Night Is Not Yours Alone

by VitaeLampada

Summary

Part five of an ongoing Spyota/Spuhura love story. This story takes an up close and personal look at the immediate aftermath of Vulcan's destruction and the effect of this loss on Spock. He becomes one of the many survivors who suffer from a psychosomatic condition known as "Saturation of the Severed Bond", with symptoms which are unique to him. Uhura and the crew take turns to help him recover, and the experience helps the young Enterprise crew to bond and become a team ready for their first mission. Spock Prime features frequently -- this is also a story about how he finds his place in the new timeline.

I would say the story is tricky to follow as a stand alone work. I make frequent references to characters and events from parts 1-4. Though it will be 'oddly self-serving', I strongly recommend reading the series from the beginning.

Notes
Big Reader Warning: even though these chapters will be short (300-500 words) I definitely won't be able to publish weekly, the way I was able to do during the summer. There could be a long wait for new material, because I work full time and am studying for an English Lit degree with the Open University. Totally understand if some readers would prefer to wait until the work is complete before reading.

Glossary Term - "ko-mekh" is the Vulcan word for 'mother'.
White

White.

A clean white.

And quiet.

Nothing else.

Nothing except time without white, which is perhaps black. He cannot remember.

White, then not white -- then white again.

Then words -- words also happen. They sound white.

“No reactive movements yet."

“In a moment, Commander, I’m going to lift your right arm and gently bend it at the elbow. We want to keep your joints from seizing up."

“--three point four degrees lower. And swelling is down."

White reveals more. Glimpses only, but after several of these the white manifests itself as segments, two dimensional and geometric, and these segments continue in all directions, beyond what he can see.

On Vulcan, white is rare. When clouds form they are dark and full of storm rains. Flowers are few, and vivid. There is no snow.

Snow. There was snow. No matter how deep he ran into the forest, where tall conifers hid the sky, snow powdered the ground.

“Doctor, we’ve seen rapid eye movement overnight."

White includes a scent. It is moist in his nostrils, and sweet.

Curious.

Sudden clarity, like the moment when an adjusted microscope reaches correct focus, finally gives the white its true identity. It is ceiling tiles. Square ceiling tiles.

Directly above him, he can see seven whole tiles and parts of another seven. If he shifts his eyes, which he does once, white flashes pure through his brain like an electric shock and leaves him with nothing else, not even a sense of time.

“Commander? Can you hear me?"

On Vulcan, white is rare. The inlet at Retakh, in northern Laurh, has waters with high salinity. Sodium chloride crystals accumulate along the shore, dry under the sun, and leave a gleaming bank which extends between two-hundred eighteen and two-hundred ninety-four mat’drih in length, depending on the season.

“Spock, if you can hear me, could you try to move your fingers?”
He is pleased to recognise the ceiling tiles once again.

Mother has a white dress. She keeps it in her study, inside a silicate trunk, along with a copious amount of fine textured white mesh, a head piece made with filigree wire and semi-precious pink crystals, as well as a pair of white slippers. She brought all these things to Vulcan, because they were wedding attire. But she chose not to wear them.

The same sweet scent is in the air.

“Spock.”

A human woman’s face appears, framed by the white tiles. He thinks ‘ko-mekh’. He knows he is incorrect, but cannot specify the precise error, except that this person has fair hair and blue eyes.

As if she knows he needs assistance, she tells him, “It’s Christine. Christine Chapel. Your favourite CMO, unless you’ve found a new one to lock horns with.”
The loss of Vulcan made people do unexpected things.

Christine Chapel, when she returned to Earth from Betazed, made a special trip to the house in Wood Eaton, Staffordshire which had belonged to her family for over two hundred years. She surprised Melanie, her niece. Together they searched the home computer archive, and together went up to the attic and hunted through the keepsakes of generations to find one particular packing crate, the contents of which had not seen the light of day for decades, possibly a century. Once found, they carried it down to the kitchen. They pried off the lid so they could check all the pieces inside, wash them by hand.

Now the complete set graced the table inside the Phoenix boardroom, USS Enterprise. Cadet Kirk was the first to see it. He arrived early for the briefing, said a quick ‘morning’ and was about to pull out a chair. Instead he stopped, his hands clamped on the seat back.

“Wedgewood?”

Chapel gave him a single nod, impressed.

“For use when mourning,” she explained. “Fashionable in the 19th century, or so I read somewhere. After World War III – well, you know your history. My family made it through thanks to the bunker under the house. Had to rebuild, of course, and replace almost everything. On the 25th anniversary of the peace, Wedgewood managed to revive production of this basalt set. It's never been used. All sale proceeds were going towards the construction of new homes in the county. Buying it was probably my family's way of dealing with survivor guilt.”

Others arrived while she was relating this story: Cadet Sulu and his husband Ben, Ensign Tiavro Dre from the Deans’ Office, Professor Abdulov who had stepped in to cover the Commander’s Advanced Subspace lectures. Dr. Khauri came with the Andorian Bovial Ch’ziaqis, who was Spock’s former Academy roommate.

Ensign Chekov put his head round the boardroom door. He waited until Sulu spotted him and waved, and then he came inside.

Cadet McCoy brought Captain Pike. Christine had reserved a space at the table for his wheelchair.

The black tea service had its intended effect. After she finished speaking, no new conversations began. Everyone sat down and directed their gaze to the table top. Some reached out for their place setting and ran a finger over the rim of a saucer, or leaned closer to study the leaf moulding. Christine wondered what thoughts the pieces prompted in each person.

Then Nurse Evans arrived with the teapot.

“Steeped for five minutes, Doctor,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied. “Would you pour?”

The moments which followed created their own, surprising sacrality. Christine picked up her PADD, intending to start their meeting, but the crackling stream of liquid from the spout, the chink of small spoons and sugar tongs and the dry sound of shifting porcelain – it seemed disrespectful to break into the music of this ritual until everyone had been served and communion achieved when all cups had been sipped. It was not logical, but oddly comforting.
“First things first…,”

Tapping sounds distorted Chapel’s words. Nyota lifted her PADD from the arm of her chair and adjusted the balance and volume settings for her earpiece. It seemed the doctor had forgotten her promise to keep her communicator open. In order to listen in on the meeting, Uhura had to open a channel from Med Bay to the conference transmitter embedded in the middle of the Phoenix Boardroom table.

She waited patiently through a storm of tea making noises, and used the time to roll her neck and massage a sore muscle in her right shoulder. In the bed beside her, Spock shifted his head on his pillow but did not open his eyes.

“We finally have a diagnosis.”

Nyota heard several people expel breath through their noses. Leonard McCoy made an identifiable grunt.

“Lieutenant Uhura,” Chapel went on, “are you with us?”

Uhura switched on her microphone.

“I am.”

“I can’t begin to pronounce the Vulcan term. Could you oblige?”

“Vi’mashaya P’pil’lai’ai,” Nyota replied.

“What?”

“The literal translation is ‘saturation of the severed bond’.”

Spock seemed to react to the sound of her voice. His lips parted. His fingers stirred and stretched inside the knitted mittens keeping them warm. Nyota reached out and curled her fingers inside the collar of his pajamas, to touch his skin with hers.

Doctor Chapel gave a dry cough. “Apparently a common condition. It’s taken this long to find out because the New Vulcan High Council could not agree a motion to share this knowledge with us. Several members insisted Spock should be brought to them, and treated by their healers.”

McCoy muttered something beginning with ‘damn’, and then the words became indistinct, as if he’d turned his head away.

“Oh, I agree,” Chapel said. “They can be beyond unreasonable. I thought it was bad enough two years ago, when we were begging them to help us understand Spock’s symptoms --,”

“Christine.”

Nyota held a breath, letting it out only when Captain Pike stopped his former CMO from breaking her pledge of secrecy.

“Anyway, we know that a considerable number of surviving Vulcans have developed the same condition since their home world was destroyed. Some showed symptoms immediately following
the disaster, others were days or weeks later.”

“So it’s a reaction to what happened?” Dr. Khauri asked.

“A reaction to bereavement, yes. Which is probably why the onset of illness is difficult to predict. So much would depend upon the individual circumstances.”

Nyota took back the hand that rested against Spock’s neck, before their psi contact could betray her reaction.

*But I should have known.*
McCoy’s voice was still angry.

“Did the Vulcan High Council see fit to tell us anything else?”

The tapping noise started again. Nyota guessed that someone, probably Doctor Chapel, was working with a PADD that lay close to the table’s conference transmitter.

“Not really,” Chapel answered. “Though in their defence, they weren’t attempting to hold back information. The path to recovery also varies. The only consistent symptom their healers have observed is temporary loss of short to medium term memory, particularly those events immediately before and after the trauma.”

It was illogical to envy that memory loss, but Nyota did.

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“Spacedock One, come in please.”

As the ship made it back to Earth without the aid of warp drives, Uhura hoped the gravel in her voice, the voice of a soldier who had not slept much for several days, would be mercifully disguised by some interference.

“Spacedock One, this is the USS Enterprise. Do you read?”

-USS Enterprise. This is Spacedock One-

A mechanoid reply. McCoy got a robot also, when he reported the number of injured and sent his requisition for medical supplies. And so did Engineering. Scotty opened a channel to warn the personnel working in Bay Five that there was external damage to the starboard neck of their ship, and advise them that all crew and rescued Vulcans would need to exit from the port side walkway.

Jim Kirk asked for an image of Spacedock on visual. And there was silence on the bridge when the structure appeared: the central, globe-shaped hub with its six bays fanning out like spokes. Five of them were shut down – their connecting structures all in darkness. There were no other starships in view.

Spacedock Two, one hundred and fifty-five kilometres further from their location, and usually presenting like a bright flower in the dark sky, could be identified only by its flashing perimeter beacons.

Androids greeted them as they disembarked. Androids directed them to the waiting shuttles.

Kirk assigned Nyota to pilot one of these craft, to get some of the Vulcans down to Earth. As her shuttle made its descent, and got below the Terran cloud cover, it was clear from her visuals how much damage had been done to San Francisco’s south peninsula. From the Golden Gate Bridge west to the Hotel Sugureta, the sea had scoured and washed away property at random, leaving dark, dull remains. Half of Nero’s drill platform had beached itself in the shallows near Presido Shoal, bedded its rim edge in the sand so that the broken interior stood out of the water.

The reception hall of the Vulcan Embassy was already cramped with other evacuees and stacks of Academy issue bedding. Donations, Uhura was informed. It occurred to her just how many
unneeded mattresses, pillows and blankets there would now be.

Staff would not permit her to accompany her passengers to any other part of the building. As she turned to go back the way she came in, just before she reached the main entrance, she heard a cry. Where it came from, she could not tell. The sound had travelled through the insulation of either the walls or the ceiling. But it replayed in her mind for the rest of the day.

She flew two more shuttle runs. Then the crew spent one last night on board the Enterprise, which kept the unavoidable at bay. The next day Admiral Barnett and Admiral Lui arrived with a senior command delegation. There were private debriefings; Uhura was scheduled for follow up medical and psychological assessments, allowed to change into civilian wear and sign her discharge form.

That done, she could beam down to a destination of her choice. Nyota put it off as long as she could. She waited several hours until Spock was also ready to transport. They chose coordinates which put them in the shared lobby of Messier Cluster 20. Then they shut themselves inside the North Axis apartment and lived on replicated food for three days. They did not so much as open the back door to enjoy the August sunshine or see the garden. Especially not the garden.
“Spock…,”

Soft though it was, Christine heard that name spoken and stopped what she had been saying in mid-sentence.

“Uhura,” she asked, “is everything okay?”

Christine could not interpret the noises broadcasting through the transmitter. She pushed back her chair, just in case.

“Uhura?”

“He’s awake.”

Spontaneous smiles appeared on faces round the boardroom table.

“Okay,” Christine said, “I’ll brief you later.”

“Thanks. Uhura out.”

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She was here. Here, after so long.

And so close. How did he manage to lose her, if she was this close? Hanger One had been crowded with so many cadets, so many identical red uniforms. In spite that, he easily located Sub-Lieutenant Jadillu, because the combination of her complexion and hair colour remained distinctive.

But no matter how he kept searching, circling round each shuttlecraft and checking the occupants inside, he could not find Nyota.

Now she was here. He could tell her about the table he had booked at Sreedharan.

Ceiling tiles. White ceiling tiles.

Nyota reached forward and touched his forehead. Her fingertips felt cold.

“It might hurt to talk,” she said.

He was not aware of any discomfort. He thought his words were clear; Nyota’s touch communicated a joyful reaction.

“I’m going to ask Nurse Evans to bring a compress,” she told him. "That might bring down your temperature."

She blurred momentarily, along with the ceiling tiles. He heard her speaking voice grow distant, and he called her. He did not want to lose her again.

Lieutenant Commander Gavin Evans wore white.

“What is he saying?”

Nyota’s reply was close by.
“He’s addressing you by rank in High Vulcan.”

“Good morning, Commander,” Evans unfolded a blue coolant gel cap. “It’s good to see you awake. Do you know where we are?”

Nyota’s face returned, and her touch. She smiled at him, slipped her hand under his neck to lift him off the pillow so that Evans could fit the gel cap over his head.

Pain.

“Sorry Commander, this won’t take long."

He could not operate his eyelids correctly, could not remember how. Eventually he felt the pillow behind his head and a considerable reduction in pain. While the rest subsided, Nyota’s voice was a helpful distraction.

“We brought you back to the Enterprise nine days ago. Doctor Chapel thought the best place was this private room in B ward, like the one Captain Pike has. And it’s perfect, very quiet. We have full atmospheric control. You have your own hygiene station and replicator, as well as a work console. Engineer Scott shuttled in this morning with an interesting set of telescopic table and chairs – I’m not sure what we’ll do with those yet. I brought your fire pot and meditation robes. Oh…."

His eyelids obeyed his desire at last and lifted. Nyota was only an arm and shoulder; the rest had moved out of sight. Then all of her disappeared.

He did not want to lose her again.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. I’m still here.”

Saintpaulias ionantha – commonly known on Terra as an African violet. The one Nyota held up for him to see had been planted in a square, fire clay pot peppered with ferrous spots, which he had chosen for the coffee table in his apartment.

“I believe you prefer some greenery in your accommodation. And don’t be concerned about the ones in San Francisco. Hikaru is looking after them and your garden.”

