am I.”

Kirk’s shoulders hunched in soundless amusement, but then came someone’s voice announcing, “Ignition T minus twenty minutes and counting.”

“If you’ve got any revelations concerning this project, now’s the time to speak up.”

“I will make sure you are the first to know.”

“Of course. Carry on, Commander.”

“Yes, Commodore.”

The countdown proceeded smoothly, with only one problem in a power fluctuation that caused a delay for three minutes. Spock’s fingers flew over his board as he and everyone else searched for the cause. A civilian contractor with a jet black goatee—Stefan Danvers, Spock supplied the name—discovered the faulty relay in the equipment at their end, and another contractor, a woman at least as pregnant as Lieutenant Hunyady and whom Spock had not yet met, jumped up to where replacements had been stocked. Spock approved of such contingency planning. She crawled under the console and inserted the unit, then emerged flushed and quizzing, “Did that do it?”

It did, and so the precise checking off of the seconds continued.

At T minus ten minutes the internal comm line crackled into life. “Commodore Kirk, an incoming call for you and your people from Earth,” the bridge relayed.

Kirk nodded as if he had been expecting the call and said, “Send it on.”

It was the image of Commander-in-Chief Heihachiro Nogura that appeared on the viewscreen, and a notable stir went through the staff. It had taken Nogura almost a full year in stasis—while organs were grown to replace the ones destroyed in the blast—and then recovery from the transplant surgery before he’d been able to resume his position at Starfleet Command, but it was a testimony to the trust that the Federation had in him that he was back at San Francisco headquarters. He was thinner than Spock remembered him being, and his hair was gray, not black, but his voice was the same, and Spock believed he wielded the same power that he had before.

“Commodore Kirk. Members of the transwarp team, I call today to wish you the best of luck….”

Spock ignored the rest of what he had to say, as it was only a pep talk suitable for quoting by members of the media. He was sure that there was a direct feed to the briefing auditorium, and probably to where Ms. Gabon was in the auxiliary room as well. Spock didn’t approve of such frivolous wasting of time by someone who had much better things to do, but he did at least comprehend the impulse that directed such very human activities. Jim had always understood the value of publicity and the occasional need to twist information for beneficial purposes, something he perhaps had absorbed from his mother. Spock had been surprised that Sarah was not actually present on the Star Traveler, although he was grateful that he had not been forced to face her and...
dissemble about his condition.

Nogura’s image faded, the countdown resumed, and Kirk went to stand behind where Lieutenant Commander Davidson was sitting. The *Acacia* was now one hundred thousand kilometers distant, her image augmented by the viewscreen. Spock focused on the new data that was beginning to come in; the volunteers on board the experimental ship had brought the drive into readiness and would engage it in less than a minute.

“T minus thirty seconds.”

The data stream was as expected: the appropriate numbers and forms of protons and muons and tau particles for the warm-up phase. He made a minor adjustment that clarified the temperature reading in the intermix chamber.

Davidson called out, “Energy output?”

“Within parameters,” someone announced.

“Spatial displacement?”

“Point two three five,” someone else responded.

“Neutrino production?”

“One part in two hundred thousand.”

Davidson looked up at Kirk. “All set and ready to go, Commodore.”

Kirk brought his hands behind his back while staring up at the *Acacia*. Spock knew the responsibility he felt for the successful conclusion of this test. “Proceed, Mr. Davidson.”

“T minus ten seconds, mark.”

The data flowed to Spock’s console. Smoothly the energy grew in the conduits leading to the intermix chamber, until it reached the critical level all had agreed would be necessary to achieve the warping of space in a new and more efficient way. The readings peaked…and then the *Acacia* moved away at warp one point zero one, barely enough to create the distortion envelope.

Spock’s eyes narrowed. Neutrino production had escalated past what had been expected….

Next to him, there was a muffled thump.

Spock tore his eyes away from the figures and saw that the woman occupying the console next to his had fallen from her chair onto the floor. Her neck stretched at an awkward, uncomfortable angle. He rose to assist her—the computer was recording the data, his observation wasn’t strictly necessary—and then he heard another thump. And another.

All around him, the scientists and engineers were losing consciousness, falling over their instruments or slumping back in their seats or collapsing entirely to the floor. Spock dropped to his knees and checked the woman’s tumultuous pulse; she was alive. Across the length of the long rows of consoles, he sought out Kirk’s equally horrified eyes. In the time it took him to swallow heavily, Spock realized that they were the only two conscious beings in the room.

Without a word Spock whipped back to his instruments, hoping he would not see what he suspected was happening, but knowing that he would.
A moment later Kirk was behind him, and Spock turned around to regard the vitality of his features. Jim was still with him....

Kirk was leaning over his shoulder, observing the data and not needing any interpretation. “I can’t believe it,” he breathed. “I thought when we set the buoys around that one in sector fifteen no one would ever stumble into one of these again. We barely got out alive the last time before the ship was torn to bits.”

Spock clamped down hard on his emotional reaction as he switched all his perceptions to red alert mode. He shared many of Kirk’s memories of that horrific time, but Spock had more. For hours he had been the only aware being on the Enterprise. “A Graves Gravitational Mass.”

“Damn it. You were right all along. All this time, you were right. The transwarp drive won’t work. It does this instead? The drive created the GGM?”

“Apparently, yes.” There was no triumph in the realization that his misgivings about the theoretical underpinnings of transwarp were proven. They might all die because of this test.

“Then how come I’m not on the floor like the rest of them?” Kirk jerked his head towards the closest person sprawled on the deck. “Last time—”

“You wavered in and out of consciousness without predictability. You could—”

“Keel over any minute. Spock....” Kirk’s eyes sought his, and the hand on his chair transferred to his shoulder instead to squeeze hard. He said intensely, “I won’t leave you alone again. Hear me?”

Spock’s hand covered Kirk’s and pressed equally hard. He felt the sinews and bones in his spouse’s fingers and promised himself that the unique lifeform that was James Kirk would continue.

But emotional promises, either from him or from Jim, would not change the reality of their situation. Inspired work might. Spock forced himself to focus on the facts. “You might have no choice. We have no clear idea of how the influence of the GGM works.”

“Am I still conscious because you came so close to the bond at Golgotharen?”

Spock nodded tightly. “Quite possibly.”

“We’d better make absolutely certain we’re the only two.” Kirk thumbed the intercom system. “Kirk to bridge. Bridge, please respond.” When silence answered him, he ordered the computer to provide a ship-wide hail and urgently requested that anyone who could respond contact him immediately. They both waited, but Spock was also consulting every sensor input he could call up to his board, to gain as much information as possible for decision-making. Somehow the alteration of space within the boundaries of a GGM interfered with the brain activity of any sentient individual who had even a modicum of psychic power, including the minimal psychic abilities held by humans, and sent those beings into delusional fantasy. A normal Vulcan would be similarly affected, but he, with his powers encapsulated, could function. And he would function, with every skill and scrap of knowledge at his disposal.

“Is this GGM like the one we encountered before?”

“There does not seem to be any difference between this artificially created construct and the—”

The deck abruptly tilted to one side. Spock clutched at the desk surface in front of him; Kirk managed to stay on his feet by grabbing the back of the chair. The superstructure of the ship
around them moaned as if in pain, then quieted.

“I remember that,” Kirk said grimly.

“The Graves Gravitational Mass warps the very fabric of space itself, which is why there is a similarity between the mathematical modeling of a GGM and transwarp drive, and why it will ultimately pull apart the very molecules of this ship and everyone on it. We are trapped within it and cannot communicate outside it.

“And there’s no way we can get out like we did before,” Kirk rasped out. “The Enterprise barely had the power to do it after all your modifications. This ship doesn’t have near the engines required. And even if we could get out, that doesn’t help the crew on the Acacia.” Kirk pounded a fist into his palm. “Has it reached self-sustaining size yet?”

“Negative. I estimate that we have less than one hour before it does.”

“Just an hour?”

Spock double-checked the data flowing in from the sensors, then re-calculated. He wanted to find more time. It had taken him eight hours and twenty-two minutes to extricate the Enterprise…. “We must act within fifty-seven minutes or there will be nothing we can do to eliminate this phenomenon. I estimate another hour after that before the ship disintegrates.”

“Okay, okay. How about…. Could the engines be self-limiting? Will they exhaust the anti-matter fuel production and just stop?”

Halfway through the questions, Spock was up out of his seat and moving to where Davidson had overseen sensors far more specific than the generalized ones before Spock. Kirk was right behind him, and together they eased Davidson’s body to the floor, although Spock let Kirk take most of the weight as he examined the computer readout. He studied data, acutely conscious of the silence in the room and the ticking of the seconds.

“Negative,” he finally concluded, although he knew less than thirty seconds had passed. “Anti-matter production can continue indefinitely and the Graves Gravitational Mass will continue to grow. Your engineers, Commodore, did their jobs too well.”

“So we’ve got runaway engines. Okay, that’s it.” Kirk spoke from where he was systematically straightening the limbs of the people who had worked for him on the project. He pulled a woman’s bent leg out from under her body. It was the pregnant woman who had replaced the faulty relay. “We’ve got to stop this at the source.”

“The computer controls will be severely compromised if our previous experience holds true. Is an override of the Acacia’s engines by way of a computer command possible from this ship?” All Starfleet vessels had a secret override code that could be transmitted, but Spock hadn’t had opportunity or reason to discover if the experimental vessel was so equipped.

“That,” Kirk said with an oomph as with effort he pulled a man off his seat to lay him flat out on the deck, “would have been a very good idea. But the Acacia’s not official Starfleet registry. It was never set up.”

“Then we have no choice. We must beam over and stop the reaction there.”

“Beam over? Is that even possible? There wasn’t anywhere to beam to before….”

“The GGM will make beaming less precise.”
“Less precise as in we should take the time to find the shuttle or less precise as in we can risk transporting? If we don’t survive, Spock, nobody on these two ships will, either.”

Spock experienced a flash of irritation with himself. Had he been absent from active starship duty for so long that he could no longer provide required information? “I recommend beaming. The odds for our survival are—”

Kirk held up a hand as he got to his feet. “That’s enough. I just needed your recommendation. Okay, we use the transporter. Let’s go.”

Spock gave a quick nod as he was redirecting the flow of data so that it would be available to him at the transporter room. It took him all of six seconds, but by the time he stood, Kirk had disappeared out of the door. He followed at a run.

Jim held the lift for him but was instructing “deck two, emergency override” as Spock skidded to a halt by bouncing against the back wall. He grabbed the support bar as the lift rocketed upwards with a high-pitched whine.

“We’re assuming that stopping the transwarp drive reaction will also destroy the GGM.” Kirk spoke with his hands on the toggle, as if his readiness to act would force the turbo to go more swiftly. “Is that definitely going to happen?”

“It is impossible to accurately predict.”

“Then give me a guess.”

“A guess?”

Kirk threw a grin his way, and the sight of it brought a flood of reminiscent emotion. This was the way it had been…. The memories were so sweet they were painful. He would stop this object so Jim could command again.

“C’mon, humor me. Guess.”

“Very well. I estimate that there is a roughly sixty percent likelihood that shutting down the transwarp engines will be successful in destroying the GGM. None of the other possible actions carries with it a more than eight percent chance of succeeding.”

“You’re making all that up.”

“I do not prevaricate.”

“Right. So much for a simple test of the transwarp drive. I imagine the reporters will really have something to write about after this. Assuming there is an ‘after this.’ Have you noticed, Mister Spock, that we seem to keep doing what we do best? Whether we’re grounded on Earth or not?”

Spock favored him with a lifted eyebrow. “Of course I have noticed it. It is quite a fascinating occurrence. Perhaps…we are natural magnets for such events?”

“You mean we attract trouble? My mother always used to say that. But I—” The rest was cut off by the doors opening.

In the corridor before them were two men clad in Starfleet uniforms, silent forms on the deck. Kirk jumped over them and began to run down the hallway, and Spock followed him, mentally sorting through possible ways they might dismantle powerful transwarp engines that were unresponsive to
…when Kirk abruptly stopped, put a hand to his head, took a few more staggering steps, and then dropped towards the deck.

“Jim!” With a lunge forward, Spock was barely there in time to catch him and prevent his head from hitting hard. Both of them collapsed as Kirk’s weight bore him down awkwardly, with his knees twisted to the side.

He fumbled for the exact right spot on the carotid, and after too many seconds had passed, a pulse thumped against his fingers. But Spock stared into slack features. Kirk was as unaware as all the others on this ship.

He was alone again. Savagely Spock corralled the desolation that threatened to overtake him. That would come in its time, but not yet….

Jim took a discernible breath. Spock took one, too.

His thoughts raced as quickly as his heart. Fifty-one minutes remained of his original estimate. He did not have the luxury of time or of sentiment, and he simply could not remain here. Minutes counted.

With deep regret, Spock awkwardly extricated himself from under Kirk’s body, being careful to find the most comfortable angle at which to gently rest his head on the deck. He pushed his fingers through the honey hair, conscious of a few more seconds passing as he allowed himself the illogical act of twirling one strand around his forefinger.

Before he could take a step away, the small sound of a deeper inhalation whipped him around again. Kirk’s features were animated once again, and his eyes were blinking.

“Jim!” Spock was on his knees next to him so quickly his kneecaps hurt from the impact.

“Wha….” Kirk made an ineffective movement with his hand, as if to bring it to his face, but it flopped back down.

“Jim! Wake up! Can you hear me?”

Again the eyes blinked, but Spock could see that he was making a prodigious effort to keep them open.

“Okay. Yeah.” His voice was slurred. “Spo…. Spock!” Urgency tensed his body and Kirk shot up to a sitting position. Both arms extended to something unseen. “No! Don’t give up! Here, take my hand. Take it!” His fingers curled, and his hands shook like a man with palsy. “For God’s sake, I can’t help you if you don’t—”

“Jim.” Ruthlessly Spock shook his shoulders, hard enough to make Kirk’s head snap. “Jim! Look at me.”

Kirk’s eyes widened as he fought to obey. His gaze left whatever it had been tracking and focused on Spock instead. “Spo….”

“Yes.”

Kirk licked his lips. “Spock?”
“I am fine. We are on the Star Traveler. Do you remember?”

“You’re not….” He rocked his head back and forth as if to clear it. “Not being crushed?”

He had never told Jim the specifics of the illusion that had accompanied him in the darkness. How had he known? Here was more evidence of the bond that connected them that they could nonetheless not reach. “Those are delusions. Do you understand? You must keep hold of reality.”


“That is correct.”

“We’ve got to get to the… Acacia?”

“Do you remember why?”

Swiftly Kirk looked up, and from the fierce determination in his eyes, Spock could see that all of James T. Kirk—the most successful starship commander of his time—had returned. “The Graves Gravitational Mass. How long have I been out?”

“One minute, thirty-two seconds.”

“Not so bad then. A lot less than the other times. How much time left?”

“Forty-nine minutes.”

“All right, let’s go.”

He got to his feet with the help of Spock’s hand on his elbow, swayed, but then shrugged him away and started down the corridor at a jog. Spock followed, alert to another fall but helpless to prevent one.

The transporter room was populated by the limp body of one junior technician, immersed in fantasies as every other sentient being on the ship must be. From behind the console, Spock called up the program he’d downloaded to the ship’s computer; they needed to know exactly where the lines of energy produced by the phenomenon were to avoid beaming through them, or their mission would end before it began.

Next to him Kirk had activated the comm system again. “If there is anyone capable of answering this hail, establish contact with me immediately.” He waited, then added, “by order of Commodore Kirk,” but no one was capable. No one answered.

He looked over at Spock. “We aim for the engine room, right? You created the over-rides on the Enterprise because the control systems were so unreliable. The Acacia’s bridge isn’t any use to us.”

“Correct. We will need to initiate direct action on the engines to stop them. However, the beaming procedure is problematic; there is much interference. I will aim for the largest area in the engine room and expect that random possibilities will act in our favor.”

“In other words, be prepared for a fall and hope for luck.”

Spock cast him a glance as he made the final correlation between data received and the transporting algorithm. “You have always interpreted me well.”

“You’re my life-long challenge.” Kirk hooked an arm around Spock’s neck and pulled him into a
quick, fervent kiss. “Life-long, hear that? Live long and prosper, love, and I mean that, no matter what happens. Ready?”

Kirk ascended the transporter pad in a bound and waited for Spock to set the automatic beam-out. A few moments later Spock was standing by his side.

The familiar disorientation of long-range transportation took over, but Spock’s feet began to tingle, definitely not a side-effect he had ever experienced. He was uncomfortably aware of his body in a way he shouldn’t have been. Usually transporting produced a milli-second of out-of-body, painless sensation that most sentient beings could not recall, but now he knew when the beam had transformed his feet into energy, his knees were gone, it was creeping up his body, his legs were completely gone, there was a whine in his ears and he wanted to turn and check on Jim but you couldn’t shouldn’t move when caught by the beam and so it wasn’t possible, besides, his torso was being pulled out of his neck in a violent, pain-filled wrench and his chin was torn and bloodied and….

…his legs came back because he fell too quickly to twist and roll onto his shoulder. Oomph! His knees buckled and he fell onto them with a painful impact. The world whirled around him, but he shook off the dizziness to come to himself on his hands and knees….