“Sulu.”

“Sulu,” Nyota confirmed. “I will put this back now.”

She left him alone with the white ceiling tiles. Lieutenant Sulu … during the Alpha Incognito simulation he began a new relationship, more successful than his previous one. He held a celebration in a white room.

“There.”

When she returned, Nyota touched his forehead again.

“Hikaru asked me if you could use an assistant gardener.” She found her statement amusing. “I think he would love to have a bit of space to cultivate.”

The white room had been inside the Stardome.

Spock believed he said the Standard word, “Engaged” and pronounced it correctly. But Nyota frowned.
“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Sulu.”

“Yes?”

Talking was not painful, but it was tiring. Spock paused.

“Sulu.”

He paused again.

“…engaged to be married.”

He closed his eyes and entered the white room.
The Rota

"He thinks the two of you are still engaged," Uhura announced to the boardroom, once they got her reconnected.

Hikaru saw some humour in it, and smiled. Ben blew out a shaky breath, tipped his head back and kept it there while he blinked at the boardroom ceiling.

"Well that confirms the memory loss," Christine said. "Lieutenant, I was telling the group about our plan for treatment, and how we want to involve them. We were just about to draw up a rota. No shortage of willing volunteers, but is there anyone you think should go first?"

Cadet Kirk leaned across the table, pinched a cube of sugar from the black Wedgewood bowl and popped it into his mouth.

Uhura hummed thoughtfully.

"We ought to start with someone who might trigger the recovery of Spock's memories," she suggested.

"Good idea," Christine agreed.

"Someone who was on board the Enterprise when Vulcan was destroyed."

"Umhum."

"And someone who, by their actions, provoked Spock's strongest reactions."

You could hear Kirk crunch through that piece of sugar.

"Uhura," McCoy spoke, "You oughta know that Jim Kirk was not a willing volunteer."

"He hates me," Kirk protested.

"The other Spock told you that Jim Kirk was his friend," Leonard said.

"That was in his timeline."

"He doesn't hate you," Uhura insisted. "He's just been too ... unsettled. Probably hasn't been relating well with anyone."

Christine bowed her head to glance at the PADD in her lap, and thought about the many conversations and messages she'd received since news went out about Spock's disappearance and his rescue. Had she replied to everyone?

Kirk folded his arms. "I'm not going to be the one you can blame if he cracks up. Not this time."

"Then I'll sit with him," Pike offered. "I'm not short of time these days."

Ben Song said, "We should --," before he had to stop and clear his throat. Hikaru took the unused napkin beside his saucer and pushed it along the table until it collided with the one his other half had left mangled and damp.

Ben tried again. "What if we showed him our wedding vids? They wouldn't be upsetting, but they
might make the Commander think about why he doesn't ..."

"Are you still blaming yourself for this?"

Kirk said it like an accusation, even pointing. Ben grabbed the table edge and shoved against it to force his chair back. Then he stood up and left the boardroom without speaking.

"Sulu?"

"Jim, he's not a soldier," Hikaru said. "Appreciate your concern, but could you lay off him a bit?"

"Ben is hardly going to help matters if he's got this neurotic --," McCoy began.

"Neurotic?" Sulu planted his elbows on the table. "Wait a second."

"Whatever," Kirk interjected.

Christine exchanged a look with the Betazoid Tiavro Dre, who simply rolled his eyes.

"Ben feels bad for insisting we get married in Vancouver," Sulu said. "He wanted to get away from all the sadness in San Fran. Now he wonders if that was being selfish."

"What do you think?" McCoy asked.

Hikaru shrugged.

"I think it's too soon to decide. In a year or two from now, who knows how it will all seem."

"Sounds eminently sensible," Leonard conceded. "Jim, nothing gets under your skin. Why this?"

"Bones, Captain Pike said he'd do it."

"Yeah, I heard."

"Gentlemen ...,"

Lieutenant Uhura's voice broadcast through the table transmitter.

"I have taken the liberty of sending a subspace hail to New Vulcan while you've been talking. There is someone on the line who would like to contribute an opinion."

Christine chided herself for checking her posture, as if she was going to be seen. She'd only met the 'other' Spock briefly, and he had been Spock, there was no question. Maybe the advanced years and added experiences had granted him something. She would need more time to judge, more than the seventeen minutes of conversation she got during his tour of the Enterprise. She would like more.
Because Spock's temperature had remained within normal range for twenty-four hours, Doctor Chapel believed that he ought to have greater visual stimulation. White ceiling tiles would not provide this.

She adjusted his biobed so that he reclined at a fifty-five degree angle to the horizontal. When awake, he could see three walls: the one on the left had a door leading to his hygiene station, and the one on the right (he was reliably informed) had a door which would take him to another part of his private suite where he could sit and move around, when he was ready.

He was not yet ready. He could not hold up his own head without assistance.

Consequently he was grateful for the third wall, the one directly in front of him. Yesterday Lieutenant Commander Evans fitted him with a wristband, a patient care device with a number of features. It allowed him to call a selection of contacts, adjust his mattress, regulate the room temperature, select audio files to play through speakers behind him.

He could have video projected onto the third wall. He tried this once, but found the experience overstimulating. He could not watch for more than a few minutes before his eyes seemed dry and his head hurt.

He preferred to use the wristband to transform the wall into a one-way viewing window, looking out at the corridor on the other side. Medical facilities needed to remain operational, whether or not the Enterprise was in service. This wall-sized segment of Med Bay revealed a small sample of everyday crew routines and interactions – there was a pharmaceutical replicator in his sights, as well as an adjoining corridor containing lockers.

The viewing technology muted colours and contrast; people and objects appeared in shades of grey. This suited him better, caused him no discomfort. Passing crew seemed to know when the viewer was operational, or else they worked on the presumption that it might be. They often waved or nodded in his direction as they went about their duties.

Cadet Kirk was evidently not familiar with this aspect of the care facilities on board. When he came into Spock’s view he stopped at the corner which turned towards the lockers and stared at the wall as if it were nothing more than a wall. His head was bowed and his hands fisted; he shifted his weight from foot to foot. He corrected his posture when Nurse Anand approached the replicator with a trolley and greeted him.

The wall technology did not provide sound. But Nyota could lip read. Sitting near the left side of his bed, her voice was sharp with irritation.

“He knows where your suite is. Doctor McCoy showed him.”

Spock saw Nurse Anand gesture as she spoke. She pointed at the wall behind her, their wall, then moved her arm as though tracing a path to the suite entrance. Kirk did not follow the motion. He kept his eyes on the nurse's face. He said something which made Anand drop her hand and smile at him.

“Oh, of course, he needs to arrange a date first,” Nyota said.

Spock frowned. His voice was weak; he should test his vocalisation in case he was asked a question.
“Kirk,” he asked, “is not reconciled with Gaila?”

Silence, he knew, could mean as much as speech. And as often as people spoke with him, they were just as often silent. He suspected they were trying to simplify their replies, and this was justified. He knew he had dozed off in the midst of receiving explanations.

“No,” Nyota replied softly.

During her silence Kirk walked out of view. He did not come into their suite as scheduled. Nurse Anand continued her work -- she logged onto the replicator, finished loading her trolley and waved to Spock before she moved away. Then the corridor was empty.

He heard Nyota sigh. She stood up and bent over him.

“Do you need more water?”

The cup resting on his over bed table was half full.

“No.”

“Are you warm enough?”

“Yes.”

She ducked down below the bed, presumably to check the catheter, though she had checked it four minutes and thirty-two seconds ago. Meanwhile Cadet Kirk reappeared in view, holding a ceramic cup. He leaned himself against the pharmaceutical replicator and sipped his beverage. Nurse Bristow came along the corridor and received his visual appraisal as she passed.

When Nyota stood up again, she faced the viewing wall. She drew a hand across her forehead, which likely disrupted her vision. That done, she let the elevated arm fall with a slap against her side.

“I don’t believe it.”
Handing Over

Lieutenant Uhura had finally finished telling him what a worthless excuse for a human being he was. Jim was now suitably prepared for even more enjoyable time in the company of Spock Junior. Or should it be Spock Version 2? Spock the Younger? Spock the Sequel?

He preferred the other, older Spock, the one who reminded him more of his paternal grandfather, the one who used let him get away with murder.

Except this once.

Before he followed Uhura into the recovery suite Kirk waved in the direction of what he now knew was a viewing wall. *Hope you enjoyed the show, Reconstituted Spock.*

Once they were both inside the suite, in the private sitting room, Uhura stopped at the table where she had a small suitcase packed.

“Okay,” she said. “Can I trust you to stay with him for the next couple of hours?”

“Yes, Nyota, you--,”

She lunged at him, and before he could evade her hand she slapped his face.

“Ow!”

“You…never…call me that. Never. Understood?”

He checked his reflection in the glass table top.

“You know, if word gets out that you beat up the volunteers, your supply is going to run dry.”

His face was fine; she hadn’t left a mark. When he looked up she had the suitcase handle gripped in both hands, but hadn’t lifted it. Her eyes were squeezed shut.

He could apologise, but he doubted anything he might say would work.

Uhura sighed.

“Kirk, I really need a break, okay?”

“Sure,” he said.

“I haven’t had a full night’s sleep since Sulu’s wedding. I’m on edge all the time, wondering when the tipping point will come, because it will. We know that much.”

She took in a long, slow breath.

“On New Vulcan, some of the first ones to show symptoms six months ago are still sick--,”

She drew her lips between her teeth and pinned her mouth shut, but that wasn’t enough to control the tremor in her jaw.

“Most patients recovered,” Kirk reminded her.

She gave a taut nod in agreement.
“You gonna sleep okay now?” he asked.

She opened her eyes and looked down at her white knuckled grip. In spite her best efforts, a single tear escaped and ran down her cheek.

“Doctor Chapel gave me some hyposprays.”

She lifted the suitcase off the table.

“You’re sure you’ll stay?” she said.

“I’ll stay,” he promised.

“Lieutenant Commander Evans is on call, and Captain Pike will relieve you at 1800 hours.”

“Then everything is covered.”

“The replicator is a bit slow,” she said.

“Don’t suppose time will be an issue.”

“But Spock is still nil by mouth, except water.”

“Noted.”

“There are extra blankets in that tall cupboard,” Uhura used her head to indicate the direction he should look.

“Okay—,”

“The duty nurse checks in every two hours. Med Bay’s computer monitors all his bio-readings, and it would probably raise an alarm before you realised—,”

“Uhura…,”

“—anything was wrong. If, if he does seem unhappy that I’m away, um, I could set my PADD to film me while I sleep. He could watch that. He likes to watch things that aren’t too, you know—,”

“Uhura…,”

“—taxing. You didn’t bring your own PADD?”

She checked his hands like she hadn’t noticed they were empty before.

“Did you want to borrow mine?” she asked, putting down the suitcase.

“No. That would be rude.”

“Rude?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m supposed to be company for someone who is recovering from the effects of trauma. That’s hardly the time to be checking messages or playing a game.”

Finally, finally, he’d done something right. She smiled, with her mouth only, but that was a start.

“So,” he said, “you can go now. Safe in the knowledge.”
When her mouth tried to smile a little more, it opened up more than she probably meant to. Tears welled in both her eyes.

“Jim...”

“Lieutenant,” he made himself sound stern as her sorrow spilled down her face.

“I should--,” she held up her hands, fanned herself, “--I should never have left him--,”

Since she probably couldn’t see him clearly, Jim grabbed her suitcase with one hand, and her arm with the other.

“Time for your nap,” he said.
Only when he returned, and was alone inside that private sitting area, did Jim dare touch the lobe of his left ear.

“Sorry to cut you off,” he said.

“Correction…,”

The Ambassador's transmitted voice sounded, no kidding, just like an inner monologue.

“Only your connection with me was muted, Jim. I could hear and see everything.”

“Oh...right.”

Another surprise. Like yesterday, when Kirk found out just how much San Francisco property the Vulcan Embassy owned: two apartment complexes, a gymnasium, the Orpheum Theatre as well as the former Library building on Larkin Street, where he met Ambassador Spock in secret.

“If I’d known Uhura would be so upset today,” Kirk said, “I would never have worried about us doing this.”

“Indeed?”

To try and reassure him, the elder Spock opted for the library’s third floor conference room with its display of antique microscopes. He set up a Zenith LOMO Biolam so Jim could see the implants. That had helped, a bit.

“In my timeline,” the Vulcan had remarked as he pushed the microscope’s stage clips away and released the slide, “this technology would be unknown until 2291. Therefore, I do not see how the Lieutenant could detect them.”

“You don’t know Uhura,” Kirk had said. Instantly, he regretted opening his big mouth.

The Ambassador had simply turned away, so he could replace the microscope in its cabinet.

“I knew someone very similar,” he replied diplomatically. “As it happens, she was credited with the invention of subcutaneous audio-visual communication. In the unlikely event Lieutenant Uhura discovers the means by which you will be ‘coached’ tomorrow, we may be able to placate her by sharing that information.”

A light, fixed above the door which led to the younger Spock’s bedroom, started to flash. Kirk sighed.

“Call of duty,” he said.

The implants could not communicate thoughts. Jim did not know how the Ambassador was reacting as they moved through that doorway together. But for himself, Kirk could not relate the patient he saw in the bed to the commanding officer who, six months’ ago, had pinned him against one of the Bridge consoles and brought him within a missed breath of suffocation. Spock looked like some life form in pupation. Medical insulation covered the biobed, quilting over everything but his face. His complexion was grey.

“Hey…,” Jim closed the door quietly. Did he sound cheerful enough? He put his hands inside the
pockets of his jeans and walked to the foot of the bed.

“I was just … helping the Lieutenant with her luggage.”

The whites of Spock’s eyes were shot with green, and glassy. Maybe he nodded. Or maybe the effort it took to swallow just made his head move in a similar way.

“… Cadet Kirk ...,”

“That’s me.”

Jim shuffled round to the far side of the bed, pulled out the visitor’s chair and sat down.

“You …,” Spock swallowed again. “You have interrupted your studies to come here?”

“No, no,” Jim said. “Classes broke up for Christmas last Thurs--,”

“--Jim,” the Ambassador’s voice warned him through the communicator, “we cannot be certain my younger self retains memories of events later than the 2nd of August.”

“Oh shit.”

Kirk covered his mouth. He watched furrows appear in the younger Spock’s forehead.

And he thought, ‘this is where he does his logical thing and starts to account for all that missing time. And the stress of trying to figure out what’s wrong, why he isn’t operating with the same mental calendar as me, it’ll make his brain implode and I will get the blame for guaranteeing he ends up with no memories at all, no power of speech, just the ability to grunt and blink and watch the view through his bedroom wall.’
Then Spock's forehead creases relaxed.

And his gaze drifted. It slid slowly away from Jim, flitted over the deactivated viewing wall before it finally settled on a particular spot. Spock appeared to be looking at the white silicon banding that covered the edge of the table over his bed. His focus remained there. After a while Kirk had to lean forward just to see whether the Commander had spotted a crack in the silicon, or a stain. But there was nothing.

So he checked Spock’s face again. The Vulcan’s pupils were fuller, the upper eyelids soft and relaxed. The eyes did not react to Jim's movements. It seemed safe to conclude that Spock was not staring with any intent, but simply staring.

That was good. Good, the more time they spent in the quiet, just him and Commander Spock breathing and nothing appearing to get any worse.

Several rapid blinks ended it. Spock made eye contact.

“Apologies,” he said.

“For what?”

“My ability to sustain …,” the Commander began, stopped, and started again. “To organise my thoughts – is diminished.”

Jim nodded. “Makes sense, since you’ve been unwell.”

“Doctor Chapel tells me this is why I should not be alone.”

“Sure, sure,” Jim said, going along with this explanation. Chapel told the briefing that extended solitude could be a trigger for the worst symptoms of Spock’s illness.

Silence, on the other hand, was safe. And that was just as well.

“Jim?”

The Ambassador spoke through the implant in his ear.

“I recommend you find a reason to spend a brief time in the sitting room again -- perhaps to replicate another beverage.”

***

“Coffee, Cornish Catimor medium roast, black, with five milligrams synth-sweet. Look, just get straight to the point and tell me I’m failing,” Jim said.

“Success in the context of treating mental illness is not easily determined.”

“That isn’t making me feel better,” Kirk said.

“I am no more certain than you how to proceed,” the Ambassador assured him. “But having observed my counterpart, I would not suggest attempting further conversation.”
“I can’t just sit --,”

“Would you ask the replicator to produce a deck of European playing cards?”

“Cards?”

As Jim removed his drink from the replicator dispensing tray, he was shaking his head. But he did as he was told.

“In my timeline, your counterpart enjoyed games of chance and strategy,” the older Spock said. “I am making an assumption you are the same.”

The replicator offered Jim a choice of designs for his deck. He glanced round the room, spotted the plant at the work console, and chose a selection of garden scenes.

“You and Kirk used to play cards?”

“No,” the Ambassador explained. “Jim Kirk and I played three dimensional chess. I found card games insufficiently challenging.”

The deck appeared on the tray, secured inside a wooden box which Jim had also selected.

“Well,” he said to his coach, “right now your younger self can’t hold a thought long enough to finish a sentence.”

“Which is why you will demonstrate how to play solitaire.”

Jim balanced his coffee cup on top of the box of cards, and then picked up both together.

“Solitaire is what I play when I can’t sleep,” he said.

“I know,” Spock replied.
Curious, the objects Kirk brought back with his coffee and set down on the table. Spock realised he had seen virtual images of them on several occasions, without knowing that they corresponded to a material reality – that is, to the oblong, laminated cards the cadet poured out of their container.

They were illustrated on both sides. His first lesson about conducting any card game was that only the images on one face were meaningful. The images of Terran flowers and shrubs were merely decorative.

What mattered about the meaningful card images differed from game to game. Solitaire, he was told, concerned itself with the numeric value of a card, not the suit depicted. Kirk laid out the suit of ‘spades’ in value order. Some elaboration about medieval European court hierarchy was necessary to correctly position the cards showing stylised human figures.

When Kirk added that the card containing a single ‘spade’ could either be valued lower than the ‘two’ or higher than the king’, Spock felt his eyes lose focus.

“That’s enough to get started,” he heard the cadet say. “So I’ll go ahead and play a few rounds – oh, round, that’s what each completed game is called. I’ll keep explaining as I go. Watch as much as you like and you can interrupt any time to ask questions.”

Spock did not want to fall asleep. The peculiar formation of cards Kirk began to lay down and rearrange intrigued him. He was pleased to find that he grasped the concept of solitaire after the first ‘round’. But the sounds -- the soft snapping and fricative slides and the barrage of clicks when the deck was shuffled — these were unusually soothing.

He knew he had failed when he opened his eyes and saw Captain Pike seated at the other side of his bed.

“Spock,” his commanding officer said warmly, “good to see you.”

“Maybe something simpler?” Cadet Kirk was asking.

Pike turned his head to look across the bed instead. “Simpler than rummy?”

“Yeah. Spock is still getting the hang of solitaire.”

“So what game do you want to play?”

“How about War?”

“War.”

The Captain was not familiar with the rules of this game. When Kirk explained, Pike seemed dismissive.

“Overblown Snap,” he said.

But they played this game. The pace, heightened by competition, helped to keep Spock attentive. He remained awake for two rounds. By round three, he could not see what more there was to understand.

He needed to clear his throat, to be sure of the quality of his voice.
“May I be shown another game?” he asked.

Pike laughed, and patted the bed cover where it fell over Spock’s right shoulder.

“See? You’re insulting his intelligence. Time for rummy.”

“You can only learn rummy by playing a hand,” the cadet insisted.

“He can look at mine.”

Cadet Kirk curled his upper lip, and started to gather up the cards.

“What?” Pike asked.

“It’s just not as good with two players.”

“Oh well, that can be fixed.”

Pike used his own patient wristband to contact Engineering, and asked for a lieutenant commander Scott.
Chris wondered why the new chief engineer of the Enterprise stopped at the threshold of Spock's bedroom door, instead of coming inside.

“Captain, captain --,” Scott said, and dipped his head respectfully at both Chris and Jim Kirk.

Jim was too busy to return the greeting. He was in the far corner of the room, trying to figure out how to assemble the telescopic table and chairs. It amazed Chris that Montgomery Scott could just stand there and watch, when clearly Kirk would take ages if he didn’t get some help.

“Now, you can say no,” the engineer held up his hands, “I won’t be offended.”

“No to what?” Chris asked.

“Sir, Keenser is standing behind me. He asked if he could join us.”

“Can he play rummy?”

“Yes, but I think you should know that the wee fella also belongs to three different subspace bridge leagues.”

“Sounds like he should be asking our permission to let you in. He’s got my vote.”

Spock had been struggling to keep his eyes open while they waited for Scott to make the long walk from warp core. Chris turned in his chair, intending to ask the Commander for his opinion. But his first officer was asleep.

“How is he?” the chief engineer asked.

“Good,” Chris replied, the way a captain should do, to maintain strong morale.

“Scotty --!”

Jim’s shout was followed by an almighty crash of metal on metal that rattled the bones. Spock woke with a sharp intake of breath. Chris grabbed the bedframe and used it to pull himself up and over the Vulcan’s face.

“At ease, Commander,” he reassured his second-in-command, and then called over his shoulder. “Mr. Scott, I think you should intervene over there.”

“Aye, sir.”

A few seconds later Jim came limping over to the bed, hand gripping one knee. “Spock okay?”

“Better than you, by the look of it,” Chris quipped.

Kirk stared at their patient as though he was waiting for something to happen. Chris felt his own leg begin to spasm.

“Oh,” he said, when he glanced down. The spasm was Keenser, who was tapping him repeatedly with what looked like two wrapped gifts. When Chris had lowered himself back into his chair, the Roylan laid the parcels in his lap.
“Well, well,” he said. “What are these?”

Keenser pointed at him, then across the bed at the still staring Jim Kirk.

“The wee man --,” Scott grunted, and Chris heard a clicking sound. “-- very keen to take part in festivities. Our last Christmas --,” another grunt, and another click. “We had no way to buy proper gifts. We wrapped two ration bars in my clean socks and gave them to each other.”

Chris chuckled. He checked the tag on the heavier parcel, and held it out across the bed.

“Well, Mr. Kirk.”

Why the hell did Jim have his head tipped like that, like he was hearing voices in his head?

“Kirk?”

Jim snapped out of his trance.

“Uh? Oh…oh. Thanks.”

“You can open them on here now,” Scott lifted the assembled telescopic table and set it down at the foot of Spock's bed.

The cards and Kirk's coffee cup were removed from the redundant overbed table so that Keenser could roll it away while Scott rolled up its larger replacement. Then the Roylan went to the other side of the room, to assemble two new chairs.

Chris could turn his attention back to the gift in his lap. He flipped it upside down to find a taped edge and used his thumbnail to carefully work that away from the rest of the wrapping. On the other side of the bed, Kirk was ripping the paper from his present with abandon and getting Spock’s full attention.

“I do not recognise this object,” Chris heard the Commander say, when Kirk placed his gift on the table top.

“It’s a snow globe,” Jim told him.

“A proper one,” Scott brought over the first of the new chairs and sat down. “Keenser did his research, and apparently it's only the ones from Austria that are still made with real glass.”

“So the interior is hollow, and filled with a glycerine solution,” Kirk continued his explanation to Spock, tapping the top of the globe. “That ensures the white particles settle slowly, and create an illusion of weather.”

“Weather?”

“Yeah, see --,” Jim lifted the globe and brought it closer for Spock's inspection. “The little figures inside depict a scene; that's a cabin in the forest. The particles --,”

He turned the globe upside down and then right side up.

“That’s meant to be snow coming down.”

Chris eventually unwrapped a coaster made from Betazed ubrelat. Keenser replicated a cup of coffee to show him what colours the crystal would produce in reaction to the heat. And then they got down to business. Keenser pulled up his chair, they opened the deck of cards and nominated
Kirk to be dealer. They played four rounds of rummy and the Roylan won them all.

Spock didn’t pay as much attention to the game as Chris thought he might. The duty nurse visited sometime during round two, and assured them that all the Commander’s bioscan readings were within parameters of normal. Spock asked for and drank a cup of water. But he seemed more engaged with the illusion of weather inside the snow globe. Kirk noticed it too. He made sure to shake his Christmas present every so often to create a fresh flurry.
The boom of a cruise liner’s horn woke Nyota. She stood up on her mattress so she could turn around and look through the narrow strip window over her headboard.

Fat, flitting flakes of snow were settling over the boats and houseboats in the marina, and on the boardwalks. It gave them a glow. That was her only scenery. The waters of Vancouver harbour, and the bright lights of the city's West End beyond that, were no longer visible. The density of snow falling from the sky acted like fog. It made the world seem smaller and simpler.

It took her back almost two weeks, to the day they went in search of Spock. Was this the reason he had abandoned the safety of his car in the midst of a storm and decided to keep moving on foot? In his increasing delirium, had the snow seemed like a way to obliterate reality?

Or had a little part of him still been rational, at least enough to consider that a vehicle with its hatch open would register with one of the many scheduled surveillance sweeps of the area and look very wrong, be a sure sign of his distress?

Ben and Hikaru had decorated this window ledge with a small wedding vidframe. Nyota picked it up. The device was locked in still mode, freezing the moment when the two men shared their first kiss as a married couple. Nyota saw herself standing behind Len McCoy, holding Ben’s bouquet of welded engine gearwheels and rivets. Hikaru had not dropped his flowers at that point, but his grip was failing.

In that image she was smiling, open mouthed, showing top and bottom teeth.

Was she ever going to feel happy again?

She unlocked the vidframe, let it play without sound. The kiss went on, and on and on and on. Hikaru dropped his bouquet and everyone laughed. McCoy said something like, “Life support systems at ten percent.”

The vid camera followed the couple as they let each other go and made their way back down the aisle. It zoomed over their heads to make the setting warmer by including the magnificent cedar pillars around the room. The film stopped when the wedding party had made it beyond the last row of seats, where tables were set for the reception.

Nyota put the frame back where she found it. Out in the harbour, the cruise liner blasted its horn a second time. Nyota remembered Ben’s remark when he described life on board a houseboat, how they never needed to set an alarm because the 7am departures for Hawaii did the job. But this must be the sound of a different excursion, one that left in the evening.

She scanned the marina for confirmation of her theory. There was another flotilla of houseboats that ran at a perpendicular angle to theirs. All windows with light were empty save for one, where a woman appeared for a brief look outside before she moved on.

She was wearing a dressing gown.

Nyota jumped off the bed, pulled her own robe out of the suitcase and left her room. Before she reached the end of the landing she caught the smell of coffee and galloped down the stairs.

Hikaru and Ben were in their kitchen. Instead of greeting her, or starting to explain why they had allowed her to sleep three times as long as she had instructed, they both said, “He’s fine.”
“Absolutely fine,” Sulu added. “I just finished talking to Doctor Chapel. Did you want coffee?”

“Who’s with him?” she wanted to know.

“Jim.”

“Jim Kirk?”

“Jim Kirk. He volunteered.”

Uhura wondered if she might be dreaming.

“Coffee,” she said absently. “Please.”
Nyota was ordered out of the kitchen, told to go relax in the lounge. Not energetic enough to argue, she turned and padded barefoot over the floorboards to an L-shaped sofa that faced the windows and a peculiar object that had been positioned like a focal point in one corner. When Hikaru brought her drink she had taken the seat that put her closest to it.

Sulu guessed what she was thinking. He stopped in front of the white silicate construct, tapped its central shaft twice. The multiple extensions branching out from it twinkled with dozens of implanted lights, red and green.

“We moved in too late to get a Christmas tree licence,” he explained. “Last week, when I checked Commander Spock’s garden, I was tempted to beam back here with one of his potted laurels.”

“Take one next time you go,” Nyota said.

Unprompted, the idea of a tree began to grow inside her mind.

Hikaru set her mug on the coffee table beside her. “How about some toast to go with this?”

She didn’t reply right away, because the tree was still growing. She no longer believed she was dreaming, but felt very dreamy.

“Oh. Sure, thanks.”

She could see tall cedars out the windows, and maybe they inspired the tree in her imagination. Hers was no seasonal decoration. Its limbs were stretching out crooked and tangled, its needles were stubby and dark, more black than green. And it kept growing, wildly. It was not meant to be indoors.