…to so much light that his secondary eyelid had already snapped into place, even with his eyes squeezed shut, and so much noise that the deck beneath his spread fingers was literally vibrating with it. He gasped at the sensory onslaught and struggled to make some sense of what they had beamed into. Finally he gave in to his instinctive impulse and clapped his hands over his ears as he sat up straight; he forced his eyes to slit open the smallest bit to gain more data.

Fortune favored him: he was facing the chrome and white transwarp column that dominated the engine room. It rose up more than fifteen meters, encompassing the entire height of the ship itself, and was dotted with the sensor plates and translucent electro-magnetic boards that were essential to containing the titanic energies within it. Spock scanned up its length through his curtained, imperfect vision, starting at its roots and all the way up to the top where the matter and the anti-matter conduits fed into the central unit from opposite sides like branches on a tree, and then, despite the fact that his vision was so impaired, he saw it.

There was nowhere to hide, to protect himself, and no time to find where Jim was, and so as the column literally bulged with the gigantic pressures within it, Spock threw himself down to the deck and transferred his hands to the back of his neck. If the transwarp shaft burst through its multiple layers of safeguards and exploded, death would be virtually instantaneous; worse would be a rupture that would guarantee them an agonizing death from radiation that would last long minutes. A tear the size of a pinhead would give them a chance, at least, for survival….

The roar in his ears crescendoed up and up; it seemed to penetrate his very bones so all his joints trembled and wanted to fly apart. The noise sent equipment rattling and pounced on his merely flesh-and-blood body like a live, snarling animal of sound, and the fight-or-flight hormone coursing through his veins made him shake. This was matter in agony, stressed to its ultimate limits, and Spock did not know if Jim’s engineers had made the column strong enough….

They had. Abruptly, silence. And Spock was still alive. He slowly sat up again and tried to bring the sight of his hands in focus. To his consternation, it was difficult and he couldn’t really see clearly; his inner membrane was as thick and obscuring as he had ever experienced it. More. But he thought there were no radiation burns on his palms, so the engine’s casing had held.

A hard grip on his arm brought him around to the fuzzy outline of James Kirk, sitting next to him on the deck.
“My God. What was that?”

Spock could just make out that Jim was shading his eyes with his other hand.

“I do not know. Perhaps unbalancing caused by the gravitational mass. Whatever it is, these structures will not endure many more similar occurrences.”

“So, what do we do?”

Spock could make out that the familiar shifting of light and colors, that he expected of any warping mechanism, was reflecting through the electro-magnetic boards at much higher than normal intensity. He heaved himself to his feet, and Kirk did the same with a shove against the deck. Spock pointed up, struggling to see through the unwelcome protection of his obscuring eyelids. “The matter and anti-matter conduits converge there. The fuel for the engines is contained and directed by magnetic fields that escort it towards the moment of annihilation. We must extend the magnetic fields so that they cross over the conduits and seal them, thus preventing the reaction from taking place.”

“More easily said than done. Just how do we do that?”

“There are two possibilities, one much safer than the other. If at all possible, we will initiate cross-circuiting that can be achieved by computer command.” As he spoke, Spock looked around for the primary engine control board, blinking hard to bring the gray ghost images into as sharp a focus as he could. “The circuitry that surrounds each conduit is in essence a coil that can be energized. Mister Scott and I identified various areas of the ship that were similarly constructed, and these configurations are not too different. But first—”

“A solenoid? You’re going to turn the entire conduit into a gigantic solenoid?”

“Essentially. Both conduits. And pass currents around and through them—those are the magnetic fields that already exist, only they will be extended. They will contain the engine reaction. But first I will need a reading from the intersection between the chamber and one conduit.”

Spock made his way across the room to the instrument panel and examined the data displayed, while Kirk wordlessly shifted the limp bodies of the three technicians to the side. The displays were ones Spock was familiar with and could operate with minimal visual input. Without explanation he magnified all data read-outs and attempted to find the information that was essential to what he planned—hoped—to do. He leaned closer to the board and squinted, urgently wishing the inner eyelids would thin or, even better, retract, but they were as unpredictable as ever.

As he had feared, the data was compromised, and that did not bode well for his attempt to use the computer to construct the magnetic field. But they had to try; he was unwilling to expose Jim to the danger associated with their second choice.

“Computer, read aloud.” At least his hearing was unimpaired.

“Working: Muon output four point seven nine. Tau output sixteen thousand thirty-three. Neu—”

“Computer, stop.”

“Well?” Kirk, at his elbow, asked without patience. They could both feel the minutes ticking away. “Those readings don’t make any sense.”

Spock thought furiously.
“I must climb to the top of the column and read out the data for each conduit directly from the source. I will take a tricorder with me so we can get raw data unfiltered by the computer; one must be stored here. Without the data to guide us, we might establish the magnetic field parallel to the conduit instead of across it. If we do that, we will add so much additional stress to the intermix that—”

“—that we’re likely to see the column bulge again,” Kirk said grimly. “And maybe blow up this time. Okay, except I’m the one going up. You stay here and I’ll call out the figures. You can hardly see, can you? Your inner eyelids…I can barely see your eyes through them at all.”

“I can still see somewhat. But you could enter unconsciousness at any time. A fall from that height—”

“Isn’t going to happen.”

“That is illogical,” Spock snapped. “You have no control over that event. You could break your neck.”

“And if you went, you might not be able to see the data we need. That’s even more illogical, to send a man on a mission he can’t fulfill. End of argument, Commander, I outrank you. I’m going up.”

Frustrated, Spock folded his lips over further argument. He knew when Jim would not be swayed. “Go, then.”

Spock would not watch him ascend the ladder rungs that led up to the positive-matter conduit. He concentrated instead on attempting to reconfigure the control systems, to see if he could indeed safely establish the fields they needed. Jim was sure-footed, their situation dire, and every second counted. They had thirty-nine minutes left of his original estimate, but Spock uneasily knew he could have been wrong. The object could become self-sustaining an hour from now or in a minute. They could accomplish what they were attempting to do here only to discover the phenomenon still pulsed in the outer bands of the Oort Cloud. They would all be trapped, at least until the ship was ground into nothingness by forces they’d been unable to escape.

Despite his focus on the computer, still he was aware of every small sound that indicated Jim was climbing higher and higher. Spock would not be able to move fast enough to cushion him if he fell…. These were the emotions that Surak had preached against, for they were unproductive, resulting only in useless anxiety. They were also the inevitable offspring of affection, of love, and Spock had surrendered to those emotions he harbored for Jim more than a year before they had first kissed…. He would have it no other way.

“I’m here,” Kirk called from over his head. “Muon production point zero zero seven three, tau production two point eight nine, neutrinos are at—”

“Are the figures stable or fluctuating?”

“Not sure…. Stable. Wait a minute…. Yes, stable.”

“Go on.”

His vision was clearing enough so that he was able to start programming as Kirk continued reporting the data, but the systems were stubbornly erratic. Twice he thought he’d accomplished the containing magnetic force they needed and asked Kirk to confirm, and twice there was no change. Spock tried again.
“That’s done something. Muons just jumped to point one six.”

Spock’s brow furrowed as he concentrated. That was not the data set he was expecting.
“Neutrinos?”

“Up to point seven two. Taus are—”

“Down, Jim, come down!”

Kirk obeyed him immediately and started to rapidly descend the rungs of the ladder, his feet and hands flying. Illogically Spock ran over to the base of the column, knowing he should instead seek shelter, that Kirk would want him to do that, but he would not abandon Jim in the face of such danger.

“Hurry!” he shouted, but he knew he couldn’t be heard, for a tremendous bass note burst from the chamber and shook the bulkheads. The translucent windows began to glow a brilliant white-hot and to tremble, and he was forced to clamp his eyes shut. The reaction of matter and anti-matter annihilating each other within the intermix chamber was dangerously unbalanced, almost out of control, and Jim was climbing down this column of hellfire and Armageddon.

Spock grabbed the ladder, although he couldn’t see it, and braced himself. He ignored the instinct to clamp his hands over his ears and held his arms out stiffly instead. In another second Spock felt a blow to his nose—the kick of Kirk’s boots—the heavy scrape against his front of Kirk half-falling and half-jumping to the deck, and then Jim was within his embrace. Spock grabbed him with single-minded intent, and together the two of them scrambled across the room with heads down and hands linked, seeking shelter from an end-of-the-world catastrophe of whirling chaos. No storm he’d ever been in had been as wild, no thunderclap so forceful against his sensitive eardrums, no bolt of lightning as brilliantly hurtful to his eyes as this transwarp intermix chamber run amuck. The chamber could explode between one heartbeat and another. How many times had the structure already withstood this onslaught, and how many more times would it have the strength to remain intact? Any shelter they found wouldn’t protect them from a blow-out, but against a lesser event even minimal protection might make a difference.…

One second, two seconds they ran, one, two, three strides and more away, with the wall of sound propelling them, and finally Spock judged that they had reached the far bulkhead. Just to the right should be the solidity of the monitoring station with its concave design that they could crawl under and within. Yes! His free hand hit against it.

“Inside!” he heard Jim shout, and hands were on him, trying to push him inside first, the safer position.

“No!” Jim would have a future! Ruthlessly Spock exerted the Vulcan strength he usually took care to control, and he forced his former commander flat on the deck, onto his belly, and shoved him within the base of the station with no regard for his comfort or his dignity or his wishes. Then, with the chaos all around them beating out the pulse of the unbalanced intermix, Spock threw himself on top.

He must have hurt Jim as he landed awkwardly, but he didn’t care. Spock squirmed so that their body contact was maximized, his front pressing down on Kirk’s back and interposing his body between the one who should have been his bondmate and whatever threatened to harm him. Kirk struggled in unvoiced protest, but Spock ignored him. This was logical: his own life was forfeit anyway. He would do anything he could to protect Jim.

His ability to accurately perceive the passage of time was the only psychic sense left to him. Three
minutes and nineteen seconds later, whatever it was that was causing the intermix to become so unbalanced retreated, and along with it the noise that had been cascading all about them diminished from the heart-rending bass notes to no sound at all. The light gleaming from the surface, as before, was still brilliant, but when Spock slowly pushed himself up from the body he’d been shielding as his own, he blinked and recognized that his erratic inner eyelids were thinned and partially retracted, so that he could see better than he had before.

Kirk was sitting up, too, and pushing the hair off his forehead. His gaze traveled up the length of the chamber. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“I am undamaged. And you?”

“Okay. Though….” Kirk’s expression was grim. “That was close. Worse then when we beamed in. It almost blew up, didn’t it?”

Soundlessly, Spock nodded.

“And if it did,” Kirk continued slowly, “then that would stop the engines. And the GGM. Maybe… maybe it would be better if it blows.”

“No, Jim—”

Kirk cut him off. “Yes. We’re running out of time. Maybe what we should be doing is finding a way to set these engines off, not shut them down.”

And thus destroy the ship and all the lives she harbored. Spock stared at Kirk with hands suddenly ice-cold, as he assimilated what Jim was saying.

“It’s logical,” Kirk argued. “Not desired, but logical. There are, what, maybe a hundred and ninety beings on the Star Traveler? Two hundred? Davidson and Randy, and your Fahtima. All the others. There’s just a crew of fifteen here, plus us. It makes sense.” He grabbed Spock’s hand. “Could we blow the engines, if we needed to?”

“Yes, we could,” Spock managed to say, although he fought against relinquishing the vision that he had of Kirk continuing long after Spock was gone, a vital James Kirk smiling, laughing, leading his people as a starship captain….

Jim had never ceased being a starship captain, Spock realized, for although Starfleet had taken away the bridge and the title and the people at Kirk’s command, they had not changed the essential man. James Kirk, no stranger to difficult decisions in the past, could still make them.

Spock looked at him, at the strength in his eyes and the set of his mouth, and he was unaccountably grateful that he could see Kirk’s face in this moment.

Kirk squared his shoulders. “All right then. The question is, should we? Have we exhausted our options?”

“No. But if we fail in what I propose we try next, then the result will be the same.”

“Ah. That’s good, then. Don’t you think?”

They had each sworn oaths to Starfleet and to protect the people of the Federation. They had each taken those oaths most seriously. Spock would make no protest against Kirk’s need to be totally himself. But he desperately hoped their last effort would work, and Jim would live….
He squeezed the hand that was still in his. “Yes,” he said hoarsely. “Let us proceed.”

They made their way over to the intermix column that was still glowing brightly. “We must climb to the top of both the matter and the anti-matter conduits and do manually what we have been unable to accomplish with computer direction. At the intersections with the chamber, there are electro-magnetic baffles, associated with physical baffle boards, that direct the flow of energy into the chamber. We must manually reach into the conduits and pull the baffle boards across, thus establishing the field that will stop the reaction.”

Kirk looked up, too, then turned to him when he stopped speaking. “That’s all?”

Spock said flatly, “The boards each weigh thirty-two kilograms, we must accomplish the maneuver more-or-less simultaneously, and we will each be exposed to a significant level of radiation.”

“Oh. So that’s all.” Kirk smiled a small, sad smile down to the deck, and then he took Spock in his arms. Spock went there gladly, easily, and impressed in his memory the feel of their bodies against one another.

“I’m the project coordinator, and this is part of my job. I’m glad I’m here to do this,” Kirk said softly. “But I’m sorry you’re here, too.”

“If I were not, you would not be able to disable the drive alone. It is a two-being job.”

Kirk pressed a kiss to his ear. “And if we don’t do it at the same time?”

“There is some small margin of error—”

“You’re not going to tell me exactly?”

“It doesn’t matter, Jim,” he said, aware of the affection that enriched his voice and yet made it so difficult to go on. Five to eight tenths of a second, an enormous length of time in the world of subatomic particles, was but an infinitesimal number in the lifespan of sentient beings. “If we are not coordinated, the flow of matter and anti-matter will be so seriously unbalanced that the intermix chamber will inevitably explode. Jim, I am sorry that I was unable to cause the computer to work. If there were any other way…”

“It’s all right. Though…” Kirk’s eyes searched Spock’s face. “I’m glad that you came back. I don’t want you to die, Spock, but I can’t help being selfishly glad for the happiness we’ve had.”

They met together in a kiss that was closed-mouthed, ardent, and short, for Spock was aware of the passing of the seconds, and he knew Kirk was, too.

Kirk released him with a step back. “Let’s go. Mister Spock, we’ve always been a very good team. Let’s make sure our timing now is perfect.”

Spock elected to take the ladder that worked its way up the anti-matter conduit, leaving the positive-matter conduit for Kirk, and Spock was glad that Kirk made no protest. What difference would it make anyway? One-millionth of a second longer to live? It was an illogical decision in a life that many Vulcans would accuse of being full of illogical decisions. Some Spock regretted, but not all.

He climbed with the tricorder slung over his shoulder, and when he got to the top where the conduit intersected the chamber, he hooked his arm around a rung to anchor him and checked the readings. They were within an acceptable range of what they’d been before.
The curve of the intermix chamber prevented them from seeing each other. “Do you see the latch?” he called.

“I see it.” They were no more than five meters apart, but Spock felt more distant from Jim than when he’d recovered himself on Golgotharen and comprehended that light years separated him from what he needed.

“On my count of three, open it. There will undoubtedly be an eruption of considerable light. Continue to count—”

“—let’s count together,” Kirk called back. “It will keep us more in rhythm.”

“Agreed.” He should have thought of that. Jim had always been the more practical of the two of them. “Let us count together and reach inside for the baffle plate. You will see a groove into which it should be moved. When we recite the number seven, we will—”

“—make sure our hands are on it, but don’t pull yet. And if we need to stop for any reason, to get a better grip or whatever, just say so. We can start the countdown again.”

“I am attempting to minimize our radiation exposure on the chance that we will be successful in this endeavor.” Spock looked down the long way to the deck. The chamber was quiescent, humming quietly and barely vibrating as he clung to its side.

“Oh. Right. Okay, once the door’s open, stop only if we need to.”

“Grasp the board on the count of seven, and with the count of ten, as we enunciate the initial consonant sound, we will pull the baffle as quickly as possible towards us into the groove.”

“And then…what?”

“If we are successful, we close the hatch. If we are not, it will make no difference, because within a second we will be dead.”

“You’ve never been one to mince words, have you? I haven’t told you that I love you today.”

“No, you have not.”

“Spock, I love you.”

“And I love you, Jim. Are you in position?

“I am. Let’s start counting now so we get the rhythm. Minus three, minus two, minus one, zero…”

Spock filled his lungs with oxygen, flexed his fingers, and prepared to open the latch. Such an anachronistic mechanism on such a complex machine, but he was grateful that the final safeguard installed had been such an elementary, purely mechanical one.

“…one…two…three….”

He should have considered those erratic inner eyelids. Now, when he needed them the most for protection, they remained stubbornly retracted, so that even though he closed his eyes tightly, the light flamed into his face with painful brilliance. Jim was undoubtedly dealing with the same assault.

“…four…five…six….”
He fumbled for the baffle plate. It was cool under his fingertips and smooth without an obvious handhold that he could detect. The strength of his fingers alone would need to pull it. He remembered how heavy it was and tried to increase his muscle tension. How fast would Jim pull his? They had to do this in concert. Spock adjusted down for merely human strength, then added twenty percent to his estimate for adrenaline.