***

Spock woke, hearing faint noises he recognised. They were the sounds of Gamma shift ending, early in the morning, when staff gathered at the lockers, opened and closed doors, made conversation.

He blinked, used his wristband to add the lowest level light above his head, and looked around his room.

Cadet Kirk had moved the telescopic table against the viewing wall, covered it with blankets and made it his bed. He slept on his side, head bowed and arms clasped to his chest as if stopping a wound. The chairs remained where they had been placed by the four card players. Perhaps they would return.

The snow globe, surprisingly, was with him. It rested on the mattress against his left thigh. He could not recall asking to keep Cadet Kirk’s Christmas present. He gripped it by its gilded metal base and lifted the glass globe closer to his face. And then he tipped the object forward and back, twice in each direction, to make the illusion of snow.

***
Many trees. Nyota’s imagination was growing a forest, the floor of which was carpeted with half
dead bracken ferns, mulched leaves and snow. Not deep snow, not like the layer which came up to
their calves on the road where they found Spock’s abandoned car. And though more was coming
down, landing on her and McCoy and Kirk, they could still make out the footprints that headed into
the trees, bearing northwest.

***

Inside the glass globe, the artificial flakes of snow settled on the ridged pieces of silicate which were
coloured and shaped to represent coniferous trees. When too many flakes accumulated in a particular
location, they succumbed to their own gravity and slipped to the ground.

Spock shivered.

Chapter End Notes

Hi Readers, I will be flying to Australia today to get some sun over Christmas and New
Year. I will have a tablet and internet access, and I'm hoping I get so bored during the
24 hours of flying that I write several chapters for you!
Have a good holiday season, wherever you are.
VL
Happy holidays to all my readers, whatever or however or wherever you celebrate. May you love and be loved.

VL

And immediately after the shivering, Spock felt pain. Sharp, burning discomfort, confining itself to his lower abdomen -- and this feeling happened simultaneously with knowing that this was not the first time he had experienced such symptoms.

He tried to keep his focus on the snow globe. Its artificial landscape included a small timber dwelling with a single visible window. The craftsmen who painted the representation chose a primary yellow for the window pane, perhaps for its welcoming suggestion of light and heat.

Then a stronger spasm of pain caused him to shut his eyes. In his mind the snow remained. It swirled, as if driven by wind. It struck the windshield of his car -- the noise was like subspace interference. And he seemed to see the dashboard controls. The navigation system told him the road ahead was closed during winter, and the nineteen centimetres of snow, along with the untreated surface, would make driving impossible.

He allowed the computer to pull the car onto the shoulder and stop.

He did not determine his next actions quickly. The pain was increasing, and making it difficult to concentrate.

"Switch to hover capability," he said through grit teeth.

"Hover not recommended," the computer replied. "This motive is not equipped for high wind velocity and reduced visibility."

He felt exasperation. Surely his former Academy roommate, who sold him the vehicle, would have chosen a model capable of handling this weather? He would expect this from an Andorian.

"I must get to the mountain," he insisted.

But the computer had been unmoved.

"There is no road access to Mount St. Helens at this time. Please suggest an alternative destination."

"I must go."

"There are no facilities or personnel at the memorial site. The summit is still classified unstable by Washington State Parks Authority since the recent eruption --,"

Spock failed to hold back the "Ahh!" when pain like a blade sliced through him from hip to hip. He had pressed his forehead against the cool glass on the driver's side window.

He did not realise how weak he had become. It was not easy to contest the wind and force open the
car door. Navigation continued to issue information, its tone clearly designed to convey urgency. But he could not concentrate on the words over the shock of cold and the roar of the blizzard.

He could not wade through the snow more than a few meters, from the verge of the highway to the treeline, before he had to stop and rest, using the trunk of a conifer for support. It hurt to breathe.

It also hurt to stand still. His shoes had been chosen for a journey across San Francisco to the public shuttleport. That seemed a long time in the past and Spock no longer tried to calculate the interval because previous attempts had failed. Snow now encased his feet and melted snow soaked through his socks.

The pain in his abdomen reached a new threshold. Spock doubled over and retched, watched his saliva freeze before it could run down the leg of his uniform trousers.

He must get to the mountain.

He staggered into the forest. The trees became mobility aids -- he made his way by falling into them or pushing against one trunk in order to launch himself in the direction of another. Regularly he stopped to vomit, or try to. His stomach had nothing to expel except its own acids.

If he could just reach the mountain, if he could get to Seleya and find a healer, they would know what to do.
Search Party

"Oh the weather outside is frightful...,"

Ben's singing voice, coming from the kitchen. It put Uhura in mind of the snowfall that started as the reception meal ended and the head table left their seats to mingle with the wedding guests.

She had been chatting with Ben's mother, contrasting the linguistic structures of Korean and Japanese, when Jim Kirk interrupted.

"You were right," he said, and held up his communicator.

She knew immediately, though it had been yesterday morning, a remark she made after rehearsal. Both Leonard and Jim downplayed it, made a joke about Spock getting his Vulcan settings back to default now he didn't have a woman to distract him. They told her not to read much into the fact that he had not answered her messages or made contact himself since he left her at the shuttleport.

Either Jim had doubts later, or was advised to have them. Uhura took the communicator and spoke to Scotty, who told her what the Enterprise scans had found.

Then everything happened in a blur. As soon as they found McCoy, Jim told the Enterprise to beam them up. They gave up their wedding outfits for survival suits and within five minutes Scotty beamed them back down to the location of Spock's abandoned car.

"Any life signs?!"

Kirk had to shout to be heard over the wind. McCoy spotted the footprints first and left the road. They followed. At a place near the treeline the doctor stopped, pointed his tricorder and turned a careful three hundred and sixty degrees clockwise and back again. He paused several times to wipe snowflakes off the device with his sleeve.

"He's either out of range," the doctor yelled, "or hiding some place that blocks his signal."

Jim opened his communicator.

"Enterprise, can you get us a finer bearing?"

While they waited, Nyota began to follow the footprints into the forest. She did not like the uneven trail she found. Spock always moved with purpose; he did not meander. About fifty meters into the woods, she came upon a bigger breakup of snow. Had he stopped to rest? Had he fallen?

That's when she spotted a dark stain on the white covered ground, and crouched to examine it.

"Toast."

Uhura barely emerged from her memory to verify that her body was not in the same place as her mind. Hikaru sat down beside her on the sofa and handed her a plate with her breakfast. Ben called from the kitchen.

"I added some real cherry jam. You're not allergic to red fruits, are you?"

"No," she said.

Language was difficult to summon. In her mind, Nyota needed to finish her remembering. She
recalled Jim Kirk, when he caught up with her, got down to her eye level and saw the bloodstain too.

"Where would he go, Lieutenant?"

McCoy also arrived, scanned the blood and confirmed that Spock had been at this location within the last four hours.

"He would head for the volcano," she replied.

"Why?" the doctor wanted to know.

Why?

The threat of eruption was what brought her and Spock out of their seclusion. Seismic readings had been coming to space station Honshu while she worked there, indicating a build up of lava and gases beneath the north slope of Mount St. Helens. But Nero's attack, with its threat of global destruction, temporarily diverted attention. The next time data was checked, the situation had become critical. Honshu requested immediate assistance. The Enterprise crew were recalled to aid evacuation.

But that didn't explain Spock's fixation.

Shortly after they arrived on board, he volunteered to beam down onto the crater and activate a cold fusion device whose reaction would prevent an eruption. He said it was logical, since he would cope better with the high temperature. But the mountain never gave them the chance.

Few lives were lost during the mission, either civilian or in uniform. Yet when it was over, Spock surprised everyone by turning down his discharge. Instead he joined the Starfleet task force overseeing the clean up and management of people displaced by the eruption. It kept him away from San Francisco until classes began.

"I don't know why," she said to McCoy.

That was a lie. But the truth was not as critical as finding Spock.

"What did the Enterprise give us?" she asked Kirk.

"Scotty dropped us on the road because that was safest. Further on the tree cover ends and we'd be walking on the debris deposited by the eruption. That won't be stable."

"But that's where he is," she said. She stood up and started walking.
In the way that a crisis can distort perception of time, Jim experienced all these things as if they happened in the same moment --

- A loud crash jolted his mind and body out of sleep.
- A nerve-knotting noise that was nothing like Spock came out from Spock anyway.
- The Commander's arms punched through his biobed insulation and tore the material into pieces, flinging these in every direction

During the second moment, Kirk jumped off the table and bolted for the bed. And he clamped himself against one side of the Spock's mattress, becoming the only barrier that prevented the thrashing, bellowing patient from throwing himself onto the floor.

Pain registered in the third moment.

While the med computer, in its detached voice, assured him that help was coming, Kirk pushed his face into the mattress and swore. His feet had caught fire, somehow. That fire combined with several throbbing ribs that had slammed into the biobed frame, a burning shoulder where Spock hit the bone with the blunt force of an elbow and bruised shins, because Jim had used them to knock over the chairs that stood in his way.

After that, time sped up a little.

The computer continued to repeat, "Emergency Assistance is on its way, Emergency Assistance is on its way". Jim no longer knew whether his feet would agree to keep him standing. If he didn't make the pain stop soon he would need to scream. He used his arms to hoist his backside onto the bed, and tried to make eye contact with Spock.

"Commander?"

Spock had nothing left to destroy. His pillows had been swept away; his covers shredded down to his knees. He was shaking and swaying and his hands still searched for something to seize.

Then Christine Chapel burst into the room, followed by Evans. The doctor held a hypospray. Evans ran round to Jim's side of the bed and pulled up short, glared at Kirk like he was nuts.

"What the hell have you been doing?!" the nurse demanded, and pointed at the floor.

Jim looked down for the first time and saw the shards of glass, the puddle of glycerine solution mingled with his own blood and the tiny pieces of snow globe scenery.

"God, I don't --,"

But he did -- he did know. Leaving Keenser's gift on the bed had been his idea. Seemed to him that Spock found the snowfall soothing.

He wanted to apologise. But Chapel had just shot the Commander with whatever drug she had loaded into her hypo. The Vulcan's full weight fell against him. Evans called for back-up, and then grabbed Jim by both ankles.

"We'll just have to treat you both right here," the nurse said.
Two more nurses arrived. One of them sprayed his feet with neurosene while the other removed the embedded glass. They told him he would need scans to determine exactly what regeneration was needed -- foot injuries were tricky, apparently. In the meantime they sealed his cuts and wrapped his stompers in bandages. He looked like a bad case of gout.
Rescue

Chapter Notes

A happy 2018 to all readers, whenever the new year begins for you.

T'Shin would have reprimanded Nyota for tearing bite size pieces from her slice of toast, and for the pointless arrangement of them on her plate. She would have told her daughter to concentrate on eating – mental distraction did not aid good digestion.

Hikaru watched her from his side of the sofa, but said nothing.

When it was clear the Enterprise search party was not prepared for the post-eruption terrain, Scotty notified Skamania County Sheriff's department, who sent three hovercraft and six crew to rendezvous at the abandoned car. All of them knew Spock. His few weeks helping with Mount St Helen’s disaster recovery had earned him a nickname – The Volcano Vulcan – plus a hologram image at the court house memorial in Stevenson.

But Nyota did not expect the sheriff to nod in her direction when they met and call her “Lieutenant Uhura,” without being introduced.

Sheriff Lucy Honua assigned each of them to a different hover and they flew over the snow covered plain of volcanic debris. Onboard molecular compression sensors scanned the surface, and detected prints no longer visible to the human eye. They found and followed a trail, though in places it seemed distorted by other kinds of impact made on the snow.

“Why is that?” Nyota asked the sheriff.

“Loss of footing,” Honua replied. “Can't see much disturbance of the ground under the snow, so maybe the Commander wasn't walking so good.”

Uhura nodded. She and Honua exchanged a glance, but nothing more was said.

The hover with McCoy aboard found life signs first. They came from lower down, the place where a tangle of charred tree trunks, stones and ash had collapsed to create a long, jagged chasm. Snow had not had time to disguise its dark interior. Nyota watched the doctor being lowered by tractor beam into the rift. She took the hovercraft comms station to pick up his voice transmissions.

The second hover sent one of the Sheriff’s team down. They could hear both men describe the smell and the blackness, the charnel pit of burnt wood, frozen mud and animal remains. They were combing the sides of the chasm to find pockets or natural shelves where a falling walker might land. Life sign scans said they were getting closer.

Nyota didn't know whether it was relief she felt when McCoy finally called out, “Here!”

She put a hand on the comms console as if to steady herself, though she was strapped into her seat. She listened while Leonard described Spock’s condition as unconscious but stable and listed his injuries -- two broken ribs and a dislocated right shoulder, laceration across the body that had torn through his jacket. His left leg was buried up to the knee in rubble. The Sheriff’s man recommended they secure the Commander in a body harness and bring down another man to free the trapped limb
with targeted phaser fire.

Lucy Honua made a call to Scotty and to her office in Stevenson to update them. Then there was the long wait for Spock to be made ready for lifting. The only things transmitting through the comm were movement sounds and grunts.

“Wanna know how I know?” Lucy asked.

Before Nyota could remember what she meant by that, the sheriff went on anyway.

“The Commander got assigned to a room with the rest of the clean up volunteers at Shepherd's Rest Hotel in Stevenson,” Lucy said. "It's basic accommodation, no frills, and the replicators are terrible. One week in and I thought he didn't look a hundred percent. So I invited him back to mine for supper.”

Both women looked at each other again.

“I, uh, I may have said it so it sounded like ... more like a gathering.”

Sheriff Honua paused again. Nyota surprised herself by smiling, one side of her mouth only but that was the side the sheriff could see.

“Yeah, you get it. I figured he had to be single, right? And probably lonely. And everyone liked him; he was such a gentleman. Anyway, he was real nice about it, when he showed up and realised.”

This was a strange cure for the tension she felt. Uhura let the other side of her mouth smile.

“But just so you know, he made sure to tell me about you straight out. Especially about that Vulcan woman you fought -- talk about heavy hint. And showed me your picture.”

Nyota breathed in and out, deep and reassured. He had talked about her, about them. He had turned down a romantic overture. At that point she decided to reconsider all her doubts, all the things which had seemed like signs of the end or at least the beginning of the end. Maybe they were not where she thought they were.
Innocuous Noises

Chapter Notes

In case anyone should wonder, I did not chose my AO3 name knowing that I would mention the famous poem in this fic. Like so many things which happen in my stories, I don’t see them coming until they arrive.

VL

“Jim ...,"

Firstly, the Ambassador believed it was crucial to assure Cadet Kirk that their audio-visual link had not ceased to function while he'd been asleep.

“An innocuous noise – clearing your throat, for example -- could serve as a signal that it is appropriate for me to continue speaking.”

Jim's response was not entirely innocuous, and strictly defined the sound was a grunt. But in his defence, Kirk was attempting to adjust his position in the biobed while supporting the full upper body weight of the younger Spock.

“The drug Doctor Chapel has administered is likely an immobility agent. Spock will remain conscious and highly agitated, but unable to be a danger to himself or to you.”

He heard Christine preempt his next statement.

“Cadet, I need you to stay put, and try to talk the Commander down.”

It was then Jim cleared his throat distinctly.

“I cannot give more succinct advice than the doctor,” the Ambassador said through their link. “I have observed only two cases of Vi’mashya P’p'il'lai’ai, enough to conclude that patients are not rational at this stage. Human intuition will serve you better in this instance.”

With Chapel’s help, Jim managed to elbow and squirm until he and Commander Spock were both recumbent. The two young men lay on their sides, facing each other. When Kirk cleared his throat again, the Ambassador believed the sound was meant to convey some unease with his new situation.

This reaction was not unjustified. Commander Spock's eyes stared unblinking at his bedfellow and he was trembling. He spoke rapidly, though under his breath, a volume the audio receiver did not transmit well.

“Jim, could you move closer?”

"Seriously?” the cadet whispered. He cupped a hand to his ear, as if uncertain about his hearing.

"Seriously. The circumstances do not warrant levity.”

The Ambassador noted, with amusement, how Jim Kirk rolled his eyes. But the cadet was prepared to cooperate. He leaned towards the patient until their noses all but touched.
"Hey,...Spock.  Spock, it's Jim Kirk."

The younger Vulcan's mutterings became audible, and as his older counterpart recognised the words he bowed his head a moment to process the pain.

"Jim," he said as soon as he felt able, “The Commander is speaking in Vulcan. He is reciting a translation of the early twentieth century English poem, ‘Vitae Lampada’."

The cadet looked unmoved, and seemed to be waiting for elaboration. Unlike Admiral Kirk, he did not appear to be familiar with this work.

“In summary, it is an exhortation to remain engaged, no matter how hopeless --,"

On Delta Vega the same poem had spontaneously come to the Ambassador's mind, as he stood and watched the Vulcan home world collapse.

The river of death hath brimmed its banks..., "Spock?" Kirk was trying again to get the Commander's attention.

The Ambassador retained enough presence of mind to consider how rarely these intersections of memory happened, between his timeline and this one. When he met Sarek on New Vulcan, he had declined the latter's offer to mind meld. He felt obliged to explain how different the relationship with his own father had been, and the resulting dialogue proved mutually enlightening. But of all the information Sarek related concerning Spock's childhood, none matched his experience exactly. Even the decision to join Starfleet seemed more impulsive.

“Spock...?"

The Ambassador realised Kirk might be addressing him as much as their patient. He would not wish to cause confusion at this critical juncture.

“Jim, I have complete confidence in your ability. I will close the link on my side, so that you are not distracted."

***

"Spock!"

Doctor Chapel loomed over the biobed.

"Mr. Kirk, you've demonstrated you're on first name terms with the Commander. Now please try and get him calmed down."
Spock heard someone call his name several times. The voice was muffled by bitter winds which had set on him like predators, slashing his ears. He could not respond. White was the only thing his eyes perceived, white so intense it made his whole head throb.

On Vulcan, white is ..., 

Vulcan is not.

Is NOT.

There is no white there, only the blackness which swallowed history whole, and the present while it still moved. And then came the tearing – in the deepest parts of him the red curtain with blue threads burned from the centre outwards. Ashes were scattered across his soul. Mother's sash lashed tight over her face and throat while her skin blistered and melted.

And he tried to swallow his own screams, which was only what every other survivor did. They succeeded. He failed.

"You are a child of two worlds...;"

Meaning?

That he was a lost cause to his father's people. His humanity would always undermine his mental control when control was paramount.

"I am grateful for this, and for you."

Grateful – the best that could be expected. For Sarek, Spock provided the perfect memorial of his second bondmate. He had mother’s eyes, and perhaps his failings were indulged at his time of crisis only because witnessing them gave his father comfort.

This is what Spock had to assume. Sarek may have said the word ‘love’ in relation to Amanda Grayson, but that emotion itself remained locked away securely, along with all others, whatever they were.

"Spock!"

Persistent, this voice. It was more audible now, and not deterred by his continued silence. Who would care enough to keep calling?

Nyota? Even with wind distortion, it did not sound like her.

She should leave him. He had been nothing but a burden since the Enterprise returned them to Earth. She had to nag him to eat, to sleep, to battle against himself in a never ending war, when neither of them knew what victory would mean, or if it could be achieved.

Or was it the Ambassador who called? Nyota did not understand why he suddenly stopped referring to the refugee who came through the singularity as ‘Spock’.

"In this case, do yourself a favour...;"

The shameless use of Terran idioms, facial expressions, deception. Had he truly believed, once, that
this was a model he should emulate?

“Put aside logic. Do what feels right.”

He had been shocked by the suggestion, initially, yet later the thought was strongly attractive. To reconcile with his emotions, change the dominant architecture of his psyche, might provide the chance to relegate his failures – as Vulcan, lover, son and Starfleet captain – to the past. He could remake himself, start anew.

Such a stimulating but stupid idea.

From the day he began to consult his feelings they became multiple, contradictory tyrants. He had no basis to judge whether the demands of guilt should overrule those of desire, or whether the blackness that sapped his energy constantly should infect his responses to well meaning individuals, particularly the woman these same feelings insisted he loved.

And when all that damage had been done, and appeared to be nothing but more failures to add to those already accumulated, he had nowhere else to go. Indeed, he did not want to go anywhere, least of all to Vancouver for a wedding.

"Hey Spock, you're okay now, yeah?"

He was not. Only the blinding white had improved, if improvement it was, by turning grey. And through the grey Spock could see, as if through a San Francisco fog.

There was someone with him.

“You're okay. You're with me, right, Jim Kirk, that pain in the ass cadet and maybe I'm no better now, but I'm gonna stay with you, okay?”

The features were indistinct, but resembled those of Cadet Kirk. This man had no reason to seek him out in this horrible place, or stay. It was the height of irrationality, and thereby Spock could be certain of Kirk's identity.

What should he do?

“Spock, I get that it's not a good time to talk. And you don't have to talk to me. But just ... just let me know that you're there, okay? If I—if I put my hand on yours, briefly, can you do that Vulcan thing, you know, where you connect with me? Everybody is asking me how you are. I gotta tell them the truth.”

Spock watched Kirk's hand come forward, grow clearer as it drew nearer. What impelled this cadet to so many acts of madness? Skin to skin contact would burn with his anger, confusion, black desolation. But what could he do to stop him?

Nothing. If he had strength, movement and speech he doubted they would make a difference no matter how employed. Jim Kirk was the most exasperating example of stubborn, human –

"Because you needed each other...,”

Kirk need him? Absurd. Jim Kirk needed no one, was his own best friend.

And yet the outstretched, human hand continued to advance, until the fingers were poised over Spock's knuckles. There was warmth – perhaps the heat of Kirk's daring. This was probably a game to him.
And then Spock was touched.

"...a friendship that would define you both, in ways you cannot yet realise."
Forgotten Toast

Chapter Notes

“Thasek” is the Vulcan word for breasts. Sourced from http://www.starbase-10.de/vld/ - many thanks for their assistance.

"Shok" - my own invention, from Chapters 15-18 of ”The Architecture of Emotion". I have copied an extract below:
“...There is a modern Vulcan word for the phenomenon, but its meaning has changed. She will say 'shok' to describe a kiss. Were she able to study the Nataki and Insular Golic texts up to the third century, she would find the same word referred to the effect of a kiss. In addition, Nataki built compound words, to compare the potency of kisses. Shok bru-lar, a kiss on the lips, gave the mildest stimulation. We have found written debates concerning shok ka-luk, shok thasek, shok coi’a and shok nehg, as to which of these kisses – applied to ears, breasts, buttocks or belly, was stronger, and to what degree. But regarding shok kotic and shok ko-lok, there was unanimity. These had no equal. The first century poet Se Jylk Sketes called them 'the surest way to sweet oblivion'."

Nyota picked up one of her torn pieces of toast. The bread, having waited some time for her to return to present reality, had turned cold and tough. But the cherry jam was wonderful.

Wonderful and tough – poignant words in the context of her memories as they continued to distract her. The evening before they were meant to leave for Vancouver, Spock unexpectedly extended their good night kiss, and slipped his arm around her back. It had been so long. Nyota let joy override all her other reactions. It streamed from her fingertips as she stroked his jaw and combed into his hair.

But part of her knew. Spock pulled her off the mattress and laid her body on top of his. He held their kiss as long as she would let him; his skin did communicate a hunger. Yet the rest of him seemed to lag behind, and only when she encouraged him with a hand slipped inside his pajama shorts did his lok swell and the flavour of their psi exchange feel sexual.

“Thasek ...,”

The first thing he murmured when she finally paused their kiss. So Nyota rolled off him and caught the hem of her vest. His head pushed against her hands, and she only managed to draw the top up as far as her armpits. He suckled as if she had real nourishment to offer, and then she began to sense another emotion coming through with the heat of his mouth.

The feeling went down her thighs and made the skin twitch, so much she had to fight the urge to throw herself off the bed and run, run hard like a hunted animal. It stopped as soon as Spock released her breast and hovered over her nakedness. He waited there, just staring and breathing. Then, after maybe half a minute, he looked into her eyes and apologised.

He left the bedroom and did not return. In the morning she found him contorted to fit the confines of his sofa in the lounge, and wide awake.
She figured it out during the flight to Vancouver, but that wasn't much use. By that point she was alone.

Spock had put their suitcases in the car, drove them to the shuttleport, parked in their reserved space and removed her luggage from the trunk. She thought it was odd how he paused then, with the car still open, called up their tickets on his PADD and transferred one to her.

“I regret that I cannot continue with our plans and accompany you,” he said.

She reached out, but stopped short of touching. Even so, something must have emanated from him so strongly it could jump the gap, because her legs were tormented by that twitching again.

It was no problem, with that kind of burning restlessness, to tell him, “It’s fine” and then flee across the parking lot into the Departures terminal.

He had not wanted sex. He had wanted _shok_.

The twitching had felt like desperation – panic, maybe? It didn’t matter whether or not she identified the best word. She knew he was poised at some kind of juncture where he had to make something happen, get away from himself, or closer to something else. She told herself the time he now had, to be on his own, would probably make that easier. But who was she trying to fool?

“Uhura?”

Her toast! She checked the plate on her lap, and wondered when she had taken the other bites. And Hikaru had left the room; he was calling from the kitchen.

“Here,” she replied.

“Urgent message from Doctor Chapel. We need to get you back.”
Nyota was forced to have a shower first. Literally, Hikaru pushed her into the hygiene station and locked the door, while she fought him to force it open again.

“We are wasting time!!”

Sulu’s voice was flat. “Doctor specifically said, ‘Do not rush’.”

She shouted Romulan obscenities, which the shower sonics likely distorted. It had started, the awfulness had started. She shut herself inside the shower stall and cried because it was safe to cry there. After this she would need to be strong, strong enough bring Spock through his recovery, strong enough to accept the truth if recovery was not possible, or if what ‘recovered’ was a shadow of the man she thought she would stay with the rest of her life.

The irony tasted so bitter. Number of serious relationships in her life: two – Emmanuel Francis Kasembe and S’chn T’gai Spock. Number of partners damaged by tragedy: two. Number of partners she was prepared to look after perpetually, never having them as an equal partner and with the distinct risk of limited career options, frustrated underemployed brain and sexual relief provided only by technological means …. 

Hikaru knocked on the hygiene station door.

“Clean uniform on your bed,” he called, “and a lunch box.”

“Lunch box …,” she muttered angrily.

Doctor Chapel had a lack of urgency which infuriated her more. Christine met Uhura in Enterprise Transporter Room One, but instead of taking her to Spock’s suite, they detoured into the CMO’s office.

“What are we doing?” Nyota asked.

“I need a favour,” Chapel said.

She went to her desk and urged Uhura to bring the visitor’s chair round and sit beside her. Nyota shook her head, disbelieving.

“You told Sulu that Spock was remembering.”

“He is. McCoy and Evans tell me that’s proceeding as well as can be expected.”

“I need to see him.”

The doctor gave her a look only a doctor would dare – presumptuous about what was important, impervious to argument, with a cosmetic smile that did not disguise that god-like assumption of power or provide reassurance. Chapel went on talking as though she’d never been interrupted.

“The messages I’ve left for Spock’s father haven’t been answered. So I don’t know whether or not he knows his son is ill.”

“Okay.”

“I wonder whether Ambassador Spock might know where Sarek is?”
“I would just ask him.”

“Would you mind?”

Polite entreaty did not suit Chapel at all.

“You can speak Vulcan; you know him better than I do. He’s probably so busy, and if the call happened to interrupt anything and it was me – well, I really would not want to antagonise. I know Vulcans don’t show emotion but he could be vital to our treatment decisions going forward. Better maybe if you were to establish a contact on my behalf. I think it would take some of the – what? Some of the awkwardness out of any future conversations.”

Uhura pursed her lips. She wouldn’t have credited the doctor with a weakness for nervous babble.

Well, if the measure was number of minutes spent talking with him then yes, she knew the one hundred and fifty-five year old Ambassador better. Luckily for Chapel, Nyota hardly credited that knowledge. She could do with more.
Beaming Down

Never touched.

We haven't touched, not yet. So what the hell was happening?

“… Bones …,” Jim called out.

“That’s me,” the doctor replied from his place at the foot of Spock's bed.

“Ahh …,”

Nightmares, the ones where Jim needed to run away but couldn't lift his body off the ground, couldn't feel his legs below the knees. The ones that made him sick with fear but swelled his tongue inside his mouth so the only sound that came out was breath, his last, rasping breath —

“Jim?”