“…seven…eight….”

He could feel heat against his nose and cheekbones and didn’t try to estimate how many rems of radiation they were receiving. It didn’t matter. They had to do this and do it exactly right. His attention lasered down to the hard surface beneath his fingertips, to the rhythm of his voice and Jim’s voice together counting, to his determination to move the baffle at exactly the same time and in exactly the same way as Jim would move it.

“…nine….”

For the chance of Jim’s continuing existence, they would do this together….

“….ten.”

Spock jerked hard, the baffle slid into place, he jerked his hand back and was already counting silently to himself—two, three, four—as he closed the latch and then caught the support of the ladder so he would not fall. The noise coming from the intermix chamber was making a slow but steady whining descent along the major scale as it powered down; in ten seconds it went completely silent.

They’d done it.

It seemed he didn’t have the trick of it anymore, the way he used to have of containing his emotions so completely that even he hadn’t the perception of them. A wave of relief so strong that it simply could not be ignored came over him, weakening his arms and legs so that he clung for several seconds, simply feeling. If he’d been asked to assign an estimate to their chance of success, he would have said less than thirty percent, except that he would have found a way of not expressing such a dismal possibility to the one who always had hope, who always found a way out of the worst situations. Jim Kirk, it seemed, had not lost his knack of surviving. As McCoy would say, Jim was the luckiest, the most—

“Spock!”

He could hear the joy in Kirk’s voice, easily expressed, and Spock caught the emotion and matched it to what was burgeoning from his own heart. They had done it!

“Yes, Jim?” His tone was inflectionless, and Spock knew that would make Jim smile even more.

“Did I say we were the best team in Starfleet?”

Spock allowed his lips to curve. No one could see. And besides, even Surak would say the cause was sufficient. “No, not exactly.”

“I should have. We are!”

“Agreed. Starfleet will make an egregious error if they do not harness your exceptional talents by again giving you command of a starship.”

He could hear Jim’s snort of amusement. “My ‘talents’ come in the form of a Vulcan scientist
“smarter than most and braver than anybody.”

“Is that so? Then may I offer some advice?”

“Go ahead.”

“We should vacate our positions on the ladders before we fall.”

Jim laughed and then began to scramble down to the deck, but Spock picked his way more sedately, so that when his feet hit the floor Jim was already there to pull him into a bear hug that Spock enthusiastically returned. He was astonished that Jim literally lifted him off his feet; perhaps he should have removed ten percent from his estimate of how long it would take a human to pull the baffle plate across, just because the man doing the pulling was James T. Kirk.

“Jim, my dignity….”

“…is safe with me.” Kirk pulled him over to the console. “Just to make sure we aren’t celebrating prematurely, double-check and make sure the GGM is really gone. We did it in plenty of time.”

Spock knew as soon as he accessed the data that they’d been successful, for all systems were working properly and responsive. But he took his time double-checking every reading. Kirk, next to him, wasn’t so patient.

“Well?”

Spock cleared his throat. “There is a puzzling disturbance in the expected number of photons and there is perturbation in the orbits of nearby comets. But the phenomenon is gone.” His gaze lifted from the display and matched Kirk’s triumph.

“Everybody should start waking up in, what, fifteen or twenty minutes?”

“That is how long it took for the Enterprise crewmembers, including yourself, to revive, yes.”

“Then I’ve got to get a message out to Starfleet that it’s safe to approach us. This ship is going to need to be towed, we’ll need medical staff to check out everybody—”

The skin around Kirk’s eyes and on his right forearm was already reddened and might blister. “You need treatment for radiation exposure as well, Jim.”

“Not for him.”

The quiet, softly spoken words came from the doorway to the engine room. Spock turned to encounter a familiar form. He stepped forward in surprise and instant suspicion, not understanding how she was conscious already nor how she’d arrived on the Acacia, and especially not liking how her eyes seemed to be trained directly on Kirk.

“Ms. Gabon.”
Fahtima Gabon looked like one of the angels who had gazed down on them from Friendship Hall more than a year before, an ethereal vision in white. With the light gauze of her clothing draped softly about her, with her features obscured by the opaque head covering that she held tightly in front of her, she was a mystery, hidden as Spock had come to realize so much of this woman was hidden. But… Spock took another step forward, cautiously, trying not to show his caution, hoping that his flare of apprehension was inappropriate. She was just a reporter….

“Ms. Gabon,” Kirk assertively said, “I’m afraid that we’re still dealing with an emergency here. There might be some residual radiation. I’ll have to ask you to beam back to the Star Traveler.”

“I can’t go back.” Although Spock strained to discern her expression, he couldn’t. The sinews of her hand, though, stood out strongly, and Spock interpreted tension. And though he doubted his own conclusions: danger.

“Surely there isn’t any danger here,” she continued, as if she read his thoughts. Gabon walked past them towards the primary console, a pillar of black that contrasted with her undefiled white, to the comm link they could use to summon Starfleet. Spock followed her, trying to sort through his conflicting impressions and watching her smooth gait. Too controlled? There was something about Fahtima Gabon he had always trusted, but logic did not point to that conclusion, especially in light of his experiences of her today. What was she doing here?

“You’ll have to leave. I’ll notify them.” Kirk reached past her to activate the comm. “Kirk to the Star Traveler, Kirk to the Traveler, come in.”

Nothing but static replied. Kirk listened with a doubtful tilt to his head, then asked Spock, who was examining Gabon from the other side of the console, “Could what’s left of the GGM be blocking reception?”

The woman was keeping her head turned away from him, as if even through the gauze of the veil she could not face him. “I believe not, Commodore. Recall, we estimated a period of time before any beings recovered. Ms. Gabon, would you care to tell us why no one is answering our hail?”

“I don’t think anyone can.”

Spock exchanged a look with Kirk. “And why would that be?”

“You have said it. A period of time…. None of them is awake enough to know anything.”

Deliberately, aware that they were watching her, she released her hold on the gauze, and it opened in soft folds. Spock could see her nose, her generous mouth, and the hint of glittering eyes…. Then Gabon took the edges of the white cloth between her dark fingers, and slowly, slowly pushed it back so that it slid over her unbound hair, almost sensuously, until it draped around her shoulders. It was an unveiling in the truest sense, as if she were violating taboos to show herself so boldly, and Spock felt acutely uneasy. He had to exercise control not to avert his gaze. Instead, he riveted attention on her eyes…. They sparked with intensity that settled on Kirk. That was what Fahtima had been hiding, this intensity. Spock remembered what she had said: *I am sorry to separate you from the commodore.* Without consciously thinking about it, he took a protective step in Kirk’s direction.

“You must know why I have come,” Gabon challenged, her words ringing out in the large and
sterile space of the engine room. It was a voice Spock had never heard her use before, a formal declaration.

“No, Ms. Gabon, frankly I don’t know why and I don’t know how,” Kirk said. “I presume you were beamed over from the—”

“Do not presume anything!” she said with an angry edge to her words. “No one beamed me anywhere.”

*Be careful, Jim,* Spock wanted to caution. She was dangerous, he was sure of it.

Kirk spread his hands, placating. “All right, then.”

“You think I’m crazy….” Her head swiveled to regard Spock. “…like one of the crew of the *Enterprise,* Lieutenant Olechowski, who emerged from the GGM experience with psychotic tendencies. She needed to be sedated and received counseling and therapy afterwards.”

There was no way she should have known that. Spock’s eyes narrowed, and his thoughts raced.

“That’s very interesting. I presume you got that information through legitimate avenues, for a story you were working on for *The News?*” Kirk’s voice was rich with irony. “But for now I suggest you return to the *Star Traveler.* This area might still be dangerous with residual radiation, and—”

“You’re lying,” she said flatly. “You might have problems with radiation, Commodore Kirk, but I won’t.”

“I assure you, Ms. Gabon—”

“Don’t patronize me!” she snapped. “I know more than you think. How do you think I got here?”

With a sinking sensation of dread, Spock believed he already knew. His fingers curled as he measured the distance between them. He could possibly reach across the console and…. She wanted Jim.

“I thought myself here, Commodore,” she said with a sort of desperate pride. “I see that Commander Spock thinks he knows my story, but he knows nothing.” She addressed Spock alone. “You know nothing, do you hear?”

“I know that you are angry and in sorrow,” he chanced. “You can be helped.”

“I will help myself!”

“When others care about you? Who wish to help you?”

“No one cares!” she said with a shake of her head.

“Myself. Ralph Randolph.”

“You barely know me,” she snarled. “You cannot help. And I still haven’t told your friend how I got here. He hasn’t guessed yet. Oh, wait, now he has.”

“He is more than my friend,” Spock said evenly. He was taking a chance. How deeply had he plumbed her heart on Luna? How accurate was his assessment of Fahtima’s essential nature? “He is my spouse.”

“What does that mean to a Vulcan?” she scoffed.
“He is my heart.”

“Your heart.” A shudder ran through her body as her anger transformed into something else. Her eyes overflowed with tears, as they had before the viewscreen that had displayed the darkened comet. “Your heart! And what about my heart? Does anyone care about my pain? My Hamza? No!” Abruptly she swiveled and held out a hand to Kirk, fingers imperiously pushing against the air as her voice trembled. “Do not move.”

So many times he and Jim had played the game with their enemies, with one of them monopolizing attention while the other acted to neutralize their foe. He’d been prepared for whatever action Jim would take, but Fahtima was too quick for both of them.

Spock’s legs were literally rooted to the floor. The woman had frozen his major voluntary muscle groups.

And Jim…. Helplessly Spock saw the muscles of his jaw work, saw his eyes flash with anger, but other than the obvious heave of his chest as he took in an indignant breath, James Kirk did not, could not move.

For long moments the three of them remained locked together like pieces in a puzzle far more intricate than it appeared. They had been an uneasy triad, Spock realized, since the day he and Fahtima had met. But he hadn’t known.

Fahtima thrust herself into Kirk’s personal space, coming up to within a few centimeters of him, and she shouted, “I hate you! Do you know what you’ve done to me? You took away the only one…..” She heaved a gigantic sob, and then, moving as quickly as a cat, raked his cheek with her fingernails so hard that she left deep, red scratches.

No! Spock wanted to shout: Jim’s soft skin that Spock loved to touch, the perfection of his features.

Then she did it again, still with tears, going over the same area quickly to leave more grooves and opening the first ones further, so that now the side of Jim’s face was moist and brightly red. And again, scratching more slowly, with a care that Spock could barely stand to watch not only because of what she was doing to Jim but because of what this illustrated of her state of mind. Base cruelty. Sadism. He was repelled, almost sickened by her actions. He struggled to shout, to distract her, but he could do nothing.

Spock saw the pain in Kirk’s eyes, the only way his body could express itself. He had gone pale, probably with intense concentration as well as the shock of the assault. He stood immobile, with one hand partially bent at the elbow, the heel of one foot up off the deck and the knee flexed, as she had caught him as he began to move towards her. Spock knew that he would have disabled her with efficient compassion.

The woman had no such soft emotion: she was caught in enraged grief. Gabon grabbed Jim’s shoulders, although she had to reach up to do so, and she spit directly into his face.

Spock strained to escape the woman’s control; he’d been caught in forcefields before that immobilized him, but this was different. Somehow Fahtima was doing this with the power of her mind, he was sure…and her powerful emotions. So far she had attacked them in ways that, although they hurt, had not caused grievous injury, but Spock feared what would come next.

Most of the spittle landed on Kirk’s cheek, but some landed in his eye. He blinked, and Spock was at least grateful he could do that.
“You…killed…Hamza! Say it! Go ahead, say it!”

Kirk’s jaw muscles worked again. She obviously had released that part of his body. “Not deliberately. He fell against my…our hearth and cracked his skull. I would have saved him for trial if I could have.”

“Ms. Gabon, it is true. Your cousin—” Spock found that he could speak, too, but Fahtima didn’t want to hear what he had to say.

She whirled around to him. “You are so blinded to this roach that you would believe anything he’d say. He knows he wanted to kill my Hamza! It might have been an accident, but he was glad when it happened! Glad!” She rounded to Kirk and in the same motion slapped his bleeding cheek with all her might. The sound of the impact, flesh against flesh, sounded dully through the room, and Kirk’s body actually swayed with the force of it, but besides the blood that now smeared across his cheek and dripped in a few thin lines down to his jaw, he was a frozen statue. “Tell him! Tell this one who thinks he loves you what you were thinking.”

“I…Spock knows,” Kirk gritted out.

“Fahtima, you cannot shame him. He told me of Hamza’s assault and his own ambivalent feelings about it within hours of my return. What would you have him feel? Hamza attacked him and Commander Ciani. Would you feel differently?”

“Yes! Yes! I would!” She began to cry, large, round sobs that got louder and louder, and her clenched fists came up to her face, but they could not muffle the sound of her weeping. She shook so desperately that it seemed as if she, and not one of them, would fall to the deck, and despite her threats and the danger she posed, Spock could not help but feel a pang of empathic sorrow for her. He thought of his life lived without Jim, and of Jim’s own inevitable grief and loss, and he remembered the calm, sad, questing woman with whom he’d enjoyed talking beneath the dark, star-studded expanse of the lunar sky.

And as soon as his emotion formed, Gabon threw out a great wail. She staggered around the console and threw herself against Spock’s chest.

But her inner control did not wane, for he was still paralyzed except for small motions of his head that allowed him to look down on her. Her eyes were squeezed shut with her sorrow, and he could feel the uncomfortable scratch of her hair against his chin. Spock remembered that she had said she had not spoken of her cousin since he had died weeks before. Humans needed to release their emotions; they weren’t like Vulcans, and this unbalanced anguish was the result of her isolation.

“Yes,” Fahtima whispered, and her hands, which were trapped between their bodies, unclenched and then clenched again. She pushed against him, in a pose between two beings that would inevitably lead to his arms coming up to embrace her, from kindness if not from any attraction. “I am so alone. Alone. No one has ever understood me.”


She rested limply against him, and he hoped she had listened. But then she twisted around towards Kirk, still within his shadow embrace—that-wasn’t, cuddling against him.

In the calmest voice that Spock had heard from her yet, she said, “I hate you. Come out here where I can see you.”

“Fahtima, no.”
Kirk was obviously being controlled, and he took a few steps from behind the console until he was facing them and stopped. Spock knew that Kirk was thinking furiously of how to thwart this inoffensive woman who wielded so much power. Spock had no doubts. Much as he did not understand how or why, she, and not Hamza Machar, must have been responsible for the deaths of so many.

Even in such circumstances, Kirk chose not to twist the truth. “Ms. Gabon, I am sorry that your cousin had to die. I’m sorry that I was the instrument of his death.”

It was as if a hurricane wind roared through Fahtima’s body as she trembled against him. Was she fighting against something? Simply lost in grief?

“Spo….”

His name, choked out, whipped his attention back to Kirk. The skin around his eyes had tightened, and his mouth opened soundlessly. His eyes sought Spock’s, although Spock did not know what his gaze was saying, but then he looked up, his neck stretched to its limit.

Jim wasn’t breathing.

“No!” Spock shouted. “Don’t do this to him. Your cousin murdered so many beings. He—”

“He didn’t murder them!” Fahtima screamed as she pushed against him. “I did! Blame me, not Hamza!”

“Do not add another death to your list of blame! Let him go!”

She hadn’t really heard him. She bit against her own fist. “I dream of their blood. I hear them. I hear Hamza calling for me!”

Jim had gone past pale to frenzied crimson as his body struggled for oxygen. One hand went up to his throat, as if to encourage it to flow, and Spock hoped that Fahtima had released them. He redoubled his efforts to jerk himself away from her, but she held him tight. No sound came from Kirk’s mouth.

“What are you seeking?” Spock would not witness Jim’s death! “Revenge? What good will that do?”

Gabon didn’t answer him in words. Instead, Kirk toppled over to the floor like a felled tree, all at once, with his head hitting the deck with a sickening crack. Spock could see his eyes glaze and then refocus as he fought against losing consciousness.

“Jim!”

Fahtima ran over to Kirk’s body, with her loose tunic moving gracefully around her. She didn’t stop, but used her momentum to aim a kick right into his side, under his ribs, and his body actually rocked with the force of the blow.

“Don’t do this, Fahtima! You will regret this!” Desperately Spock tried to reach her, wished that he had Kirk’s ability to connect with people, wished that he’d taken more time to talk to Fahtima earlier, wished he understood her better. “Stop it!”

Gabon didn’t seem to hear but was working herself into a greater rage. She kicked Kirk again in the side, she shouted “I hate you!” with the blow, and then she swooped down to grab one of his arms and fling it out so it rested limply against the deck. Then she stomped on it, once—”I hate
you!”—and again—“You killed him!”—and finally came down on Kirk’s curled fingers with all the strength she had.

None of these were killing blows, and she was a small woman although infuriated, but Jim still wasn’t breathing. Desperately Spock sought for something he could say to stop her. He hadn’t thought she was this type of person, was caught off-guard by her ferocity and cruelty…. And perhaps he’d been right. Maybe she wasn’t…. Human psychology was complex, and he had wondered at her grief over a man who not only might have abused her but who, from her own accounts, had allowed his loathing of those who were different from him to rule his life.

“Fahima!” Spock put all his strength into the call and all his persuasive powers into the words he hurled at her. “Do you want to become another Hamza? Don’t let hate consume your life as it did his!”

She stopped so abruptly her foot stilled in mid-air. “Oh! Oh!” And then she collapsed onto the floor next to Kirk’s body, huddled in on herself, and she began to weep again in utter despair.

“Let him breathe! Let him breathe!” To Spock’s intense relief, he saw Kirk’s chest rise and then fall. At the same time, a tingle raced through Spock’s four limbs, and suddenly he was free to move.

Cautiously he made his way towards the two of them on the deck, trying hard to keep his intention hidden, knowing that he was probably unsuccessful. He stopped within an arm’s length of the sobbing woman and crouched down on his haunches. But when he tried to raise his arm for a neck pinch, he couldn’t. He tried again, but his arm simply wouldn’t respond to his commands and he couldn’t budge from the spot where he crouched. So be it. At least he was close enough now to see the tears glistening on her eyelashes.

He hunched there for long minutes, simply being close, watching her cry herself out, wondering if she interpreted his presence as support or threat. He allowed his gaze to linger on Kirk, too, where he was laid out behind Gabon, bloodied and conscious even if he was silent at her bidding. His eyes, blinking slowly, were trained upwards, undoubtedly the position that Fahima was keeping him in. The danger was still real; Spock had little successful experience in dealing with highly emotional beings, and he knew that Fahima could turn against Kirk again at any time. Live, he silently urged his lover, his spouse. And when the time comes, sooner or later, find happiness without me. He wished he could touch Jim.

“No one ever wants to touch me!” Gabon said savagely.

“Perhaps because you have not let anybody close enough to know you.”

“I’m a freak of nature! Do you want to know how I got here?”

“If you wish to tell me.” Spock could almost hear Kirk advising him let her talk herself out. You’ll create an advantage. And if she was talking, Spock could keep her attention diverted from the helpless form behind her. “You said you thought yourself here.”

She drew up her knees and rested her chin on them in weariness. “I never lost consciousness like all the others. I don’t know why, but that’s how I’ve always been, always different. I went to the transporter room and tried to lift the knowledge of how to transport myself from the technician, but he was so lost in fantasy I couldn’t. But then I realized that I took the bomb from the mountains and brought it to Paris, so why not myself? I waited until I could see whether you and Commodore Kirk would be successful with the engines, and then I came here. So I could kill him.”
Spock closed out the sight of her at this admission of guilt, and he wondered at how she could live with herself: the deliberate murder of so many must weigh on her katra—her soul.

He opened his eyes and attempted to regard her dispassionately. That she could dip into his mind, interpret his thoughts, and see through his eyes: he didn’t understand how that was possible when he had been closed to all but Deverans for years, but he couldn’t consider that now. He would speak to her aloud, so Jim could hear, too, and hope that what he said reached the integrity that he believed resided at her core.

“So. You have telepathic powers like the Betazoid. And, like the Metrons or the Organians or the Dwí’ni, you have the ability to manipulate matter.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears. “Yes.”

“That is unusual for a human. I am sure that members of the Dwí’ni race, especially, would be interested in meeting you.”

“Unusual? I’d be a specimen for them to dissect!”

“Or a human who could have a unique understanding of them. You are right to be interested in beings from other worlds.”

“I cannot even find my way in my own world.”

“Ms. Gabon, are you responsible for the death of Representative Pren’felit?”

She sighed, hugged her knees, and stared into a far-off distance. At last she seemed to be calmer. “Have you ever…totally known yourself? Ever dug down deep to the evil impulses and the awfulness and the things you normally keep hidden?”

“I.…” Spock remembered his first pon farr and how he had felt about Stonn. He thought of the times he had engaged in hand-to-hand combat, and the powerful emotions that had driven him. He thought of Parmen. Surak had wanted to shield his descendants from the dark depths, but this son of Sarek had experienced more than most. “In a way.”

“I killed Representative Pren’felit by squeezing his heart. I ripped off his antennae and gave one of them to Hamza.” She turned her gaze on him. “I feel your horror. I understand it.”

He paused to collect himself. “But I do not understand you. Why would you do that?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know!” she wailed. “Because I’m not even a human being! I’m less!”

“You are—”

“No!” In a rush, she was on her feet again. “Inside I am a freak, and outside I am not even a woman. You saw me in Paris. I was ripped apart long ago, and no man could want me.”

He looked up at her as she stood over him, clenching her fists. “Ms. Gabon,” he said quietly, sincerely, and hoping that Jim would understand. “You must know that statement is not true. Under different life circumstances, I could want you. There is more to a relationship than genital congress.”

She stared at him as if he were an idiot. “You do not know, do you? You don’t know who I really am. You don’t know anything about me, because if you did, you wouldn’t say you might want me.”
He found that he could move and slowly got to his feet. “How can I know when you keep yourself cloaked like a Romulan warship? Share yourself.”

“Share myself? You want to know what it’s like to live always in the light? It blazes inside of me and I can never get away! I am burned and shrieved inside, and all I have to hope for is more burning and more pain. I hate it even more than I hate your Jim. I would do anything to rid myself of who I am.”

“Rid yourself of your psychic powers?” He came half a step closer.

“Yes!” she positively shrieked. “How do you think I became this parody of womanhood? I thought the mutilation would cure me!”

“Tell me more. Make me understand.” He could flex his fingers; perhaps she would not notice….

“No one understands! I am crippled, I am obscene!”

“No, you are not. You are—”

“I am not worthy of trust! Don’t you know, I have taken your thoughts, your memories! When we spoke of the singing trees of Sinoptus, I went there with you as you remembered. I felt the breeze against my skin as you did. I experienced the scratch of the sleeping bag against your legs. I know what it is to have heard the songs because you did.”

He regarded her solemnly. “I freely give you the beauty of those memories. The trees—”

“No, No! You don’t understand! I can barely keep myself from flowing into you even now. I have made myself free with what you would wish to keep to yourself! Yes! Now you begin to understand,” she said with savage satisfaction that contorted her face. Her eyes flashed as she flung each word at him, and Spock was paralyzed as she held him still again. “You have grip marks on your hips and thighs, there and there,” she advanced and laid her hands on him, just the tips of her fingers, exactly on the intimate spots where Jim’s hands had been, “where your lover held you as you copulated with him last night. I know with you how it feels to have his penis slide into you, how much you hunger for that possession and enjoy it, and how it feels to push inside of him, his coolness, and the sounds you make when you ejaculate into his body. I know you prefer his mouth on your ass more than on your testicles, and I have opened my mouth with you to kiss him. Do you see? Do you see? A woman who would do this to you! To you, whom I consider…. I am capable of anything.”


“You said people could change. I cannot! The Fates gave me a different destiny. It is impossible to fight against them! I am what I am!”

“You are Fahtima Gabon, tortured by your gifts, but capable of—”

With a roar of anguish she was on him, body against body. Her hands clawed at his tunic. “Capable of nothing! You do not see me as I really am. Then see the reality! See!”

Sight, sound, touch disappeared, and Spock was enveloped in darkness. The dead weight of fear pressed him down, for this place reminded him too much of where he had been trapped for so long. He resisted the urge to struggle, for right next to the fear was intense curiosity and a sort of hope. She could reach his mind when no one else could? What was Fahtima doing to him?

Then from far away a wind whispered through trees, he could hear the leaves rustling, and he
thought of the singing trees of Sinoptus IV, and of the shading branches under which he and Jim had pledged themselves, and of a sparkling firework that raced high up into the sky and then exploded into blooming—

Too bright, too light, too much!

Doors long closed within him were assaulted by the ravening force of Fahtima’s determination—*Know me! Know all of me!*—and burst open. Like a star gone unexpectedly nova, her illumination poured itself over his consciousness, and it seared him. Spock writhed beneath her rays of light and felt the landscape of his very self being altered as she forced herself on him. He flailed to escape, to find some shade, but he was spread out like flat land under a rising sun, and there was nothing to provide shelter. It was like a Vulcan meld gone wild.

*You will know all of me!*

All of her loneliness as she ached for some companion in her unhappiness. Her fierce fixation on Hamza, so clear to Spock now in its unhealthiness, and how she bent her judgment beneath the strength of her cousin’s will. Her twisted sexuality and deceitful incursions into other women’s bodies to experience the touch of Hamza’s hand.

The spot-lit night in a garage with an Andorian. The sun-filled morning when Spock fell on a street in San Francisco.

Behind it all, the dazzling light she could never escape, warping what should have been a fulfilling life. Blinding her.

She swept through him with her radiance, and while she forced herself on him, she demanded him, too, more and more of him, as if she were turning him inside out to feed her voracious hunger. He could not stop her. Everything surfaced: his thoughts—*so glad he had not bonded with Deverans*—his experiences—*the tang of Jim’s sweat upon his tongue*—his fears—*I do not want to die*—his hopes—*I want the bond again. The bond, that is held deep where I cannot reach it*....

Surely it was here, somewhere among all that was being brought to the light. Where? Where? Frantically Spock searched....

Until she who was the-light-that-always-burned cast a beam of brilliance on the small knot of being he had seen only once before while at Golgotharen. It was redolent with the essence of what had been SpockJimtogether. His encapsulated darkness was wrenched out of him along with everything else, and for an instant Spock watched it from too far away. It was opening to her as everything else did....

With an effort of will that he did not know was possible, Spock was on it. He wrapped himself around what was precious to him, to shelter it from her.

As it blossomed.

As it engulfed him.

As he found himself.

And Jim.

The bond was in him, and he was in the bond.

Silence.
Completion. In one moment he was Spock-the-crippled and in the next he was Spock-whole-and-entire, with his beloved at the core of him and all the psychic powers of the Vulcan race returned. He could feel the change between one beat of his heart and the next, as if he had been crawling for ages and only now could stand upright like a healthy being. He stood, and knew himself as he should be, and emotion profound shot through him.

Silence.

His heart. He could now perceive its pulsing, and the blood that flowed through his arteries and veins, and where the radiation from the engine had damaged his tissue. He would be able to heal himself with the application of will, for now he had control of his body again.

Silence.

His linkages. What he and Deverans had labored so mightily to reach over days of effort, he achieved awareness of in less than a dranath. They glowed with health and vigor, and he saw how Fahtima had carelessly engineered *sri’tekt* and energized the linkages as she’d passed through. Now, they would serve him.

Silence.

Awe.

Jim.

He caressed the essence of the bond and knew what joy was.

*Jim. My t’hy’la, who taught me what it is to love.*

Behind him, far away, it was as if a cloud began to form with the threat of rain, the sun hid, a cold wind swept through the tops of a leafless forest. And he perceived an emotion so powerfully negative that Spock could only call it desolation.

Fahtima. He had ignored her too long. He whirled about and confronted her, interposing himself between her and the essential center that he would do anything to protect.

But she made no move towards him. Then, the brightness that had shown him the way faded as she fled.

“No!” He said it aloud as she retreated mentally and physically as well, and in the engine room where Jim’s form was still motionless on the floor, Spock caught her up in his arms. His fingers groped for the contact points that he had not touched with any effect for so long. His first meld in this reincarnated mind was to be not with Jim but with this woman who had made his rebirth possible…and who was still immensely dangerous. There! Her skin tingled his fingertips and he stabbed the meld between them, knowing that although she denied it, she wanted their union. She could have stopped him….

//No! Leave me alone.// She struggled in his arms but was no match for his hybrid strength. Within, he perceived her despair, thick and destructive, like a monstrous fifty-year sandstorm.

//So you can kill James Kirk? Or// he caught the wisp of intention //so you can kill yourself?//

//Let me! I hate myself!//

//Hate the self that was. You can change. There is a future.//
//In a rehabilitation center? I see that is what you intend for me, if I go meekly.//

It was still in question. She could sweep him away into darkness again with a thought. She could, even while within the meld, squeeze Jim’s heart and throw his life away. Spock had no power over her.

She acknowledged his fear wearily. //Don’t worry. I will not hurt him. Do you think me such a monster that I would do that to you? Now that I have seen your joining: impossible.//

//Already you change. You become more yourself.//

//I am the light, and the light is me. It cannot be extinguished. It has driven me to madness. I cannot believe what I have done. I am like Hamza. I was his hand.//

//Your own hands have given me back myself.//

//Accidentally. I did not know—//

//You knew what was happening and you did not prevent it. Despite your fondness for me, you stood by and witnessed the bond reanimate.//

//I saw your darkness glow to light. How I wish the reverse could happen to me.//

In a flash of realization that rivaled what sparked inside her, Spock saw….

//It can be done.//

//What?//

//We could…contain what makes you different. Capture your psychic powers and lock them away.//

//Don’t you think I’ve tried that? So many times, long after I realized that my mutilation hadn’t worked. Nothing works.//

//Look.// It was as if he extended his hand. She regarded it with awe and some fear, and then slowly took it. Her fingers rested in his. Their contact expanded.

Spock showed her what had been done to him when the Danarakh attacked, how against them he had curled over and protected what he could. How the bond, although infinitesimal in size, nevertheless contained all that made him Vulcan.

//It was inaccessible to me. Before Deverans brought me to its brink, it was even unknown to me. If you were to do the same thing, you would be free of the light.//

He directly perceived her skepticism, and then her slow wonder, and then her fear.

//I am afraid to try again! If I fail…//

//Imagine what your life could be as a normal human being.//

//Without the light. To live in the cool protection of the shade? She yearned for the shadow more than she yearned for continued existence. Spock saw it; if they failed, she would kill herself.

//I have lived in the shade too long, and I was desperate for the sunlight that Jim and I had shared together. I would do this for you.//
//You think that together we could accomplish it?//

//Yes.// He attempted to limit the thought that accompanied his affirmation. He wanted to do this for Fahtima, yes, but he also had every intention of bringing her to the Federation authorities. She would need careful rehabilitation so that her violent tendencies could be re-directed. If she kept her powers, no one would be able to hold her.

//How I want this! But…../

//What?//

//I will never be here with you like this again.//

//Fahtima.//

//Spock. I do not know if what I have felt for you is love. We are matched, you and I, in a way I do not understand.//

//I have felt the tug of our attraction. But you do know that I am Jim’s.//

//And he is yours. Even as I was capturing his breath, he thought of you.//

//We make choices in life, Fahtima. I hope that your choices in the future will be wise ones that bring you happiness.//

//I do not ask for happiness. That is too much. Just…some peace.//

//Let us aim for peace, then. Follow me and I will show you how—//

//Wait. Before we do…. More? More from you?// A sob echoed from a genuine one in the physical body, and Fahtima’s intense longing filled their joint essence. //You…You know me. All of me, and yet you have not turned away, though I feel your disgust of all that I’ve done.//

//You must somehow try to come to terms with your actions.//

//I will. But please…more of you? No one else will ever know me. I’ll never know anyone else….//

//We have never joined in this fashion before, and yet I did perceive you as you could be. Others could well do the same.//

//I don’t think so. This universe…. It has no answers for me. No certainty, no order, now that Hamza is gone. And even with him, I was so mistaken.//

//You put your need for another in the wrong hands. You could find the right person to share with, and the universe will not seem so capricious.//

//No. But now, please….//

Compassion overcame his caution, and he drew closer to her, laying over her the true affection that had grown before he’d known about her monstrous deeds. With an effort not as great as he might have expected, he was able to tap into a gentler feeling. He gave her a small, chaste kiss of the spirit.

//Ahhhh.//
Fahtima sighed in a distinctly feminine way he had never experienced within the more intimate congress of one of his melds with Jim. Jim, his wondrously vigorous, definitely masculine lover, would never feel like this, and Spock was glad that there was the distinctive difference.

//I know I could never have taken his place in your heart. But, still, I thank you for this.//

//We should proceed.//

//One more….//

She came closer again, and this time Spock felt her essence more distinctly than at any other time. For all the evil she had committed, she was still a being worth salvaging.

//Thank you// she whispered. And then //I’m sorry.//

For a fleeting moment, something different happened that he didn’t understand, as if she had disappeared for a split second and then come back, satisfied, but perhaps he was not yet accustomed to operating within the mental landscape again. Or perhaps it was an aberration of joining with a woman so deeply. He was willing, for this short time, to hold her warmly within the embrace of his thoughts, and to wish her well.

But all things must end. //Follow me. I will show you how.//

His memory of how he’d defended himself against the Danarakh attack was suddenly clear, and together he and Fahtima identified similarities between her psychic foundations and his own.

//Here. And here.//

//Yes. If I try this, then….//

//Do not forget, at the end, this.//

//And you never perceived the bond once it was hidden?//

//I did not, not until Deverans took me to it. Once you are free of the light, do not merge thoughts with anyone.//

Her laughter was a pure, lush sound that rippled through the thick green leaves under which she would soon take refuge. //Free of the light! Spock! This is going to work!//

//Yes, it will.//

//I’m going now. We should separate. Good-bye.//

//Good-bye, Fahtima. Fare well.//

//To you, too. I can be my own Fate now, so I do what I must to make myself free. It is best this way.//

*****

Spock blinked at the unconscious woman resting limply in his arms. In fear, Fahtima had beamed over from the Star Traveler when she’d come to and realized she was the only one awake on the ship. Then she and Jim both had seemed to suffer from some sort of aftereffect from the Graves Gravitational Mass and each had collapsed. Spock had been close enough to catch her, but Jim had fallen heavily to the deck.
Spock blinked again. And again in growing astonishment. He could…. He could…. He could perceive Fahtima’s essence, her aura, as almost all Vulcans knew the psychic force of another’s existence, an experience so common that they were barely aware of it. Fahtima’s seemed to be pulsing and then slowly fading to the background steady state characteristic of humans, but it was definitely there. He hadn’t known another’s aura for more than two years….