“… hah …,”

“I'm scanning him, Doctor,” Jim heard Nurse Evans say.

“He in shock?” Leonard asked.

“Nothing indicates --,”

“--why’s his hand stuck in mid-air?”

Because it couldn’t get closer. Force field emotions from Spock held Jim back; they blasted out like a starship’s warp stream, brittle cold down to the nerve endings in his fingers. What now?

“Readings are normal,” Evans said.

“Jim,” Bones was leaning over him, close to his left ear, “Try and say something again. What’s wrong?”

“Ush …,”

No use. No use, no hope, no point. Bones, if you could feel -- it’s so fucking colourless and cold. The whole room is cold, isn't it? Cold and running out of air, the room is shaking and her face just turned to me, turned and I saw fear in her, the last feeling she knew was fear, and she died alone, she ….

Who? Who was this?

“Jim, show me something,” McCoy said, “anything.”

Did he?

“I saw him blink, Doctor.”

“Not much to go on.”

“We should try and move his hand before it cramps.”
Jim watched McCoy finish what he could not, press his outstretched hand down until it landed on top of Spock’s pale, trembling fingers.

That was the cue for strange wisps of light to appear and whiz back and forth in front of Kirk’s face. Some seemed to turn and stab him through the eyes. And he could swear his ribs itched – the exact sensations that went with being transported. That, and the way everything surrounding him faded out and disappeared.

Ordinarily, beaming down into the unknown was supposed to involve some preparation: surface scans for life signs, consultation of Starfleet databases, and a communicator link with someone shipside who could advise about terrain, weather conditions, somewhere to shelter. It was never completely unchartered territory, and you were never really alone.

Could this, where he was now, even be called a place? He looked down but saw no surface, no Jim Kirk either. He saw blistered, liquid colour, shades of destruction, a festering tar. For a split second, he saw his own face reflected back. Or did he? He felt no connection to the other parts of his body, like hands, so how could he be sure he had anything else?

What about a voice?

“Spock?”

The sound played across the liquid in ripples. The ripples expanded out in ever widening circles, out beyond vision. Jim wondered if the small waves might lap up on a distant shore, the one he was trying to reach.

“Spock … ? If we could just, just get together. You know how to do this better than I do.”

He felt returning waves. They passed through him like a sub-woofer on its lowest playing frequency, and the symmetry of the ripples broke. A million small puckers jostled the surface.

“Okay, okay. So hopefully that’s you. Can you show me anything else?”

Increased agitation – ripples became tiny spikes of liquid. Jim began to feel feelings that never troubled him as far back as he could remember. He never yearned for anyone’s approval. The acceptance of others was nothing compared to the acceptance of himself.

He never doubted his own mind. Why should he? But now he felt contradiction, a split. Split? How could two minds operate within the same person? Surely that wasn’t possible.

The liquid spikes grew sharper and broke free, spattering him.

What Jim felt next he did recognise. The void. The absence. The sensation of being hollowed out inside but presenting as if you were filled, like normal people, when you were no better than a shell.

The worst time to be without a father was when Jim turned thirteen, that threshold where childhood begins its learning curve towards the adult. He wanted to establish the true identity and potential of James Tiberius Kirk. But he had no benchmark. His mother failed to see that, at best, she was only half the picture.

Stupid, but having no father worried him, like he might not achieve manhood, not fully. It felt like something strangers could tell just by looking at him.

“And then,” he said, the words bursting out, "you had to go and announce it to everybody in the assembly hall. ‘You of all people should know, Cadet Kirk. A captain cannot cheat death’. What
was that about? Why say it? Did you -- did you honestly think I would need reminding? Damn it Spock, you weren’t just stating facts; you were stabbing me right where it would hurt most. You might as well have cut me down the sternum and pulled my ribcage apart!”

All fell still. The emotive soup rocked with residual motion which gradually slowed. In the calm, Jim realised what he’d just done.

“Shit.”

In the absence of a body, his guilt and anxiety about what would happen now couldn't be channelled into futile gestures. So time went by.

“This was supposed to be about you,” Jim said at last.

The ripples of his words barely rose on the liquid before they died.

“You know, the other Spock keeps insisting I’m the person who will make a difference in all this. Can you believe that? Just because the Jim Kirk he knew was his best friend, could read him like a PADD display, had some intuitive link or whatever ... I mean, it doesn’t follow that we --,”

“Cadet Kirk...,”

In the still lake of their connection, Jim saw the Commander’s face looking back at him.
The Ambassador said he would close his connection with Cadet Kirk. And he was good to his word. He deactivated the implant link on his PADD, stood out of his chair, and walked across the conference room of the library to check the comms display next to the microscope cabinet.

If he were dealing with the Jim Kirk from his own timeline, it would be understood that closing the link was one thing, and *keeping* it closed another. The Jim Kirk he served alongside could usually second guess his second in command. He would know Spock needed to disengage so that he could plan a strategy which would get them out of danger. That Kirk would be confident he had not really been left alone.

Whereas the present version of James Tiberius would almost certainly be unhappy with him now. That was an unfortunate necessity.

The comms display had messages forwarded from the Vulcan Embassy. One was from Lieutenant Uhura, on behalf of Doctor Chapel. The other was encrypted, not once but several times over, code within code. He and the sender had agreed the additional security measures to ensure privacy.

It had been his intention to share the contents of these coded updates with the younger Spock.

He made four attempts – on Terran dates 7th and 28th October, 9th and 18th November – to contact the Commander by subspace video link, accompanied by as many written messages. The confirmed diagnosis of *Vi’machaya P’pil’ai’ai* might explain the lack of response. But Spock did not find that sufficient justification. His checks confirmed that the Commander was carrying out his duties with no symptoms of illness as late as the 2nd of December.

Vulcans neither neglected nor forgot social obligations. The logical deduction, therefore, was that the Commander did not want to speak with him.

On 22nd November, representatives from an Arcturian aid mission sought and obtained a meeting with him at Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco. His command of the visitors’ language was passible, and the mission leader spoke fluent Standard. Nevertheless, he requested the services of Lieutenant Nyota Uhura as translator.

Lieutenant Uhura – he touched the comms display to open her message, read it through and noted the irony of the situation with a half-smile.

Uhura received the same expression when she thanked him in High Vulcan for providing her with an opportunity to *practice* (her stress on the word) Arcturian. She had greeted the mission when they arrived, and wished them a safe journey home on their departure. In between, throughout the entire six hour meeting, Standard was spoken and she had nothing to do.

She gave him a questioning look when he asked if she would join him for dinner. But she accepted the invitation. And since he could not rely on his memories of San Francisco in the 23rd century, Uhura also suggested a restaurant – the Sreedharan in North Bay.

“I believe you would find the food satisfactory,” she said. “And there is considerable space between tables, so that conversation is unlikely to be overheard.”

Where conversation was concerned, she put them in no great danger of revealing anything.
Uhura admitted something had created antipathy in her Spock towards the Ambassador. What that something was, she claimed not to know. Yet he wondered, as she failed to take much interest in the dish she recommended he try and ordered for herself, as she gave vague answers to his enquiries about her life before Starfleet, as she repeatedly avoided eye contact, whether she and the Commander shared the same, mysterious dislike of him.

Before he endeavoured to understand or alleviate any hostility, he would make use of it. Trying to calm the younger half-Vulcan would take Cadet Kirk out of his depth. Ambassador Spock gambled on frustration overriding discretion, so that Jim would reveal exactly how he had been pressured into his position, and how much he resented the person who applied that pressure.

Then just like Nero, the Ambassador would become a common enemy against which Kirk and Spock could unite.
“The, the circum--circumstances …,”

Broken thoughts and struggles for words seemed to hamper Spock’s ability to speak telepathically as much as audibly. Jim waited for him to try again.

“…circumstances … which led …,”

Jim Kirk finally had to prompt the person he could see through their strange, liquid connection. "Circumstances which led to ...?"

“…destruction…”

“Destruction of Vulcan?”

The image dipped its head and shuddered.

"Okay," Jim said, "and those circumstances ... did they ... um ... did they --,

“Changed ... changed us both,” Spock said at last.

Yeah,” Jim agreed. “Hell yeah. I wouldn’t be half as fucked up --,” he stopped himself. “Anyway, I bet you think about it too. About how it all started with one person’s decision. Am I right?"

Spock’s image swallowed, shut its eyes. “Yes.”

“And, don’t get me wrong, Commander, if the other Spock hadn’t been on Delta Vega, I would have been chewed pulp inside a Hengrauggi’s gut. But what if he’d never created the black hole in his timeline? He told me himself, he said ‘billions of lives lost because of me. Because I failed.’ If it weren’t for him, I would have known my father. Maybe I’d be less of an asshole – that’s Leonard McCoy’s opinion, by the way. Maybe I wouldn’t have pissed you off enough to send me to Delta Vega --,”

He needed to stop talking soon. Listening, that’s what friends were supposed to do, right? Huh.

“And Vulcan would still be here,” Jim finished his rant.

The image of Spock had teeth clenched, eyes shut and seemed to be rattled by regular convulsions. Jim hoped what he had said would do something, but it wasn’t enough. The Commander choked, gasped, tried to speak.

“Then I – I, I failed. I --,”

“No, Commander – that is not how it is --,”

“He is – me.”

“No, Spock, listen --,”

“Both -- failed …,” the image was breaking up. Shadows from nowhere were casting themselves on the surface of the liquid.

“Spock, listen to me! You are not the same person he is. I am not the same person he thinks -- shit,
he thinks Jim Kirk is the best thing that could happen to you. He has no idea how different we are. Just because he can’t live with his own guilt doesn’t give him some right to turn our universe into a replica of his. You don’t have to carry that burden, Spock, do you understand? You don’t have to feel responsible for any of it, you don’t have to like me or even stand the sight of me. If you want, I’ll leave now and get someone you really want to be with, like Lieutenant Uhura. How about that? Would you like me to go find her and bring her here instead?"

The tar was sluggish to the point of standstill. But not entirely – was Spock still there, buried beneath it? Was he trying to push his way to the surface, but couldn’t?

“Spock?”

Hand. Jim could feel, for the first time, his own warm hand resting on top the Commander’s cold one. He felt his arm right up to the shoulder. Was that a signal? Should he try to open his eyes? Call for someone?

“Spock?”

The Commander’s voice honestly sounded like it came from the back of a cave, or from under all that fetid slime.

“Do not leave.”

Jim was sure those were the words he heard.

"Please."
With one hand, Christine grasped the teapot handle. The other hand patted its porcelain belly, just under the spout, to confirm what she expected. The contents had gone cold.

Cold, mind you, might be just what the doctor needed. What with the exertion and tension of treating Commander Spock in his overheated room, frustration trying to locate his father again, resolution when faced down by Lieutenant Uhura on the other side of this desk – Christine could feel the sweat on her face had dried at last, but not the dampness under her arms.

She lifted the pot off the tea tray and filled her cup.

Her feet had already been freed from the hot confinement of her boots. She carried the cup over to her examination bed, sat down on the mattress and squirmed around until the wall was her backrest and she could crumple the disposable blue coverlet with her toes.

But the tin of Abernathy biscuits was now out of reach, still on the tray with the lid removed.

When she realised she had forgotten the best part of her tea break ritual she gave an exasperated grunt. She drained her cup and heaved herself off the bed to start again. More tea, cup on saucer, Abernathy biscuits (two) tucked onto the plate also. Then the doctor scanned her desk things carefully, to be sure she wouldn't leave behind anything else.

PADD. She would take her PADD.

Getting back on the bed with both hands filled took longer and was even less elegant. Christine kept an eye on her office door, but no one rushed inside to catch her shifting her hips to untwist her twisted skirt or scratching her left ankle with the edge of her PADD.

She indulged in twenty-five seconds of pure, limp relaxation with eyes shut. Then she lifted her cup and dunked one of the biscuits in the cold tea.

That was when the communication hail came through.

“Doctor?”

It was Ensign Chekov. Christine’s mouth was clogged with crumbled cookie, but she managed to press the reply function on her PADD and reply, “Umhum?”

“I have Ambassador Spock on a subspace channel.”

She swallowed thickly. “Put ‘m through.”

“Sir, he is requesting immediate beam up. He wishes to respond to your message in person.”

“Oh God,” she muttered behind what was left of her biscuit.

“Sir?”

Christine took a swallow of tea to clear her mouth.

“Ensign, if you could detain him in the transporter room a minute, I’d really appreciate it.”

“Yes, sir.”
She got off the bed, hooked the coverlet with her left pinkie and dragged it away with her. She returned to her desk and dropped the blue paper, along with her PADD, on the chair. Next, the cup and saucer went back on the tea tray. She clamped the lid over the biscuit tin. Then Christine stepped behind her chair, opened her locker and retrieved her boots from the bottom shelf. She hid the tray in the space they left vacant.

Before she discarded the coverlet, she adjusted the mirror she had fixed inside the locker door and checked her face, using the blue paper to blot the shine off her nose and chin and forehead.

Her hair, she decided, was a lost cause.

Chekov was obviously no master of diversions. The Ambassador rang her door chime while she was pulling on her boots.

“Come,” she said as she stood straight.

The elder Spock stepped inside and assumed the characteristic Vulcan stance, hands clasped behind his back. Christine got a second chance to gauge her reaction. What was it?

“Doctor Chapel.”

There – the way he said her name. The vowels lengthened ever so slightly, not a drawl, but verging on it.

“Ambassador,” she said, “I never intended to make you interrupt your work.”

He dipped his head a moment, and this was inexplicably charming. Safe from observation, Christine rolled her eyes at herself. What was she now, forty-three? That was a little old for crushes.

Spock looked up at her again and no, she didn’t think she was seeing what she wanted to see. His mouth held its straight line but the muscles on either side of his face twitched, putting dimples in his cheeks and more wrinkles around his eyes.

“I felt it was time to observe the Commander’s condition first hand,” he explained.

There, she told herself. It’s not about you, so stop acting like a lovesick fifteen year old. She would have talked herself into that as well, if the Ambassador hadn’t stepped closer to her desk.

“It seemed only logical to address your enquiry at the same time.”
It wasn't so bad. It was the opposite of bad, in fact.