Without much care he laid her on the deck, and then discovered that he barely had the balance to stand upright. Everything looked different, the angles and the colors, and he remembered how he had been forced to literally learn to walk again when he’d been deprived of his psychic senses. And now…they were back? How was this possible?

Trembling inside and out, he touched his uniform with both hands, under his ribcage, but he was really testing his perception of his body. His heart beating, the blood pumping, the endocrine system working, the radiation damage he’d received from the transwarp engine, it was all apparent to him in a new and yet wonderfully familiar way. If he were whole, he would be able to start a small healing process without a trance…. With wonder, he allowed his consciousness to zoom down to the patch on his arm that had reddened and might eventually blister; he felt each individual cell and knew, with the instincts of his Vulcan forebears, how to set them towards health. There. And there! And there!

Wild emotion swept through him, and with mingled hope and dread he tried to whirl towards where Jim had dropped to the deck, but his newly expanded perceptions transformed the action into a stagger. But he would find his way to the motionless form if he had to crawl. Yes! He fell onto his knees next to Jim, hard, but barely noticed for, although his eyes lingered over the damage to Jim’s face that he’d received when he’d fallen from the ladder, Spock’s inner eye was seeking the small, just-developing joining that had sprung up spontaneously between them what seemed like long ago. Jim had not been aware of the bond’s existence on his own, it had been so new and unobtrusive, and Spock had needed to guide him towards it. But Spock had known. It had filled his days and nights, providing such satisfaction and the promise of continued joy, and when it had been ripped away from them he had become half-a-being, forced to live in darkness when he remembered and longed for the light.

He thought it was there. Surely that was what was pulsing quietly but steadfastly just the other side of his awareness. Right there…. He hardly dared to hope but was drawn inexorably towards what he must have….

Silence.

Completion.

They were whole.

Spock drew such a deep breath that it filled up every cubic centimeter of his lungs.

“Jim,” he whispered.

He was going to live. They were going to live together.

Spock had practice dealing with the emotions he had allowed himself since he and Jim had entered into the art of love, but he had never experienced the surging elation that filled him now. His body urged him to action, and the turbulent emotion coursing through his blood urged him to sound—if he had been McCoy, or Sulu, or even Jim, he might have shouted to the bulkheads. But he was Spock, and restrained of movement and sound and expression except when he was engaged in sexual activity with Jim, and so he did not know how to find some outlet for his feelings. His
happiness filled him up completely, making his chest tight and his throat full and his fingers clench and unclench.

How had this happened? Somehow, somehow the dying pulse of the Graves Gravitational Mass that had robbed Jim and Fahtima of consciousness had released the bond. And Gri-Ta’s prediction that his union with Jim was the key to his Vulcan self had proven true. Everything had returned!

“Spock?”

Kirk’s groggy voice pulled him down to the sight of his spouse’s body on the deck. Kirk was up on his elbows and observing him with a slight frown furrowing his forehead. “Is everything all right?”

“Everything is…fine, Jim.” Rather than release his emotion, he contained it too well. His tone was flat. “How do you feel?” To restrain his impulses, Spock pressed his hands against his thighs.

“I feel….” A hand went to his temple. “I think I must have hit my head. Not a concussion, but…. I’ll be all right. Where I cut myself on the ladder stings like hell, though. How long was I out?”

To his consternation, Spock wasn’t quite sure. The GGM effect had possibly altered his time sense, but he would not allow himself to be concerned. “Not too long,” he said.

Kirk regarded him strangely and sat up all the way with a small groan and a clutch to his side, and then he looked at him again when Spock did not offer a hand to assist. “What’s wrong?” he demanded.

“Jim, I….”

“Is it the GGM?”

“No, I believe it is truly gone, and the engines have been stopped. The others should regain consciousness…shortly.”

“Then what’s wrong with you?”

Spock swallowed hard, made a difficult decision, and then found it took all his resolution not to instantly renege on it. “Absolutely nothing is wrong with me, Jim. Nothing. Do you understand?”

“No, I—” Kirk reached towards him, Spock scrambled out of the way to avoid him, and they each heaved themselves awkwardly to their feet.

“Do not touch me!” Spock warned.

“Why not?” Kirk asked with a trace of panic. “For God’s sake, tell me what’s wrong.”

“You must promise not to touch me.”

“All right, all right, I won’t. Tell me!”

Spock closed his eyes and released a small portion of the joy that was energizing his body. “Jim, I am recovered.” He opened his eyes because he had to see Kirk’s reaction. “I have it all back. The bond, everything. It’s here.”

It was better than finding Jim in the hockey arena, and it was better than the day they’d pledged themselves to each other before witnesses. Seeing the new light in Jim’s eyes was a sight he would always cherish. Spock knew his lips were forming into a smile, as much as he ever allowed himself, but he would not, could not prevent this manifestation of his happiness.
“Spock!” Kirk surged forward, his arms outstretched, but when Spock backed away he stopped. “Are you sure?” he asked urgently.

Spock nodded, struggling for control in the face of Jim’s reaction, not sure he wanted to achieve it, but eventually managing to at least moderate his expression. “I would not prevaricate. I am relatively sure, although my time sense seems to be somewhat impaired. But that is all. Jim,” he had never truly believed that he would ever be able to say this, “everything else is there. I am all right.”

“Oh, God!” Kirk looked like he could not contain himself, as if he would burst. “You’re back? Really back? I can’t believe it!” He groaned in mingled delight and frustration, tried to capture one of his hands in the other, released his bruised fingers without even glancing at them, and said, “It’s killing me not being able to touch you. But…. We can meld again?”

“I feel sure we will be able to do so soon.”

“We can bond?”

“As soon as possible.”

“I can’t believe it!” Kirk stalked around the room, with one hand clutching his side and the other arm carried awkwardly, its fingers cautiously spread, but it was obvious he spared no thought for his own aches and injuries. He paced past Fahtima’s form without glancing at her and did the same with the three scientists he’d laid out on the deck minutes earlier. “After all this time, after everything we tried, Golgotharen and Deverans and giving up hope. This past week, I was preparing myself…. You could have been taken from me any time. And now this…. Spock!” He stopped only a meter in front of Spock, and although his face was flushed and caked with drying blood, his eyes were alight with such happiness that Spock had rarely seen from his ever-expressive lover. “How did it happen?” Kirk demanded.

“It must have been that last pulse from the gravitational mass, the same one that affected you and Ms. Gabon. Perhaps because I had come so close to the bond before with Deverans, not only were you relatively unaffected by the psychic distortion of the GGM field, but I was, equivalently, finally open to its influence.”

“Oh, I’ll accept that. I’ll accept anything! But why the hell can’t I touch you?”

“Because,” Spock said earnestly, “everyone on board this ship and the *Star Traveler* should be achieving consciousness within minutes. If we touch, our fledgling bond may well react in a spontaneous way we are not prepared for. After all, we have been separated mentally for more than two years, and the bond by its nature moves towards completion.”

“Spontaneous way? Like how?”

“Such as…falling into a dangerous meld that we cannot control because of its intensity. Such as… mutual and multiple orgasms.” Spock arched an eyebrow in challenge. “I do not believe either of us wishes to initiate our reunion in a public place with such possible consequences.”

“That wouldn’t be my choice, no. But…oh, hell!” Kirk ran his fingers through his hair. “Okay. Okay. Back to business. There’s a lot to do here, but at the first opportunity, I am going to touch you, Mister.”

“Please do not, Jim. I do not wish to risk our mutual mental health to an uncontrolled joining after so long. It must be done in the presence of a healer who can help us. At the same time, our bond
can be brought to full maturity. Although I am gratified that it arose spontaneously, I am now unwilling to wait for it to grow on its own.”

Would he ever tire of watching Jim’s slow, sure smile spread across his face? No one smiled like James Kirk did.

“I think I’ve just been proposed to. Again.”

“You have. May I have your answer?”

“I’ll meet you…” Kirk took two big steps closer, but Spock did not retreat, not this time. He gazed into Kirk’s eyes and saw his future. “…at the appointed place.” Jim’s voice softened. “Yes.”
If they didn’t hurry, they were going to get soaked in a minute. Kirk eyed the menacing clouds overhead. Maybe two minutes. He hated damp dress uniform tunics.

He stopped himself from touching Spock’s side to get his attention and said, “Run for it?” instead. He broke into a jog to turn the corner, minding his footing on the already-slick pavement, and Spock kept steady pace with him. The day had dawned with heavy skies and the tang of a wintry chill in the air, unseasonably dreary for mid-November in San Francisco. It had rained on and off all early morning, and they’d made their foray out from the house on Fortuna Street during one of the lulls in precipitation. Spock had evaluated the overcast and estimated that they had seven and a half minutes to make it to Sluman and T’Braggia’s office, but Kirk had challenged his weather sense in a friendly wrangling that had taken them past the neighborhood bakery, past where Spock commented that perhaps they should have brought umbrellas, and now all the way to the healers’ doorstep.

Kirk bounded up the steps and opened the door, being careful to move out of the way as he held it for Spock to precede him. Both of them had taken the prohibition against touch seriously, and Kirk wasn’t going to let the frustrating and restrained dance of the past five days go to waste because of a chance contact. Since Kirk had been released from the base hospital three days before, Spock had, undoubtedly wisely, insisted on sleeping in the guest bedroom.

“After you.” Kirk bowed him inside, then followed into the empty waiting room. The door banged shut behind them in time with a clap of thunder so strong that it shook the windows, and the skies opened in a downpour. It was a coincidence that he decided to take as a favorable message: they’d escaped the chaos outside and found shelter.

Shelter. Kirk glanced over at where Spock, with his usual efficiency, was brushing a few stray drops of water from his dress tunic, and a feeling he couldn’t define tightened his throat. He didn’t need a refuge every day, he just needed…a base from which to operate. Someplace where he could go and recharge, get perspective, and someplace—one on whom he could completely depend. The vagaries of life and the caprice of the fates might buffet every other aspect of his world, but not this relationship. Not this one. He could deposit his soul and his heart and his ambitions and his fears and his love with Spock and, with this one certainty, face anything else.

Kirk cleared his throat even though he hadn’t said a word. He wasn’t going to proclaim any of that out loud; Spock would see it all once they were joined, and Kirk was positive that he would find a reflection of his own feelings in his spouse’s incomparable soul. He was rock and refuge for Spock, too.

Instead he commented, “Hell of a day to get bonded.”

“Indeed.” Spock had a distinct twinkle in his eyes. “This is as different from my previous bonding day, and the environment in which it took place, as is likely to be. Fortunately.”

“Were your parents there for your bonding with T’Pring?”

Spock put on a faintly scandalized expression. “Of course not. It is far too intimate a ceremony for family members to be present. In addition, there is the possibility of interference with the mental emanations of persons closely related to the individuals involved. No, in modern times the initiation of a bond has generally been performed either in private by mature individuals or with the assistance and witness of a healer.”
“Or in our case,” Kirk said wryly, “three healers. Two and a half.”

On cue, T’Genia, the young assistant for the healers-in-residence, opened the door to the inner sanctum, saw that they were present, and eased herself out to stand with folded hands within the confines of the room. She nodded in a self-conscious fashion first to Spock and then very quickly to Kirk. Kirk was definitely in the mood to be pleased today: he found her awkwardness amusing.

“Healer T’Braggia and Healer Sluman request that you wait until they are ready for you.” Without another word she swept around and left them.

Kirk chuckled, and even Spock looked indulgent before he retreated to sit in the same chair he had sat in more than a year before, when they’d come here together and met Versin. Things had changed. Kirk noted with immense satisfaction that, despite the chill outside, Spock had not donned a jacket. He could adjust his metabolism to different temperatures now.

Kirk was too keyed up to sit, so he stayed where he was by the window. He watched the water rip through the leaves of the trees outside and pound onto the pavement and tried to distract himself from the monumental impatience that had been driving him ever since that moment…that moment on the Star Traveler. He would never forget the look on Spock’s face or the way he’d said it. I have it all back.

Kirk rested his hands on the windowsill and stared out at the rain, though he saw none of it. Life was such a frustrating mystery sometimes. He had to shake his head at it. After all his determination to find a way to help his lover, Spock had come back to himself through no effort of Kirk’s or the healers’ or even his own; a chance encounter with a spatial phenomenon poorly understood had done it.

And the identity of the perpetrator of last year’s attacks hadn’t emerged from Kirk’s nights of sincere effort, but rather randomly because one man had been in the ‘fresher and managed to escape when Kirk and his people had invaded the cache of weaponry.

Life, much as he loved it, couldn’t be depended on to proceed with any order. Fate, chance, coincidence: maybe they were words he should admit into his vocabulary after all. Fate had given Spock back to him…and that was what could be depended on. Spock. Him and Spock, together. Soon, very soon, they’d have their melds again.

Kirk remembered the way they used to rub their essences one against the other, as explicitly sexual as intercourse but without a hint of the body, and a thrill shot straight through him. How he wanted that again. He couldn’t help himself, he was a sensual man, he loved sex, and he loved Spock, period. The meld, for him, had been as good as and sometimes better than their lovemaking. He loved Spock’s body, but to encompass and be able to love his mind as well…. Kirk remembered caressing one of Spock’s thoughts, and then stroking a feeling, and knowing in the most basic and visceral way—in his own self—the immense pleasure Spock received from his touch.

This gift he could share with Spock: it was like one of their ship’s challenging contacts with an alien culture. Mystery, allure, excitement and, for them, fulfillment. A mental joining between sex partners might be alien to humankind, and it might scare the bejeezus out of privacy-concerned beings, but the unknown gods and goddesses of the universe couldn’t have invented a process more appealing to the man who’d been captain of the Enterprise.

And then the bond, that would enhance their melds like a standard engine going warp twenty-five, that would pull them together when Spock had need of him in pon farr. He’d experienced the hint of their immature bond before, and he couldn’t imagine what it would be like complete and functioning. Different and separate from the meld, Spock had told him. There was no guarantee
that he would be aware of it at all, he couldn’t perceive it now though Spock assured him it was there, but Kirk wasn’t betting on being blind to what they hoped to establish today. He and Spock had been unusually compatible from the day they’d first met. Have Spock purring in the core of him and not know it? Kirk couldn’t imagine it.

This wasn’t helping distract him at all. Kirk tried to clear his mind of what was going to happen in a few scant minutes—Five? Ten? When were the healers going to come for them and how long would the procedure take?—and counted to himself slowly, in a way that he knew Spock had sometimes used to help him concentrate. It worked, and soon he re-focused on the view outside, determined to think only prosaic thoughts.

It was coming down in buckets now, as his mother used to say when one of the tremendous spring thunderstorms of southeast Iowa had unexpectedly loomed over them. He wanted to show Spock a storm like that some day, not that his Vulcan hadn’t witnessed such cataclysmic events before, but it would be different when viewed together from the front porch Kirk had played on as a child. In a weekend or two or three…. They were going to be summoned to Iowa soon anyway for the obligatory presentation to aunts, uncles, cousins, and family friends. Maybe Sarek and Amanda could stay on Earth long enough to come, too. They were scheduled to arrive in almost a week, and Kirk knew from the discreet length of time his parents-in-law had provided that they wanted to give their son and his bondmate some privacy after this session with the healers.

Privacy with Spock with a full bond and the opportunity to mingle their hearts as often as they wanted to…. Abruptly Kirk swerved away from that inflaming image. Starfleet was definitely going to have to live without them for a while. Instead he tried to imagine Sarek dealing with his rollicking Aunt Teresa and couldn’t. Though he bet Sarek and his mother would get along. His mom and Amanda? This was going to be interesting.

A gust of wind pushed raindrops against the windowpane. Hadn’t it been raining that day in October last year, too? He thought so. He defiantly remembered Versin and his declaration that “there is no bond.” He could hear the man’s dismissing meld-voice even now. Well, it had been there all along, just not where Versin was willing to see it.

With satisfaction, Kirk turned to see Spock staring at his hands. His Vulcan was pretending to be calm, but Kirk knew better. Spock had had five days to get used to life as a Vulcan again, but they hadn’t touched. Life was suspended, not yet restored. They’d shared a few words, quick glances, and a determined retreat to separate bedrooms. In minutes, they would share a hell of a lot more. Everything.

Kirk folded his arms across his chest and leaned back, and he couldn’t keep a smile from growing. To hell with prosaic thoughts. Today…today he would be able to touch Spock in every way. The meld and sex, sex and the meld….

“If Sluman sees you like that…. Spock said with amusement quirking one side of his mouth.

Kirk chuckled and refused to relinquish his smile. “I’m not going to start pretending now. He’s going to get a real eyeful—or what would you call it, a mind-full? Anyway, he’s going to see exactly how I feel soon.”

“Please, not exactly how you feel,” Spock said with feigned pain and a wrinkling of his brow. “We have been celibate for a considerable length of time.”

“Two years, five months, and twenty-seven days.” He’d counted up the days the other night. Then, in sudden seriousness, Kirk said, “I can’t wait to get into your mind again, Spock.”
“And I into yours, Jim,” Spock said quietly. “I have thought of little else. It will be soon.”

There didn’t seem to be anything else to say after that, and so Kirk waited with as much patience as he could muster, controlling his thoughts—or not—as the minutes passed.

Finally T’Genia was there again, saying simply, “Please follow me.” She led them not to an examination room where they’d been before, but for the first time up a steep stairway to where the two healers and their assistant must live, and Kirk appreciated the consideration. He didn’t care where their bond was re-animated, strengthened, approved, and finally set free for them to revel in it, but he wanted to see Spock receive some consideration from his fellow Vulcans. After the experience at Golgotharen, Kirk didn’t know that Spock had much trust of them. He’d shown no enthusiasm at all to Kirk’s mild suggestion that they return to the home planet for the bonding. That was fine with Kirk; he didn’t want to add travel time to the interminable days they’d already waited.

Sluman and T’Braggia stood at the top of the stairs, and although the elderly Vulcans couldn’t be said to be showing pleasure or happiness, their facial muscles were relaxed in such a way that Kirk had long interpreted as the projection of positive emotion. They had on the shimmering gray tunics and pants that they’d worn to Starfleet Headquarters, briefing room seventeen, to attend the wedding.

“Welcome to our home,” Sluman said, and they entered a room whose bay window looked out onto a backyard not unlike their own, only with a tree that towered over the property and whose branches brushed against the house, driven by what had become a gale. A wide, padded windowseat spanned the width of the window, and T’Braggia gestured them towards it. They all sat, the storm at Kirk and Spock’s back, with the Vulcans arrayed in three chairs before them. Not what Kirk would call a casual conversational setting, but then Spock’s people were usually direct.

“Commodore Kirk. Commander Spock. We are pleased that we can be of service to you today. We appreciated being present at your ceremony of commitment not long ago.” Sluman’s age had withered his body, so that he seemed as small as a boy, but his voice was still vibrant.

T’Braggia added, “We had not witnessed such an Earth tradition before, and it was most interesting. Quite different from the way Vulcans recognize such relationships.”

“Although we have been residents on this planet for some five of your years, we have not perhaps interacted with the culture as much as we might have,” Sluman said with some earnestness. “I was interested in my conversation with several of the other guests, especially after the two of you departed.”

“Yes, the explanation that Commodore Friedman provided of his role in the day’s events was most illuminating.”

Kirk had to admit to himself that he was pleased. The two old healers had learned the concept of human small talk and were applying it for them as best they could. It was refreshingly different from the way Versin had treated them or treated Spock when he’d been at Golgotharen. IDIC lived in this house.

Spock was saying, “—just as valid in the eyes of Federation law. It was satisfying to me that you were present on that day.”

“Yes,” Kirk put in. “Thanks for coming to the wedding.”

“And now you come to us for the joining of your forefathers, Spock,” Sluman said.
Spock was composed and determined. “We ask that you assist us in the re-vitalization of our bond. We also request that you guide it towards completion and stabilize any irregularities.”

“Of course, we will do all that for the two of you,” Sluman said. “I will tell you first that I had little hope that you would see this day. I am still unable to account for how your condition improved so dramatically, when even the efforts of the healers at Golgotharen were unable to help you. The change as a result of this unusual space phenomenon is not clear to me. It appears arbitrary.”

“Nor is it clear to us or to those who have studied the Graves Gravitational Mass in the past days. I assure you, however, that the change in me is definite. There can be no mistaking.”

T’Braggia agreed. “We do not dispute what you say. Your aura is present again. We can easily detect it, and T’Genia reported that to us after her brief contact with you downstairs as well. But we are concerned that, because we do not understand what caused your psychic abilities to return, we cannot guarantee they will not atrophy again.”

“If I can add to this?” Kirk asked. “As I understand it, one of Spock’s problems was lack of stimulation to the linkages in his hippocampus. Help us today, and I’ll make sure there isn’t any lack in the future. I’ll be there.” He looked at the man sitting next to him. “You won’t be able to get rid of me.”

“I have no wish to reject the one who gives me what I need,” Spock said serenely, and then he addressed the other Vulcans. “If it would be possible to proceed.”

“We will,” T’Braggia assured. “Because your bond has been inactive for a considerable length of time, we must approach it with some caution. First Sluman will unite with Spock to establish a baseline. Then, we will act as intermediaries in a joint experience and hope to bring you together with as little turbulence as possible. Since your was a spontaneous connection, without a formal intention to create it, we must also be alert to deficiencies that might require adjustments. Is this plan acceptable to you?”

Spock nodded, and Kirk said, “Yes, that’s fine.”

Sluman added, “We must point out that there is some element of risk. There are so few Vulcan-human pairings, and the three of us have never encountered one. It is impossible to predict your reactions, Commodore, or how you will perceive the process. We will attempt to minimize any discomfort.”

Spock had already warned him of all this. “Yes, I know. That’s fine. I’m sure you’ll do your best. I’d like to get on with it.”

The healers stood, although T’Braggia indicated by a motion of her hand that they should remain seated, and T’Genia precisely positioned two of the chairs much closer to Kirk and Spock. The third she took out of the way into a corner, then she came to stand between the healers. Sluman took the seat opposite Spock, T’Braggia sat across from Kirk. Kirk didn’t move away when his knees came into direct contact with the elderly female healer; he guessed that physical proximity, though carefully controlled most of the time by Vulcans, was in this case necessary.

Sluman raised his hand in a configuration that had a wealth of associations to it. “Spock Xtmprsqzntwlfb, may I have your thoughts?”

Kirk couldn’t take his eyes off Spock’s face. His Vulcan was solemn as he said, “Sluman Brndzytwlfb, take my thoughts so you can join me with James Kirk, whom I have lost.”
With a small knot of apprehension, he watched as Sluman and Spock leaned towards each other and as their hands mutually settled on the spark points that would establish a connection between them. No one had melded with Spock since he’d come back to himself. Though Kirk wished he could have been the first, it was so much more important to make sure this was done right, and that Spock wasn’t hurt.

“My mind to your mind,” Sluman said quietly, and both of them closed their eyes. Kirk knew what this felt like: the cautious approach, the gentle contact, the slow merging…. That’s how it had been in the beginning for him, like being lightly caressed along the length of his spine. Later, they’d simply kissed, not needing the formal application of hands, and they’d fallen into each other’s minds like breathing, it had been so easy. One moment two and separate and entirely in the physical world, in the next moment together in a way that most humans couldn’t imagine. Kirk had tried to explain it to Bones and hadn’t been able to find the words. Just…desired. Intensely, desperately desired.

The expression on Spock’s face didn’t change, neither did Sluman’s, and Kirk couldn’t tell if their joining was going well or not. But it was over in less than a minute. Sluman slowly lifted his hands, and Spock pulled away from him.

“I am honored to serve you, Spock, but now that we have established contact I must caution you.”

“Speak, healer.”

Sluman glanced at him, it seemed to Kirk with some uncertainty, then back to Spock. “I saw the bond, as you did. It is healthy, and we will be able to bring it into its full flowering, but it will not be like other bondings. It will be different. I cannot guarantee that it will function in the manner most Vulcans would expect.”

Kirk frowned and asked, “I don’t understand. It was fine before….” He collected what was a wholly emotional indignation. “What are you saying, healer? That I’m too human for Spock and can’t give him what he needs?” He’d heard that accusation before; Versin had thrown it at them in the consulting room downstairs.

“I am saying that your humanity is inescapable and it will affect the texture of your union.”

“Different is not necessarily deficient.” Spock said it with certitude.

But Kirk needed to make sure. “The important thing is that the bond draw us together during Spock’s Time. Will it do that?”

“So far as I am able to determine, yes. It has done that once already.”

“But….”

“But it appears that you are not capable of offering Spock a full union in the Vulcan way. Your minds are simply not matched in that manner. The configuration—”

“We are matched in other ways,” Spock said flatly. “I will have no other.”

And he didn’t want anybody but Spock, he’d proven that to himself during their long separation. Kirk remembered from their first year together exactly how satisfied Spock had been with their mental contacts; they’d had their ups and downs, they’d struggled for a rhythm that suited their disparate needs, but they’d been happy. Spock had been more than happy with him, and each of them had wanted as much of the other as he could get. Was that deficient? No.
“Aren’t we arguing—” he moderated his emotion and went on, “—discussing without purpose? The bond exists. We formed it ourselves, and if you won’t help us we’ll complete it ourselves, too. I don’t—”

“There is no question that we will help you, Commodore Kirk,” Sluman said with composure. “But I wished to ascertain that Spock was fully aware of the consequences of joining with a being who is not completely Vulcan.”

“If Spock wants me, I want him.” Kirk turned from the impassive faces to the one he was really talking to. Spock was regarding him intently, his brown eyes solemn. “I want this bond,” Kirk said directly. “More of it, so it’s all it can be and what you need. Whatever I’ve got to give to you, I’ll give.”

“I know that, Jim,” his Vulcan told him softly. “When have you not? Let us proceed.”

Kirk allowed himself a quick smile. “Good,” he said, with a certain amount of defiance. “I’m getting tired of not being able to touch you. Let’s go.”

The healers didn’t seem to be fazed by his emotional declaration. “T’Genia will act as stabilizer and in case of need,” T’Braggia said. “I will meld with the commodore first. Spock, Sluman has relayed your admonishments to Versin from last year, and I will heed them as we initiate contact, so do not fear for your bondmate because of my actions. James Kirk, may I have your thoughts?”

This was it. The past two and a half years contracted behind him and compressed into a few beats of their hearts.

“I’ll see you,” he told Spock softly, “in our bond.”

Spock’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. “Yes.”

With a last look at his bondmate, Kirk turned back to the healer and recited, “T’Braggia, take my thoughts. Give them to Spock Xtmprsqzntwlfb, whom I have lost.”

The last meld he’d experienced had been with Versin, whose fingers he remembered as being ice-cold or at least unwelcome against his skin. The press of T’Braggia’s fingers was gentle, compassionate, and Kirk tried to be open to her. She and Sluman understood what he and Spock had lost, and they would be good witnesses for the restoration of their lives together.

As Spock had told Versin, his mind insisted on conjuring up different images for each joining with a different individual. In one instant he was sitting knee-to-knee with T’Braggia, but in the next she was a luminous figure emerging through a fog, almost a cloud, and he was weightless and floating above some unnamed planet. Free association told him why he’d formed this image; they were above the ordinary concerns of beings, free to move through the extraordinary psychic landscape that Vulcans shared…and that few humans were privileged to enter.

There was some awkwardness as the insubstantial clouds shifted and swirled through and around first the healer and then him, and Kirk caught the essences of contact he remembered: shapes that spoke of resolution, colors that told of long years of patient toil, a sharp tang that meant she was concentrating. Together the sensations merged into an experience that definitively conveyed: T’Braggia.

But he had never been good with the kind of essence-to-essence communion that he had only ever known with Spock in their more sensual entwinings, and so she came closer still, tugging and twisting a certain way—there—until communication, mostly in words, could take place between
them.

//I see you, James Kirk.//

//And I you, T’Braggia.// Without effort he knew her other name. //T’Braggia Hmontl.//

//I also see your bond.//

A flare of light brightened their joint experience as he could not contain his excitement. Awkwardly, he flailed about, attempting to range all around them for something he wasn’t at all sure he’d recognize if he encountered it. But T’Braggia easily caught him and brought his focus back to her.

//Wait. Allow Spock to bring it to you.//

//When?// he demanded.

A withdrawal that Kirk interpreted as a wince.

//Sorry.//

//There is no need. I am not accustomed to humans and their lack of restraint. I attempted to prepare for your exuberance, but I did not gauge the intensity correctly.//

//T’Braggia, Spock and I have been separated for a long time. I know myself, and I don’t have your kind of control. When we finally get together, I don’t want to hurt you.//

//I have already adjusted. What will be, will be. In addition, I am a healer, and I have seen much.//

//Human emotions? Desire? For his mind as well as his body?//

//I have been witness to Vulcan desire, human-Kirk. Do not be concerned. I will draw Sluman to us now, and then from there we will go to Spock. Do not attempt to expand this joining to your bondmate yourself. You must meld first, and then proceed to the bond. Allow us to guide you.//

She was right to advise him to use restraint. He’d seldom felt this way: maybe the night before graduation from the Academy, when he’d harbored youthful dreams and ambitions that hadn’t been tempered yet by experience. Or maybe the morning right after he’d been summoned to Nogura’s office and told that the Enterprise was to be his. He’d known he was on the brink of fulfilling a life-long ambition, and it had been hard to wait the days until he could beam aboard. Now, he was rife with possibilities; the promise of a life to be lived together with the man he loved hovered just on the other side of the next few minutes.

//As you say, healer.//

It was as if she half-turned away from him, and he interpreted this in his only-human way by seeing the fog descend on her again and almost but not quite obscuring her from view. Then, another color tinted their mental landscape, a lavender that Kirk could have identified as Sluman under any condition. There were now three together.

The lavender and the white swirled together effortlessly into a pleasing union…. Kirk became aware that he was expressing himself as the Vulcans would. They were frankly beautiful, like a sunset over a lake coloring the water and the sky, or the streaks of multi-hued rock layers that highlighted a jagged rock cliff, and he realized that not many—hardly anyone—had ever seen a bonded pair from this perspective.
//We reveal ourselves to you through the healers’ necessity// said T’Braggia-Sluman. Then, with kindness, //You will have this soon.//

//We had it already, once. It was always good.//

//And with honest effort between you, it will be again. We wish you well, James Kirk. Are you ready?!//

A moment to settle himself, and he felt their approval as he corralled his eagerness. He imagined Spock sitting and waiting, impatience showing only in his eyes, with the rain behind him and the storm-lashed tree leaning as if watching what they were doing through the window.

//Ready.///

This time the fog stretched and thinned, with the white swirling more towards him and the lavender reaching out into the distant darkness. He resolved not to try to follow where the lavender was going and concentrated instead on staying right where he was. T’Braggia, at any rate, was blocking his way.

She didn’t need to announce //they are here// because before she conveyed the message Kirk knew. He didn’t move, knowing Spock was near and would come to him.

Just a little longer….

Images flashed before him:
—a stark, black ibatha tree growing alone from a crack in a cliff,
—a raven-winged grackle swooping along the line of the Iowa garden wall,
—the sweep of a seared desert landscape that he had never visited,
—one eyebrow rising in skepticism,
—Spock’s face alight the first time they touched to give each other pleasure—

//Kirk!///

Kirk slammed into something strong and hard and fell to the ground, gasping, not knowing what had happened or where he was. He grabbed his ribs and doubled over, trying to heave oxygen into his desperate lungs. What? What planet was this? Where was the rest of the landing party? Then the ground shook, he grabbed at the earth and found that it was literally splitting in two beneath his hands. He rolled to get away from the gaping crevice, and rolled, and rolled, and couldn’t stop rolling as the sky he glimpsed overhead went from blue to red to blue to red.

//Kirk!///

He crashed into a heavy, protruding tree root and sat upright, grateful for its solidity that had stopped the whirling. But it seemed nothing was certain in this world, for as his gaze moved up into the leaves, they shape-shifted and flew away like birds, and the tree limbs picked him up like gigantic hands and shoved him to the side. He tried to find some purchase, some place he could remain still and at least orient himself to what was happening, but this was a storm that wouldn’t end. The ground tilted beneath him and down he went, sliding feet first, hanging perilously above a chasm plunging far below him. He grabbed at the dirt with his fingers, desperate to stop his slide. If he fell all the way, he’d cease to exist, there wasn’t any question. How could he survive without
the earth to support him?

He slid another half meter, then managed to stop his deadly progress by grabbing another root. The cold wood was freezing to his fingers, cold enough to be painful, but he held on. There wasn’t anyone else here besides him; no one could help him.

//Kirk!//

The dirt scraped against his cheek and so did small rocks as he hung helplessly above where oblivion courted him. His feet lost their purchase and dangled. He was going to fall….

Something different. A change in the scent of the air. Kirk sniffed sweet perfume and knew he should remember it. Heavily fragrant. Pungent…flowers, blooming by the back door in Iowa year after year, as the winter retreated but still lingered. The appearance of the flowers meant the promise of spring for a small boy eager to be out and about. If he could only hold on long enough, everything would change.

And before his eyes, as he hung on tightly to the only thing that prevented him from falling, a clump of hyacinths sprang from the dirt. The flared bell-blossoms were blue and pink and white, just like his mother nourished in Iowa and….

…like the crystal sculpture that he and Spock kept in their bedroom.

All things were possible. He caught the scent of the hyacinths and knew that he was not alone.

Jim.

Kirk released his grip on the root and plummeted down, towards Spock, towards the bond.

Towards what he needed.

This is how it is with me now. I can’t be happy without you.

What Spock needed.

I am here. Only you.

Down he fell, and as the wind whipped through his hair he laughed for sheer joy and the release of earthly cares. The scent of hyacinths grew stronger; it was always like this in a meld with Spock, but they weren’t quite there yet.

Spock!

I will give you shade when you need it.