Christine didn’t give much credit to the memory of her last meeting with Ambassador Spock. She dismissed her favourable impression as wishful thinking. But now it proved true -- their conversation about how to contact Spock’s father began haltingly, formally, but after the first exchanges of words and glances it was possible to relax. After that it became easier and easier to forget that they barely knew each other. The Ambassador was not less Vulcan and yet, somehow, he managed to make being Vulcan more *personable*.

In reply to his request to see Commander Spock, she said, “We’ll check his situation first, before we go in.”

She connected her PADD with the surveillance array in the Commander’s room, and chose the visual feed from the camera looking down on his bed. She set the PADD into its dock at her workstation, so they could both study the bio readings.

“Cadet Kirk is injured,” the Ambassador remarked. McCoy was removing the dressings from Kirk's feet to begin cellular regeneration.

Christine let a sniff of laughter escape her self-scrutiny.

“This will sound very unprofessional, but I’m almost glad for those cut up feet. I don't think Kirk would be there now if he could have walked away.”

Lieutenant Uhura was at the bedside. She stood behind her beloved Commander's back, stooped over with her face close to his right ear, talking to him.

“Curious,” the elder Spock took a step closer to the workstation.

“What is?” Christine asked.

“The Lieutenant alternates between speaking in High Vulcan and Romulan,” he said.

He tilted his head to one side, as if considering Uhura's words.

Christine shrugged; the volume was set too low for her. It didn’t seem as though the Lieutenant's efforts were getting any reaction. Spock and Cadet Kirk still lay facing each other, seemingly in a state of trance. Their hands were clasped together so tight the knuckles were bloodless and their eyes blank.

She heard McCoy say, “Those blood pressure readings …,”

They were not good. Christine frowned at Spock’s heart rate and hormone levels also. He was too weak for this amount of strain. She opened a comms channel on her PADD.

“Evans,” she said to her nurse, “We’ll need to consider a dose of cupric mellumyn in a few minutes, if we cannot work out how to calm him.”

Uhura stopped whispering, and looked up at the ceiling.

“Doctor, let me try one more thing,” she asked.
“Make it quick,” Christine replied.

She watched the Lieutenant straighten up, shake her shoulders loose, take a couple of deep breaths. Then Uhura walked around the bed to the other side, so she stood behind Cadet Kirk.

“You gonna whisper in Jim’s ear now?” McCoy asked.

Uhura rebuked him with a glance before she leaned over Kirk, spread out the fingers of her left hand in a peculiar formation and extended that arm carefully towards one side of Spock’s face.

“Fascinating—,” the Ambassador murmured.

For just a moment, Christine was lost for words. Then she asked, “Is that … is that what I think—,”

But before she could finish the question, Ambassador Spock had walked out of her office.
In order to keep pace with a one hundred and fifty-five year old Vulcan, Christine had to break into a run. She nearly collided with a trio of nurses who stepped out from the locker wing on their way to lunch.

Did the Ambassador already know his way to Commander Spock’s private suite?

Evidently. He also knew the security sequence for the entrance. Christine ran faster, so she could slip through the door before it closed behind him and catch up before he could go any further.

“Ambassador, wait--,”

She tried to grab his sleeve while they were in the sitting room, but only swiped the fabric.

“-- Doctor Chapel,” he cut off her protest as he opened the next door. “You may ask all your questions when we are over the worst.”

Now she knew the question that needed answering more than the others.

They entered Spock’s bedroom together. Evans and McCoy looked up -- whatever greeting or remark they had opened their mouths to make remained unspoken. Lieutenant Uhura did not notice their arrival. The Ambassador went to the far side of biobed where she was standing, and beckoned Christine to follow.

“If you would assist,” he said as she drew alongside him.

“Assist how?”

“By catching.”

Then he reached over Uhura’s shoulder, grasped her at the base of her neck and steered her body as it fell so that she toppled sideways into Christine’s arms. The hand Nyota had positioned so precisely against Commander Spock’s face dropped like a stone and struck Jim Kirk on the jaw.

“Argh!” the cadet cried out.

Kirk released his grip on Spock’s hand, blinked and rolled his head back to see the Ambassador casting a shadow over the bed. The elder Vulcan leaned forward to place his hand exactly where Lieutenant Uhura’s had just been.

Mc Coy came over to help Christine with Nyota, and they exchanged a look. That was just before it started.

As they lifted the Lieutenant onto the telescopic table, Commander Spock made a single sound, or rather a sound was forced out from him. Christine glanced back to see the Ambassador adjust his stance slightly. It gave her a glimpse of the younger Spock’s face, his slack jaw and tongue.

There was one shout. It was almost a word, a plea. Christine heard Jim murmur “Spock…”. But the Ambassador’s hand seemed to bear down upon its victim, as if it had grown weightier. Spock’s head was pinned to his mattress; Christine watched his eyes as they rolled back.

Then came the screams, over and over and over. They woke Uhura. They set off the security array, which was programmed to alert all the volunteers who were not already in the room. Spock’s blood
pressure, already worrying, climbed higher. Christine counted the seconds until they became minutes and the strain broke Spock’s voice. Full throated roars would lose their treble and become nothing but thin, breathless keening.

Jim Kirk was trapped face to face with this. And while the rest of them stood still, stricken dumb by the awfulness of an intervention they didn’t understand, he turned himself carefully onto his back. He looked up at the Ambassador’s face, which was shut tight with concentration, and boldly tugged at the collar of the older man’s jacket.

“Enough,” he said. And when that didn’t work, he started slapping Ambassador Spock on the shoulder of his outstretched arm.

“I said -- enough!” he shouted over the noise. “Let him go … please.”

Christine saw the marks left behind when the Ambassador took away his hand. The skin around them was mottled and slick with sweat, and Spock was bleeding from his nose. The screams stopped; that was something. But the Commander was not finished. All his heaving breaths were building towards something else. Kirk tried to keep the younger Vulcan’s head tipped forward so he would not choke.

The Ambassador stood straight, linked his hands behind his back. He watched the first tears fall down the Commander’s face, mingle with the dried blood around his mouth. While the crying happened silently he remained where he was. Christine found her voice.

“Questions now?” she asked.

The Ambassador held up a restraining hand. The gesture made McCoy growl, “Goddamn it.” But they waited.

Christine had witnessed many, many people break from sorrow or pain: patients, relatives of patients, doctors who could not save the dying, survivors waking from their nightmares, children alone. Spock’s first sobs cut into her; she was holding the wound they made in her gut when the older Vulcan finally turned away from the bed and came to her.

“Doctor,” he began, “if you would allow --,”

Lieutenant Uhura pushed herself off the telescopic table and stopped his words with a vicious backhand across his face.

“Get out,” she hissed.
“The next scheduled visitor is Ensign Tiavro Dre at 1100 -1300 hours.”

“That is me,” Tiavro told the computer.

The security array commenced its DNA scan, and he was advised that this would take approximately twenty-five seconds. He could not detect the medical tricorder, though he could hear it working. It might have been integral to the comms display beside the door, the readout on which said, ‘Patient ID: Starfleet 53.03.217 – Spock, Commander’.

Christine Chapel had known what she wanted. She contacted Dean Rosseau first, to ask him how quickly he could spare his Betazoid aide. So by the time she got in touch with Tiavro himself – what a coincidence – his diary was mysteriously clear of commitments.

He took it as a compliment, though on his home world it was a standing joke that every Terran thought every Betazoid was a therapist.

Tiavro had no plans to tell that joke to any human, or to remonstrate with the Doctor for pushing him up to the top of the volunteer list. Her briefing convinced him that Spock could use empathetic company. He would have corrected her if he discovered she had been taken in by that other Terran misconception, that all Betazoids hated Vulcans.

It was complete nonsense. An intelligent person could easily work it out, if they thought a moment. Contactless telepathy was in equal measures a gift and a burden. Species without psi sensitivity, such as humans, could not shield their emotions, and any environment they occupied was full of vibrations. Working with Terrans felt like being trapped in a room full of competing loudspeakers. The volume could go up or down, but Tiavro could not control it.

If he ever had cause to visit the Vulcan Embassy, it was a welcome interlude of peace. Though it was true that, after The Destruction, Vulcans he had worked with since graduation altered their mental shielding. They had not become human, far from it. Tiavro was never flooded with their feelings. The more apt metaphor was that they put out a notice, which he detected if he met them in private, and gave him a sample of their current mood, particularly if they were challenged by reactions to their loss. They expressed gratitude when he acknowledged these communications. Sometimes they showed him more.

The Enterprise Med Bay computer thanked him for his patience, and opened the entrance to Commander Spock’s suite.

Tiavro laid his PADD and jacket on the table in the sitting area, and paused. From where he stood now, he could detect a happy, slightly nervous anticipation nearby. Beyond that, more than one mind was fixated on small anxieties, useful predictor of a viral infection. None of these vibrations were coming from Commander Spock’s bedroom.

Nothing at all was coming from there.

Tiavro picked up his PADD again and checked Chapel’s notes. Yes, he’d remembered correctly. Neural connections essential to Spock’s psi defences had been disrupted, an experimental treatment since there was no proven cure for his illness. But the doctor had it on good authority that the Commander’s brain could repair itself.

“Would it be wrong,” he’d asked the doctor, “to assume this leaves Spock more Terran than Vulcan,
emotionally speaking?”

“Not sure,” Christine admitted. “That’s what we’re hoping you can tell us.”

No pressure, then.

Tiavro went through the next door into Spock’s sleeping area. Lights were low. He waited a moment for his eyes to adjust before he approached the biobed. The mattress was horizontal. The Commander lay on his side with his back to the entrance. Chapel warned the Dean’s aide that Spock might feign sleep, or had done with her.

And the half-Vulcan’s eyes were closed. Tiavro made himself comfortable in the visitor’s chair on that side of the bed, folded his hands in his lap, and listened. Now he picked up vibrations. They made him shut his own eyes a moment.

*The things that unite us.*

Well, he was no therapist. But he knew this place, where Spock was now. It was the furthest, deepest blackness, where no emotion could flatter itself and say it came anywhere close to the truth. The Betazoid had not been able to hear it before because there was virtually nothing to hear, nothing to feel. The strongest reaction any humanoid could express in the aftermath of trauma was a state of being that went into a psychic black hole, devoid of feeling.

There would be no point trying to engage the Commander in a discussion about this. Vulcans could hardly articulate their emotions in normal circumstances, and no attempt at Betazoid psi ‘nudging’ would get a response. Part of Spock could be said to have gone missing, was lost to him as well as others. It would be found when it was damn good and ready to be. In the meantime, the only helpful thing was connecting on some level, without seeming to be concerned or even aware of the gravity of the patient’s situation.

Here goes.

“Commander,” Tiavro said softly, “did I ever tell you about the time I took your mother shopping?”
Grey

Chapter Notes

Readers, I realise that so far the story has not been happy. Let me give reassurance -- in this chapter we begin to turn the corner.

Control of emotion was Vulcan culture. Parents melded with their infants and toddlers, preparing them gradually for the training which commenced after their fourth birthdays. Then came years of one-on-one tuition, daily exercises, required hours of meditation, regular retreats. Terrans could not honestly comprehend the amount of work, or how the habit of control altered the brain such that it could not be seen as something apart from one's identity.

Had Spock lost only this part of himself, he could recover, given time.

But without any emotion, there was nothing, no loss of control. No desire to achieve control or anything else, and no fear of the consequences of wanting nothing. Spock slept because that did not require choice. If he waited long enough, it would happen. If he awoke, he left his eyes to behave as they would without effort, which was neither fully seeing or unseeing. What reason could there be to do more?

So the world was grey now, and without focus. He had no desire to mark time or eat. Doctor Chapel and Nurse Evans ensured that he was fed, cleaned and kept warm. He no longer understood why they did so.

And Nyota had shared his bed, face to face the way Cadet Kirk had done. It was likely they spent a long time together. She touched his hands, kissed his face and whispered to him in Vulcan. The words he knew. She expressed emotions through skin contact, but they meant nothing without corresponding emotions within himself, to prompt a reaction. He knew it would become untenable for her, eventually, when he did not respond. When she got out of the bed and left he was no different than before she arrived.

After that, Doctor Chapel sat with him. She began a monologue about his second pon farr, with which she had assisted. She related details the fever had prevented his brain from recording. And she described the feeling she had, of being on the cliff edge where knowledge ends and how stimulating, in ways advantageous and not, the leap into the unknown had proved.

She was attempting, of course, to elicit a reaction from him. Ponn farr was a well-chosen subject for this purpose. Or that was what he remembered. He remembered that he used to feel once, but not how.

Today Ensign Tiavro Dre entered the room. Spock sensed his empathetic connection like a slight rise in temperature, and listened as the Ensign settled into the visitor’s chair. He expected this to be the shortest visit. Since he had no mental defences, the Betazoid would perceive immediately the emotional nothingness within. The Ensign would do well to inform the others, especially Nyota, so that she would not waste more of her life with a man who was no longer a suitable partner.

Betazoids could communicate telepathically like Vulcans. Unlike Vulcans, they did not restrict that communication to family members. Spock was not entirely certain of their cultural norms. Tiavro
had never attempted to project anything into his mind before.

“Commander,” the Ensign said softly.

And suddenly Spock could see her face. Her head was uncovered, because Earth did not have such high levels of ultraviolet radiation or blowing dust that would get trapped in her hair. She sat on a sofa in one of the VIP apartments father often used for his Terran assignments, located on the upper floor of the Academy administration building. Of course, Sarek could have stayed at the Vulcan Embassy. But his father believed that his mother would benefit from spending time in non-Vulcan company.

She was smiling. Smiling and looking directly at him.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I took your mother shopping?” Tiavro asked.

Spock did not open his eyes. He felt no desire to see the outside world, or reply to his visitor. But what he could see interested him. It was a memory of her he did not possess, and he was owed a debt of unmade memories. He had not considered the possibility of borrowing these from others.
“Weeding: you thin out the ground, so the things you want to thrive have the best conditions, and
don’t need to fight for survival. A healthy garden, like a healthy mind, is not overcrowded. The key
is to weed frequently. If you leave it, then the job becomes overwhelming, and it’s easy to make a
mistake and damage a plant you love.”

Hikaru watched Nyota as she read the ‘January’ page from his 2259 San Francisco Gardener’s
Almanac. He doubted it interested her. She had not really wanted to beam down with him this
morning and he was surprised he managed to persuade her.