Let’s live together in the sunlight. Find me! Where are you?

Hands on his not-a-body, directing him, turning him in a slightly different direction as he rocketed towards completion. The perception of white and lavender reflected the flowers’ delicate shades, and they were T’Braggia—

//Your bond, unusual as it is, will be strong. This way.//

—and Sluman—

//May you serve your bondmate in his Time well, may you live together in the harmony of two
minds united in peace.//

The healers flowed to the side, though Kirk knew they were still there, clearing the way for him to see ahead. Ahead…. Oh, God. Ahead was Spock…. Kirk could feel/ hear/ see/ perceive him, almost united but not. He was there, then not there, flickering in shadow and light, appearing and disappearing, but always coming closer….

Kirk remembered the last time they’d been together, under Gri-Ta’s patient wings, and the promises they’d made. Promises kept. They hadn’t given up.

Come to me! If he had to wait one dranath longer….

Shakily. You have always been an impatient human. I am yours. You are mine.

And then…. Not the image of Spock he had nursed in his memory for so long, but Spock himself.

No more falling. He was exactly where he wanted to be.

Silence.

Need. I need I need

You you

A kaleidoscope of images as in an instant they passed through and into each other to find their home….

Union.

I We love you/ us/ you, this touching, feel so good/ waited too long/ here I am you are/ better than we remember I remember you always/ I forgot us Deverans/ doesn’t matter/ touch me you us/ deeper/

Deeper/

Deeper/

Deeper/ goodgoodgood/ was it this good before/ what is before this is now/ this is/ mountains sunshine the ship/ your ship our ship our life/ your face your hand your touch/ touch me/ be me/ touch me/ this is better/ better/ better/ better/ be me/ don’t leave don’t ever leave/ how can we leave this is where we live/ will live/ go on forever like this except still need for the bond/ how can touching you us like this be any better/ I’ll we’ll I’ll explode with the bond/ blow away like a leaf on the wind/ I’ll we’ll I’ll catch you/ touch me here/ touch me there/ love you us together

Be me/

How did we live without this/ we almost didn’t/ don’t think just feel/ feel/ I love how you feel/ I feel you know you love you you and us/ together/

Together.

Together.

Together.

Be me/ too much too soon remember we you I we must reach for the bond/ step back/ no/ yes/ no/
yes/yes/step back still within us I still the joining not as close/ I don’t want to take a breath that isn’t yours/ spock your romantic soul/ jim you are my soul/ breathe with me/ already we are you and I/breathe with me/breathe with me/I’m you/I am you/

Just far enough apart so that he had a knowledge of two separate selves, but still within the meld. Jim. Jim. Trembling to his core—I am Jim—because of wanting more. But now he could also feel/hear/see/perceive his partner of thought a different way, a….

…a being of light and shadows, bruises and health, expectations and a deep, profound longing for James Kirk that matched the yearning for Spock that geysered up from Kirk, too.

Two years apart/ We two years apart they/hard years/

He was Jim, Jim Kirk in a meld with Spock/breathe

We had two years apart and they were hard years. See our shadows.

Not so overwhelming now. Perspective.

The shadows shot through Spock’s light: here was the shattering loss of what had made him a Vulcan, there was the pain of living side by side with Kirk without being able to touch him, there was the torture of the long darkness after his collapse, and finally the disorientation of being attracted to Deverans while still knowing he would not be enough.

Jim almost-separate-still-together could say I’m the one for you. I’m not a Vulcan, but I’m who you want.

Spock-almost-separate-still-together with sor-row felt/heard/saw/perceived in his partner-thought-partner: fault lines in Kirk’s being from the humiliation of bowing before Komack the past year, raw edges of frustration as he contemplated the people who had died when they’d come to honor him in Paris, jagged cracks as he tried so hard not to want his absent, maybe dying lover as badly as he did, skewed borders as he acknowledged his attraction to Lori while still knowing she would not be enough.

Spock-still-together-but-separate-and-proud I am the one for you. I am not a woman, but I am who you want.

Kirk affirmed Yes Yes and knew Spock’s pleasure.

Time for more the bond

I want you the bond/I want you the bond then come now/how don’t know how/just fall into me see/my arms wide open/my heart wide open/my mind wide open/fulfill me/fulfill ususususus/

Spock.

Jim.

Spock. Jim.


spockjimjimspockspockjim

—T’hy’la—
For a long time, there was only sensation.

It could not last long enough.

_I do take you in body and in spirit._

_In the meld and in our bed._

_Forever._

_Always with you._


_I missed you so much._

Enfolding. Holding.

_So much better here, life._

_Different from what I expected._

_Not deficient._

_No. You. Us together._

Satisfaction.

_We glow like a star._

_Be my star._


_Won’t let you go._

_Won’t let you go._

Knowing. T’hy’la.

//Commander Spock. Commodore Kirk. Release.//

_We/us_ had not lasted long enough. Kirk didn’t admit that the part of him that could perceive anything outside his bondmate’s being had registered the call.

//You must release each other. Follow me.//

No.

//You will have the rest of your lives to indulge. For now, separate.//

Knowing. T’hy’la.

//For the sake of Commodore Kirk’s mental health, it is necessary for you to separate now. You may enact a meld and indulge in your bond again later today. But now—//

That caught their attention.
We must go. But the bond is here.

I see it. I’m keeping it this time, too. It won’t disappear.

I think you will keep it.

Your being pleases me, Spock.

You are pleasure incarnate, Jim.

Later, t’hy’la.

As they pulled away from each other enough that their individual selves were apparent, between them stood the bond. It was healthy and lush, and as Kirk watched, it transformed in his needy, human imagination from a glow he could never find words for or be able to explain even to himself to…a tree. Its roots stretched down deep, into him, and into Spock, and they joined from their separate selves into the solid, undeniable trunk that thrust up into the sky in joyous celebration. The branches of their tree swayed above them both, reaching for the unknown, and through the interweaving leaves Kirk saw the sun, and Eridani, and all the stars of their galaxy.

Kirk felt himself moving further and further away from what they were together, but his awareness of the bond didn’t disappear, it simply changed. It was planted too deeply to ever be uprooted, and it would always be with him. It was like always holding Spock’s hand in his.

A long time seemed to pass as he returned from where he’d been. This was reality, the Earth, San Francisco…Spock’s hand in his distracted him. The warmth of it, the length of the fingers that entwined with his own. It felt good to be holding hands with Spock. Kirk wanted to kiss their fingers, but he was too lazy to pull them to his mouth or to bend down to where they rested together on his hip. The meld and the expansion of their bond had temporarily stolen his energy. He’d just rest for a while like this.

Felt good to press his mouth to Spock’s forehead. Spock’s bangs tickled his lips. Nobody else was this warm or smelled this good. Exhalations blew against the front of his neck. Breathe. Breathe. Kirk matched his breaths with Spock’s and thought about the bond, and then he thought about how good this felt, too. Hand to hand, body to body, his arm under and around Spock, cradling him close as Kirk was being cradled close.

Felt so good it ought to be taxed, as his mother would say. Bones would probably say that, too. Kirk stirred languidly, but not enough to take him away from where his legs were tangled with his bondmate’s.

“You awake?”

“Mmmm.”

Kirk laughed softly.

“I am awake.” Lips brushed the base of Kirk’s neck. “You taste good.”

“Love you,” he murmured, and he nuzzled under the dark hair so he could plant a kiss right in the center of Spock’s high forehead. “I know exactly where we are. See it?”

The bond throbbed within him. Yes, there. He’d known he’d be able to feel it. He could tell that Spock felt it, too.
“Jim. I love you.”

Kirk sighed with pure happiness. “We did it.”

“That is true,” a voice outside their cocoon of togetherness said. “You were successful in re-animating your bond. I will certify to its rectitude.”

Kirk jerked up on one elbow and wildly looked about, finally twisting around to see behind him. He stared at where an unruffled Sluman was sitting in a chair, his hands placidly folded in his lap. A plate of food was on a table that had been pulled up next to him.

“What?” Kirk asked in confusion. But then he remembered….

He gazed down at Spock, who was under and next to him, spread out like a lascivious offering along the window seat. He appeared to be as startled as Kirk felt.

He gave Kirk a wry look. “Apparently we are not only here,” the bond pulsed again, and Kirk caught his breath, “but we are also in Sluman and T’Braggia’s living quarters, creating an emotional display. Jim, if you will allow me to get up….”

Hastily Kirk swung himself into a sitting position. He ran a hand through his hair to try to put it into order, knowing that at some time Spock’s fingers had been stroking through it.

“Uh, Healer Sluman….”

“Do not be concerned, Commodore. A period of focus upon the bond partner when emerging from a bonding meld, even one as idiosyncratic as yours, is to be expected. T’Braggia and I agreed to leave the two of you undisturbed. I have not suffered from the wait. T’Genia makes an excellent stew.”

“Sluman, I beg forgive—”

“There is no need, Spock,” the healer said serenely. “All went as expected. We believed that there was a significant possibility that you would experience another out-of-season Time, considering the commodore’s human sexuality and its effect on you, and so we were prepared. But I am pleased that did not happen, and that you were able to restrain yourselves from initiating physical congress.”

Now the reason for inviting them up to the wide, long window seat was apparent. Kirk manfully tried not to blush. From their appearance—Spock’s dress uniform was half off his shoulders, his collar undone, Kirk’s tunic was bunched up under his arms, and his cock was only now subsiding—it didn’t seem like they had escaped “physical congress” by much. They must have given Sluman quite a show, but Kirk preferred to do his loving in private.

Spock shrugged his tunic straight and refastened his collar, while attempting to put on his “I am a Vulcan and cannot be embarrassed” expression. To Kirk’s eyes, he didn’t quite get there. “Your discretion in allowing us…adjustment time is appreciated.”

“Gratitude is unnecessary. We serve.”

“Then the bond is successfully re-animated?” Spock asked. A quick flip of his head and a single motion of his fingers put his bangs in place.

“Yes. I will certify as such for formal records in Shikahr.”
“There were no problems?”

Was that an amused sparkle in the old healer’s eyes? “No more than your unusually passionate natures produced. I can see that you are well matched indeed in some areas with this human, Spock. Now,” Sluman rose from his seat, plate in hand, and Kirk hastily got up, too. “I advise you to return to your dwelling at this time. The storm has abated for the moment and you may be able to get there without being rained on.”

“Sluman.” Spock’s calling him brought the healer back to them. “Before you go, I wish to…thank you. In the way of Jim’s people, I do thank you for helping us find each other again.”

“I want to thank you, too,” Kirk said, stepping up next to his spouse. “You and T’Braggia…. You made me feel welcome, you always have.”

The healer raised his chin in inquiry. “The experience was not too unsettling? Very few humans would tolerate it, I believe.”

Kirk touched the bond. He had a feeling he’d be doing that a lot for a while. “Unsettling? No. What would have been hell was not having the bond again. What happened among the four of us, that was nothing. Anything would have been worth enduring for what we have now. Thank you.”

The old man nodded as if he understood, and then he walked away. Kirk could hear him go down the stairway and then along a hall. A door closed softly, in the careful Vulcan way. And he and Spock were alone, though they’d never be alone. Never parted.

Slowly Kirk turned to the being who was the other half of this incredible awareness he sheltered where no one else could see. What he saw from his eyes alone: pointed ears; upswept eyebrows; deep, serious eyes; a sensual mouth; long, strong limbs. What he knew from their long service on the ship: an astounding intellect; a driving curiosity; a strong will.

Spock, and yet not Spock. Kirk closed his eyes and, with the pleasure of memory, experienced his spouse as he really was.

“What do you see?” Spock whispered. He had drawn very near.

Blindly, Kirk reached out. His hands closed on the strongest, most reliable, best arms in the galaxy, and he pulled Spock into his embrace even as he was being gathered in. “You. You. Us.”

“Us,” Spock sighed. “It is truly back. Kiss me, Jim.”

Kirk took Spock’s face between his hands, loving the warm skin beneath his palms and the angles and curves of chin, cheek, and nose. Wordlessly, beyond happiness, he ran his thumbs from the inside of Spock’s eyebrows all the way up to their ends. Spock’s eyes…. Was it possible for the gods and goddesses of the universe to grant them this much joy?

His voice was thick. “Who do we thank for this? How did this happen for us when for so many others it doesn’t? I thought I was going to lose you. I thought what we had would be just a memory, that I’d wake up to misery when I realized you weren’t there anymore. Spock….”

Gently, slowly, Kirk pressed his mouth to his bondmate’s, and Spock’s lips softened beneath his.

_Breathe/ breathe_

To breathe in the same air, to live in the same space, to know, to know, to really know
To know you

To really know that Spock would live because they loved each other.

As slowly as they had come together, their lips parted, lingering in their contact because Kirk was reluctant to release any part of this man.

“Jim.” Warm fingers brushed through his hair, then found their way to the back of his head and held him there. The dark Vulcan eyes were shining, and Kirk could perceive, on the other side of conscious awareness: you are my sunlight and my shade. Kirk didn’t know which one of them had thought it. Maybe Spock started it and he’d finished it, in that way they’d always had, but both of them meant it.

He swayed against Spock with his arms wrapped around the thin frame, and he allowed himself to be held. Their faces rested against each other, and they stayed like that for a long time, in silence, not merging their thoughts and yet speaking all the same.

Eventually, Spock stirred and deposited a simple kiss on Kirk’s hungry lips. “I believe we should relinquish this room to our hosts.”

Kirk took in a normal breath of air. Time to return to the real world. Which, with Spock in it, wasn’t a bad place to be, either. He had plans for the rest of this day. He smiled a wicked smile.

Spock took a step back from him. “I mistrust you when you look like that.”

“Do you know what I’d like to do?”

The bond sparked with Spock’s knowing.

“No, no, not that yet. First I want to get the biggest plate of pasta we can find. I’m starved.”

“I am sure that our replicator will be capable of providing that. And then?”

“With sauce and Parmesan,” Kirk added as they made their way down the staircase.

“I notice your consideration for my vegetarian sensibilities.”

“Consideration, hell. I want your mouth all over me, with no hesitation.”

“Jim…”

“Yes, Spock?”

“Do you know what I’d like to do?”

The bond sparked with Jim’s knowing. He stopped dead in his tracks on the bottom step and looked over his shoulder.

“Yes, exactly that,” Spock nodded.

“You devil.”

“We have indulged in sexual relations while melding before.”

“Not with the bond like this, we haven’t. Am I going to survive the experience?”
“Experiences,” Spock said as they went through the waiting room. “I expect to perform with you often over the next few days.”

“It had better be a really big plate of pasta, then.”

“Indeed. I will join you.”

Kirk followed Spock out the door, paused on the top step, and lifted his eyes to the sky. It looked like it was going to rain again any second, and already a few fat drops were splattering on the street and pavement. The trees in front of the house and down the block were miserable-looking and dripping, with many of their leaves stripped from them by the force of the weather. They would be no shelter at all as he and Spock went back to Fortuna Street.

“We’re going to get drenched.”

“I find that…I do not care.”

His fastidious Vulcan?

“Because then I will have the opportunity to remove your wet clothing and dry you off,” Spock patiently explained.

Kirk shivered. That sounded good to him. But as Spock turned towards home, Kirk said. “Wait a minute.”

Spock swung around at the foot of the healers’ steps, and Kirk moved down to the sidewalk to face him. “Spock?” he asked, and he took both of his Vulcan’s hands in his, in the same way that Spock had reached to him when they’d exchanged their marriage promises. He didn’t care who saw them.

“Yes, Jim?”

He wanted to get this right. “I would serve as your partner in the Time.” He thought those were the right words. It had been a long time since he’d seen them in his lover’s thoughts. He knew Deverans had said them.

Spock squeezed his fingers and Kirk, hypersensitive to everything about Spock right now—his fingers so warm, his eyes like stars—watched a swallow ripple down the length of his throat.

“I accept your gift of self for all our years, and I pledge to be the partner that you need in turn. Yes. Jim, we are bonded.” Spock said it as if he could scarcely believe the words.

“Yes, we are.” Kirk grinned and couldn’t wait to get started on their new life together. It was going to be extraordinary. “Come on, bondmate, let’s go home.”
EPILOGUE: *In the Shade*

**So Spin the Fates**

--a Roman saying

Permission to visit the small southern continent of Sinoptus IV, home of the famous singing trees, was not easy to obtain. The carefully monitored sites were closed except for scientific researchers and the occasional influential onlooker who managed to wrangle a permit. Sometimes a media outlet placed a reporter there, so that every few years readers were treated to a story about the magnificent, soul-stirring sounds they could never hear. Even the files *The Galactic News* sent out to its many millions of subscribers were not able to convey the complete experience of the trees. A being needed to visit the planet to hear the mysterious overtones of their song.

Fahtima Gabon had made her plans and she had worked hard. She was a good interviewer; people trusted her and told her, more often than not, the truth. Her editors noticed the unsparing detail of her prose and realized that the readers liked it, too. One wrote to a *Letters to the Editor* column with praise and the comment, “It’s as if she knew exactly what Donaldson was feeling; Gabon’s insight is remarkable.”

She graduated from being Ralph Randolph’s assistant to being his colleague. Her by-line over the next few years was seen more and more often in the most-widely read publication in the Federation. Sometimes she and Randolph competed for stories, for now neither of them was confined to Earth. The woman who had been born into shattering light in a small village south of Khartoum now boarded star cruisers casually and took them to planets and satellites and starbases she had only dreamed of before.

When she asked if she could make a detour on her way to interview the new prime minister of Beta Sandor III, her boss readily agreed. Gabon was tired, she worked hard, she deserved a rest. When she suggested that she could combine business with her short and needed sabbatical, the higher-ups couldn’t have been more pleased. Sure, write an article on the singing trees. They would arrange entry.

Perhaps another person would have smiled when the permission came in over the mini-comp she carried with her everywhere. Another being might have pumped her arm into the air at this assurance that what she’d been aiming for over the last two years was going to happen. But not Fahtima Gabon. She kept her head down and her expression controlled because they were the habits of a lifetime. Though everything had changed—everything important—some things had not. She was as she was.


Now it was almost sunset on the southern continent. She closed the door of the Spartan pre-fab quarters that were the only places to stay, and she walked lightly along the path towards the trees, clutching her scarf under her chin. She had no access anymore to the power that had permitted her to rip the memories of the songs from Spock’s mind, but she did remember the images she’d stolen clearly. She’d used them to steer her towards the exact same grove, among thousands of stands of trees, that Spock had stood under that time he’d heard the singing.

It was a strange sort of pilgrimage she was on, and even she did not always see the logic of it. But
then, she thought with a pang of affection, Spock was the logical one, not she. For him especially, above all others, she needed to make restitution for the memories she’d stolen and he did not know had been touched, and it seemed to her the only way to validate what resided in her mind was to go and hear for herself what already resonated there.

Sometimes she thought about the other people she had wronged and those she’d killed. She vaguely considered restitution and validation for them but could come up with no way to do it. How to pay anyone back for the loss of one they loved? For months of pain? For the loss of a limb? For the loss of….

She always tried not to think about Pren’felit. When his face penetrated her dreams anyway and she woke up shivering, she consoled herself by thinking of James Kirk and how she’d stopped herself. How Spock had stopped her. He had been right. No, she did not want to be like Hamza.

For restitution, she could join some volunteer group like Doctors for All Beings. They always needed people to assist them, even those without medical training. Or she could re-educate herself and offer her services to troubled beings who needed therapy. Maybe she could settle on a planet and teach. Maybe….

No. She knew she’d do none of those things.

The breeze began to pick up on this, her first evening on the planet. A group of five humans and one Canopan was gathered to one side against the railing that separated the people from the trees, but she ignored them and went to the other side. It was always her way to find the solitary place.

The sun was almost down. The wind blew against the exposed hand that held her scarf and trickled in to barely touch her nose and mouth. It was her favorite time of day on any planet, the time when the light was almost gone and she knew the deep darkness would come.

How wonderful, to live in the shade.

Thank you, Spock. She thanked him, in her heart, every day and every night.

There? She strained to hear. The first faint hint of music…. Yes. Yes. Fahtima released her scarf and lifted her bared face to the breeze. The trees of Sinoptus IV began to sing.

In the beginning, silence, and in the end
Silence; and in between these silences,
The sound of one white flower, opening, closing.
My love, my love, be that white flower for me:
Open and close: that sound will be my world.

In the beginning, chaos, and in the end
Chaos; and the vast wonder come between, --
Glory, bewilderment, all sense of brightness.
Love, be that glory and that sense of brightness.
You are what chaos yielded. Be my star.

--Conrad Aiken, Preludes for Memnon, xviii--

THE END

For the last part of the Sharing the Sunlight series, a story related to but not quite part of In the
Shade, please read “Love and Fate” next. It's listed as Chapter 27.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading my K/S stories! Especially, I suspect there are some of you who have read through the entire length of my Sharing the Sunlight series. Wow! You've been on a long journey with me! I wrote that series starting on January 6, 1991 and ending in May 2005.

I can't begin to express how very special spending those years with Kirk and Spock were. And spending them within the K/S fan community. I will always treasure that time. I grew, I learned, I met many friends I love. I learned how to write, hopefully, too, though that wasn't what was driving me. Always it has been my love and fascination with James Kirk and Spock of Vulcan that caused me to sit down and put words to page.

I poured my heart and soul into my K/S writing. It's all there for everybody to see: what I believe in, who I love, what I value. What intrigues me, how I want the world to grow in a better way. My imagining of the future world isn't quite as pristine as Gene Roddenberry's, maybe, but it's based on the same foundations. I hope we get there.

To you, the reader: thank you. Peace.

Love,
Jenna
Addendum: Love and Fate

A note from Jenna:

This short story belongs with the novel In the Shade and should be read immediately after it, although it doesn’t quite flow as part of that plotline. It’s more of an observation and a summation of In the Shade, a little off to the side. It was never published with the printed, zine version of the novel as a consequence, but I always wanted it to be read as part of that entire novel experience.

Fate and its working is one of several themes in In the Shade. Historically, the three Fates are interpreted in many different ways and have had different names too. I chose Clotho, who spins the thread of life, Lachesis, who measures the thread, and Atropos, who cuts it at life’s end. Kirk and Spock dance with all three of them throughout the Sharing the Sunlight series, and I thought it would be most appropriate to end the story I tell of them with the Fates. Don’t worry, Love and Fate is about Kirk and Spock too.

Love and Fate won’t make any sense at all if you don’t read In the Shade first. That’s why I put it as chapter twenty-seven of the novel instead of as a stand-alone story.

As always, I would be delighted to hear any commentary on any of my K/S work (posted at the archive under Jenna Sinclair and also Jenna Hilary Sinclair) either as a comment posted to the archive or through email sent to Hilary54@aol.com.

I hope you enjoy reading this very last part of the entire Sharing the Sunlight series.
Love,
Jenna

LOVE AND FATE

(a reflection of, and the last part of, the novel In the Shade)
by
Jenna Sinclair

There is no way, even with our vast powers, that we could supervise the fates and lives of every human being. There are just too many of them: all the human beings, sweet ones we fell in love with millennia ago, and all the beings that the humans love as well. And now that they’ve taken that big step into space, the half-humans, too. But there are some people who bring themselves to our notice; we can’t help but see them.

All the rest of our people are gone. Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, Hera, and Cupid, my darling. Not so long ago, an instant ago from our perspective, we felt Apollo calling and knew his deep despair. Apollo was always the insistent one, always trying to go back to the way things were before. But he couldn’t hold onto that dream anymore. He spread himself on the wind as the others had done, and then he was gone. Clotho cried. I walked along the rows of a cornfield and counted plants for a long time. It’s what I do best—measuring, counting—and I found some small comfort in fulfilling my role. Atropos…. It must be much harder for her. I don’t know how she does it, always living on the edge of night. We didn’t see her for weeks.

Our people couldn’t adapt to the changes in this world, but my sisters and I are tied to it. And we’re content on Earth, too. We were the first, you see, created from the same matter as the primordial
soup, and so I’ve always thought that we couldn’t leave even if we tried. We’re part of the sky and the wind and the fertile soil. We grow with every plant and sigh with each breath of breeze, and when the humans look up at the stars, we’re shining there, too.

We’re incorporeal most of the time. It’s easier. There aren’t any unpleasant surprises that way.

Clotho was the one who noticed Spock first. She’s always had an eye for the out-of-step loner, and all the part-humans, and the non-humans our guardlings love. Watching over them is her special, given vocation. I think it’s because of her youth. I envy her that luminescent skin and her burnished hair, but I don’t envy her the wild emotion that comes from being just-old-enough to know better. Poor Cloti, she loves so fiercely. She suffered with Spock all though his painful growing years and spun his thread madly. It was a beautiful yarn that emerged, more colorful than most we pay attention to, and sometimes ‘Pos and I would admire it. Then Cloti’s dimples would show, but she wouldn’t say anything; she just kept spinning.

When Spock stepped foot for the first time on the Enterprise, his thread just wouldn’t get any longer, but it was such an enormous length by then that I think she was satisfied. She turned it over to me and said, “This should last him a long, long time.”

Ah, but she should know better. Not even her most beautiful creations will last forever. Even the best of them have some flaw that flows into their lives and warps their future. Some very near the beginning. I took up Spock’s thread in my hands. It was thick and heavy and multi-hued, and for just a moment I admired it as I allowed his being to seep into my awareness. Such a sylvan soul. In that moment, I remembered what it was to be as young as Clotho and as needful as Spock, and so I wished for him not to be so very alone, as my sisters and I are.

The next day Atropos came to me. She doesn’t talk much. I don’t think it’s because she resents her role of cutting off the light of our dear humans; it’s more like she’s settled into the role, that she is the knife. But, like Clotho and me, sometimes she goes afield and just lives for a while among our charges. It’s how we collect our favorites, you see. This time, she had just come back, and she had several cords dangling around her neck, like nooses ready to be tightened. I felt a pang of pity, knowing that most of them would not see another day. But not all.

Atropos said to me, “Do you remember Alexander? Here’s another one like him. I think he needs something before he can really be measured.” She help up a bunch of cords, each of them different in color or texture or length, and she carefully picked out one. Smooth and golden, it was. She looped it over my wrist. “He is one of those who almost truly saw me. He danced a dance with me and wasn’t afraid.”

I know how much that means to Atropos. It is a heavy burden, always to be feared. Those who don’t fear her are special to her.

To know our charges to their depths is part of my gift and my responsibility. Somewhere inside of me are all of them, with their hopes and doubts and triumphs and struggles and all that makes them the most fascinating beings in the universe. I held the golden thread up to the light to admire it, and I knew instantly that it would blend most beautifully with Clotho’s favorite. It was an unlikely pairing that was not obvious on the surface, but when I placed them side by side, each was enhanced by the other.

I took the two and tied them together at one end, and before I left them for other cares and other lives, I gave them one twist together. That was when Jim Kirk was given command of the Enterprise.

Every once in a while I would return to that union of heavy, multi-hued color and smooth gold, and
I would twist them again. It pleased me to perceive what was happening. Occasionally I would find that they were more intertwined than I remembered, and I suspected that Clotho had found her way into my domain. No matter. She is me and I am her and we are both Atropos, and so there is no harm done.

It's lonely, with just the three of us who really understands the others. Occasionally we have taken lovers among the humans but can never tell them the truth, and though we might manage to live for many of their years among them, and we might fool them utterly, we cannot fool ourselves. The day always comes when one that we love comes under Atropos’s knife.

That has happened once too often for me. I said good-bye to Piotr and turned away before it happened, and he was my last. Now I ask for no love or joy of my own, but I discovered that in observing and not participating, I was able to truly love more of them and more lavishly. It had not been obvious to me before, but it is true.

I watched while Spock’s heart softened and Jim Kirk’s widened. Soon his human affection included his Vulcan first officer. His thread deepened into the most beautiful glowing silk, like real gold. Then Clotho and I clapped our hands in happiness when Spock realized that it was possible the word “love” might apply to his life. When they shared their first kiss—ah, it was a beautiful sunrise on Olympus that day.

Those first months together, how they struggled to accommodate each other! With pure hearts and boundless hope that made me smile. Not just me: Clotho, too. We were united in our fascination with them, our joy in their joy. It was easier and easier to loop them around each other: Spock’s rope was suddenly much more flexible, and Jim Kirk’s thread clung to his Vulcan’s sturdier support like a rose climbing up a trellis, reaching higher and higher.

But eventually I came to them and saw that, though they were still tightly wound about each other, at the end, back where they had started, their threads had come apart. They were separating. So much sooner than need be. I had hoped…. I looked up and saw Atropos staring at me. My sister is practical. “Not much longer for that one.” It was Spock’s thread that was weakening.

I didn’t want it to happen. There are times, very few, when we have made exceptions from what was meant to be. We are but actors on this stage and not the writers of the play, but sometimes actors can improvise their lines, as our treasured Aeschylus knew. But all three of us had to be in agreement.

I held out their united strength. “Not even for them? Why for Admetus and Alcetis but not for Spock? Must I find a Hercules?”

“Not even for Piotr or my Susan,” she said.

“Without Spock, Kirk will never be your Alexander. Don’t you think our humans need an Alexander?”

Atropos’s face paled when I said James Kirk’s name. “What must be, will be,” Atropos said, though I could tell it was hard for her to speak.

I dropped the threads upon the table. Her knife was close by as always, at her waist. “Kirk’s sorrow will be as boundless as the seas. We have just heard Apollo’s death cry. I do not want to hear Spock’s, nor see this remarkable human’s tears. Do what you must.”

Atropos looked at the knife and then at the beauty of the threads interwoven, and then she turned away. “Not yet. They are not yet unbound. I will wait.”
And so we waited. I’d twist them together at one end, and they’d be untwisted at the other end by the time I saw them again. Clotho and I witnessed Spock and Kirk cry together, we say them fight with each other, we saw them reconciled, we saw them determined, we saw them hurting, and never once did the force of their love diminish. Kirk’s thread, if anything, clung more tightly to Spock’s where he could, for he could not bear to let him go.

Atropos never joined us as we watched and loved these two who were giving all they were to each other. She might have witnessed the two of them at other times. A few times she disappeared, but each of us did that occasionally. I knew she had a special spot in her heart for James Kirk, and sometimes I wondered if she had gone to see them in the flesh. I wanted to do that myself, to experience the flame of them first hand, but I had learned my lesson. It hurt too much. I didn’t have Atropos’s strength.

The day came when I went to pick up the cords together, as I sometimes did, just to feel the force of their passion for each other, and to my horror Spock’s, unbound, fell to the ground. I heard Clotho’s cry, and the sound of her running towards us. She always knew when it was time for one of her favorites to go, and she never had the sense to turn away.

I went to scoop Spock up, but Atropos was there, too. “Hold him out for me,” she said, and her knife was in her hand.

It is part of who we are, to do our duty, and so I held that heavy thread for her, beautiful in so many ways, and yet I argued, “He does not need to die.”

She scoffed at me. “It is not his life you want, it’s this union with Kirk. You moon after the two of them like a love-sick youngsters. You are old enough to know better.” Clotho, out of breath, came up to us then, and our sister gestured towards her. “You are a bad example for our young one as well. It is not good to yearn over what you cannot have.”

“But to find consolation in their goodness? To be energized by their devotion?”

The knife was sharp and glistened in the sunlight.

Clotho was next to me. “Not a bad example but a good one. Imperfect our humans are, but they are capable of much good. Spock has gone through so much! Do not cut off his life!”

“And if I were to stay my knife but take his thread and fold it thus?” She grabbed a length of the cord from where it hung lax between my hands. “So that he and Deverans have a long bonding, and he never thinks of James Kirk again? It is not life you argue for, Clotho, it is love. Love ends. Love is disappointing. Love is betrayal.”

“Love is the furnace that burns some and purifies others. If you spare Spock’s life, he will find his way back to Kirk. James Kirk needs him. Look at what they will accomplish together if we grant them life.”

On the table lay Kirk’s gold, looking forlorn. Already, I saw, it was beginning to fray at one end. Without Spock, he would return to space on the Enterprise and die without meaning on his second mission, on some faraway planet.

Clotho snatched Kirk up and held him over her head. “If we sever Spock, we should do the same to Kirk, at the same time. Together in death.”

I nodded. “It is right. They should share the same destiny. Let him die in the cave tunnel, in the fight with the Eternist. The phaser blast….” Clotho, daring as she is with her impetuosity, laid Kirk
in my hands, parallel to his Spock but not together. I held them both out to Atropos. “Cut.”

“It is not foreordained.”

I disagreed. “Sometimes individuals make their own destinies.”

“Very few.”

I shook the cords in her face. “Look at them! And then tell us where you have lingered on Earth these days.”

Shame suffused her face, and she turned her gaze away. “I went to see him.”

“James Kirk?”

She nodded. “I knew what was coming. It is so easy for me, you see, to cut these threads. I can do it without thought. Without feeling. Is that right? I resolved…I would feel his sorrow when Spock had to go. I needed to know that I had the strength for it.” She lifted her eyes to us. “I do.”

We stared at one another then, the eternal triangle of us: the young, the middle-aged, the old. The optimism and deep-feeling of youth, the resolve and organization of the mature, and the resigned acceptance of the old.

“Strength,” Clotho said, “is in feeling.”

“Strength,” I said, “is in understanding.”

“Strength,” Atropos told us, “is in enduring.”

I am Clotho, and I am Lachesis, and I am also Atropos. I hold the threads of life in my hands. “Strength,” I said gently, “is in finding stability in the midst of universal madness. The world whirls around and around our humans, and they struggle to find meaning in their lives. Sometimes they find shelter with each other, and they can go on to do great things. To show mercy. To find justice. To be an example one to the other, and to love. How we love them.”

“Yes, I love them!” Clotho cried.

“Yes, I do love them,” Atropos admitted. She put down her knife and sighed. “I am an old woman, but I can admit I love. What better reason for life? Lachesis, dear one, put them back together again. You’ll both be happier this way.”

“And you?”

Cloti shares her dimples with ’Pos. My older sister smiled. “Of course. When they achieve their bond, let’s have a picnic. The three of us, under the old olive tree. I love to hear the two of you laugh with joy. It’s a beautiful sound.”

On that day Atropos held her knife and did not cut the threads of life. And now: look at how happy Spock and Jim are.

THE END
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