“Spare gloves in there,” he told her. He pointed to the silicon crate beside the glass house door. She
glanced that way, and he saw the tears like a wet finish over her eyes. He bent down, picked up the
gloves himself and handed them to her.

“Isn’t a lot to do,” he said.

She sniffed.

“Are you saying you didn’t really need my help?” she asked.

“Are you saying you don’t really need mine?”

She squeezed the gloves hard, and used one to slap him on the arm. He was about to smile, but the
next thing he knew her face was buried in his scarf.

“Hey …,”

He put an arm round her shoulders and waited a while. He gazed out the glasshouse door and across
Commander Spock’s garden to the back fence. There was a knothole there, clumsily patched over
with packing tape. Didn't seem like the Commander's style, but it was a trivial thing and so he'd
never mentioned it.

Nyota was battling with her own sobs, trying to beat them back behind that ultra-tough exterior.
What with all her Vulcan mind training, Nyota used to make him feel like a complete basket case.
Ben had changed that, brought out a stronger, protective side Hikaru didn’t know he possessed.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said finally, gruffly.

“So … what,” he was careful. She was hard to predict right now. “You want … some
suggestions?”

Uhura nodded.

“Sure?”

She nodded again.

“Well okay,” he said, “but if you don’t like them, you’re not allowed to hit me with anything heavier
than those gloves.”

“Promise,” she said in a voice that seemed to mean it.

Even so, he patted her shoulder and waited a while longer. That was meant to make her think he
didn't already know what he’d wanted to tell her since Spock's illness had seemed to get worse.

“Vous need to apologise to the Ambassador.”

Uhura’s shoulder muscles tensed, but she didn't hold it.

“We could invite him to the houseboat. Have dinner. Ask Doctor Chapel, maybe.”

Nyota groaned and lifted her head.

“Uh oh,” he said. But it was okay -- she set the pair of gloves on the potting bench.

“Keep going,” she wiped her face with a hand, straightened her shoulders.

“You need rest as much as Spock does. And …,” he hesitated again, “time with other people.”

A little grimace. Not bad.

“And?”

Hikaru shrugged. “Who says there’s more?”

Her hand reached for the gloves.

“Okay, okay, hold up a minute.”

Now he did need time to think. Of course his brain brought up something inappropriate, because it had been on his mind, but that was more about his relationship than hers.

But when you love someone …,

“Look, would you mind,” he said. “Ben really puts a lot of work into your lunchboxes.”

She started nodding, which made the rest easier.

“And I haven’t got the heart to tell him you haven’t been →,”

“I’ll eat them,” Uhura said.

He breathed out. So did she. It was a lot of air cleared. Nyota picked up the gloves and put them on.

“That Almanac is a handy book,” she told him.
Captivated Audience

Tiavro Dre told the same story in two ways. Via telepathy, Commander Spock received one version of events, direct from the Ensign's memories. There was no need to describe action or dialogue because all that could be seen and heard. But for the benefit of those who had tuned in via the security surveillance (Doctor Chapel was not certain how many there might be) the Dean's aide also narrated his anecdote, speaking into the wristband Nurse Evans had fitted, which contained a microphone.

"Commander, it was my duty to call on your mother each morning and ensure that she had everything she needed...."***

Mother unfolded her hands and used them to push herself up off the sofa. As she stood, and carefully walked round the coffee table, Spock heard her voice –

"Ensign Dre, I don’t know whether you could help...."

In reaction to the sound, he drew in a swift, soft breath. The oxygen entered him, passed across the spark of recognition and brightened the grey interior of his mind with a tiny, comforting source of feeling. He continued to watch this memory of Tiavro’s, completely absorbed. The Ensign had preserved so much detail: the way Amanda bit her lower lip when she chose her words, how she rocked her shoulders and let her hands dance as she tried to explain herself earnestly.

And naturally, the Betazoid remembered the emotions which emanated from her. She was moderately concerned about a problem, and glad to have a non-Vulcan with whom she could confide.

“My husband and I will dine with Councillor T’lerus this evening. You might think that, having lived on Vulcan as long as I have, I would be accustomed to the heat. I won’t bore you with details of Terran biology. Let’s employ an old euphemism and just say that I am ‘a woman of a certain age’—,”

Then she pointed at the fine lines around her eyes and laughed –

Laughed.

The pure joy that she expressed to the Betazoid came to Spock also, washed through him like a wave of warmth. Now he experienced another feeling. He hoped that there would be more points in Tiavro’s recollection where his mother would be moved to laughter.

***

“What she needed,” Ensign Dre said aloud, “was a garment that was formal, by Vulcan standards, without being heavy or warm. And Commander, you had written and told her about your Andorian roommate and his cousin, who had developed a ground-breaking new textile.”***

“He’s opening his eyes,” Christine’s voice squeaked with excitement.

From the other side of her desk, Pike kept his jaw clenched as he watched the same surveillance
images from Spock’s room. As he saw his First Officer react, finally react after all the attempts to reach him, Chris kept his own voice steady and his eyes dry. It was goddamned hard work.

***

“Yesss!”

Scotty raised two clenched fists and shook them at the live display they had playing in the Engineering break room. Keenser gave him a rebuking whine.

“What?”

And when the Roylan explained his objection, Ensign Chekov remarked, “He thinks you are regarding Commander Spock’s illness as a spectator sport.”

The chief engineer stood up indignantly, and gesticulated with his empty teacup. “I regard the Commander’s illness as another attack by that bastard Nero. And this --,” he pointed at the display, “this is us fighting back.”

***

Ben, Nyota, Hikaru: they sat on the sofa in that order.

When Spock’s reaction played out on the picture wall in the houseboat lounge, Uhura was caught in the middle as husband and husband embraced. They synchronised a kiss on either side of her face, before they left her to watch the rest. They needed to begin preparations for dinner.

***

McCoy was adjusting the focus on his PADD when he felt a pair eyes boring into the back of his head.

“Thought you were going to give it a miss,” he said.

He listened as Jim's boots pivoted on the tiled floor, as he walked out of the office and into MedBay reception. A few seconds later, in his peripheral vision Len saw a chair land on the floor beside him. Kirk sat down. McCoy shifted the PADD into his other hand so they would both have a good view.
For the benefit of his surveillance system audience, Tiavro added gestures appropriate to his story.

"So naturally," he said, "I called Bovial."

And he mimed the hand motions used to initiate a local comms transmission from his workstation.

"We interrupted his lunch. But he came because, well, when a cadet receives a summons from the Dean's office, he doesn’t waste time eating. I think your mother was wary of him at first."

Telepathically, Tiavro noted Spock’s agreement with that opinion.

“Of course, you know Bovial,” the Dean’s aide continued. “Gruff with introductions, and not much friendlier after that. But it was your mother, and his cousin we were talking about. So that was different. That was about personal loyalties.”

Tiavro paused. It would be a tedious story if he talked through every detail of the three way conversation between himself, Amanda Grayson and the Commander’s Andorian roommate. Duller still if he described how they moved from the VIP apartment to Tiavro’s office, and from there to the elevator which took them to the ground floor of the Administration building. Their car journey to Akonev’s printworks was unremarkable.

But for Spock, all these inconsequential motions and words and reactions, direct from the Ensign’s memory, were life. Tiavro allowed the Commander time to witness them all. Hopefully, Doctor Chapel would not think it callous if he let Spock’s quiet tears fall and soak into his pillow. The Commander had found reason to feel. Nothing should be permitted to break the moment.

And then something almost did. The door to the bedroom opened. From the other side, Tiavro sensed tightly gripped pain and he stiffened, expecting footsteps that would make too much noise.

But the sound, as Captain Pike drove his wheelchair inside, hardly registered.

Ensign Dre was about to stand, but Pike tamped down that idea by patting the air with one hand and mouthing, ‘at ease’. He steered his chair between Tiavro’s seat and the bed, getting as close to the Commander as he could manage.

***

-Ensign Dre-

Pike really had no idea how Betazoids read minds. He just went with his gut.

-Please carry on with your story. I've done my best, but I can't do more.-

***

Fidget, fidget, fidget –

“Jim!” Leonard snapped. “I swear I'll get a laser and put all those cuts back into your feet if you can't sit still for--,”

“Why is Pike allowed inside?”
“Because he's captain.”

“Captains don’t outrank CMOs,” Jim argued, ”not where patient care is concerned.”

“So tell me something I don't know.”

"Then why --,”

“Why what? What the hell is the matter with you?”

“Why wouldn't she let me?”

McCoy forgot about the live stream on his PADD, and stared at Kirk instead.

“You volunteered to go in there again?” Len asked.

But he wasn’t looking for an answer; Jim's face told him all he needed to know.

“Are you … jealous?” McCoy said.

“No—yes—maybe—no, no, I’m not.”

McCoy watched Kirk lean forward, lean back, fold and unfold his hands, drum his fingers against the seat of the chair.

“Of course I’m not,” Kirk said again.

McCoy waited him out. The chair took maybe another half a minute of Jim’s abuse before Kirk stopped fighting against whatever it was and stood up.

“I’m gonna ---,” he started to say.

“Sure,” McCoy replied. “Why don't you do that instead.”
“Now you’ve never met Akonev,” Tiavro resumed the story as he’d been instructed. He decided to describe Bovial’s cousin.

“He’s about my height, and powered by an incredible amount of nervous energy. Constantly talking. And there’s your mother, seeing his beautiful fabrics, because they were amazing. She choose a bolt from his collection and it—it changed colour as he unwound it. He scanned the robes she was wearing and printed a perfect copy made from this cloth – oh, what was it called …,”

It was time for another pause. Captain Pike had gently planted his elbows on Spock’s mattress, and needed to be distracted before he gave in to that strong impulse to express solidarity with a touch.

“Sir,” Ensign Dre asked, “may I trouble you to look up something on your PADD?”

***

“Endriss Twist Crepe, that’s it. Thank you, Captain.”

Nyota found that she could not just sit and watch. She felt like Bovial’s cousin, full of nervous energy. So Ben transferred the visual feed to the kitchen, projected it onto the white cupboard doors, and Hikaru told her to come help with the cooking. She got to stir the risotto.

“Akonev had one of those Terran antiques, painted wooden panels hinged together to make a freestanding visual interruption, and he supposed your mother would understand its function. So he handed her these new robes and gestured towards this flimsy thing with gaps --,”

Nyota stopped stirring.

“Look,” she said, and they did. But she would talk over the story if she tried to explain, and neither Hikaru nor Ben could detect the change in Spock’s expression.

“Your mother’s face was calm, but I could sense how conflicted she felt. I asked Akonev if he had a room where she could change instead. And he said, “Room? Room? No one has needed a room before. Why do you want a room?”

“Oh dear,” Nyota said.

“But then I felt her fill with resolve, and she gave herself this funny little lecture, as if we weren’t there. ‘Have I really become SO Vulcan?’ she said. And then she turned to me and added, ‘Ensign, believe it or not, this is the same woman who used to sunbathe topless in Denny Blaine Park’.”

Nyota’s gaze switched momentarily to the simmering pot of rice, and it wasn't the rising steam that made her face feel warmer. She had been reminded of her roommate. Back in September, Gaila’s older sister arranged a short visit, and this made it possible for Nyota to face the task of clearing the apartment she had shared with the Orion cadet. Thilulla asked if she could be shown the knothole in the back fence, because she’d been told the story, of course. She had touched it reverently. Later, she insisted that Uhura keep the red bikini.

***
“So that was that, Commander. Your mother agreed to go behind the screen and change clothes.”

The live feed streaming to the Ambassador’s PADD was interrupted. The computer system in his apartment overrode the transmission, in order to tell him that there was someone standing outside his front door. He was shown the face front image of the caller.

And he debated whether or not to get up, deciding quickly that it was better to remain seated and conserve energy.

He selected the computer option to open the entrance. Cadet Kirk came inside. He appeared greatly agitated, and for that reason Spock did not follow Terran etiquette and invite him to sit down. Nor did he question the young man. He allowed Kirk to roam about the room -- it was his first visit, after all -- and stare out the twenty-second floor windows for some considerable time. The view of San Francisco from that vantage point was absorbing.

While he did that, the elder Spock programmed his PADD to record and save the live surveillance from the Enterprise.

“Nice place the Embassy gave you,” Kirk said finally. His tone of voice was sharp with anger.

“I trust--,” the Ambassador replied, but had to clear phlegm from his throat, which made him start again with different words.

“Your counterpart in my timeline was always frank with me.”

“Yeah?”

Kirk continued to look out the window.

“Did you know how much it would affect me,” he asked, “if I touched him?”

The Ambassador carried out a memory rationalisation on his PADD, a non-urgent function but a few seconds reprise from the exacting discussion he now expected.

“Not entirely,” he answered.

“You protected Lieutenant Uhura, for God’s sake,” Jim growled. “But me – it was okay for me to take all that? Was it?!”

In which direction ought he to take this conversation? In the circumstances, it still seemed selfish to speak about his own feelings. And yet they were no small factor. In the end he decided on a less direct approach.

“Unless a mental connection is repeated or sustained by a bond, its effects diminish over time.”

“Diminish,” Kirk muttered, like the suggestion was an insult. Which in one respect it was.

The Ambassador had exposed him to the power of Vulcan emotion, his own emotion, more than once since Delta Vega. By the year 2290 in his own timeline, Starfleet was training its counsellors about the consequences of such exposure for Terrans and other psi-insensitive species. He could recall the words from one manual – ‘treat the patient as if a longstanding romantic relationship has ended against their wishes. Help them acknowledge that residual attachment will remain, but assign them tasks which fortify or begin new attachments, so that they experience satisfaction with these while they recover naturally from the separation.’
Remembering this convinced him of the need to be frank with Kirk, whatever the consequences. He had been avoiding this, partly to spare Jim the pain.

Spock needed to close his eyes briefly. His symptoms had returned, and it seemed they provided the greatest amount of pain he could manage while appearing outwardly untroubled.

And there was this evening’s dinner invitation to consider. Perhaps, when that was over …

Chapter End Notes

Is it weird to ask your readers a question like this? Are you all coping with the amount of sadness? I feel more than a little guilty for keeping Spock and Nyota apart, even though it seems right given where they are in their respective grieving processes. I'm sorry that I cannot produce more words for you right now -- we could have got past the worst more quickly. I don't mind if you want to express any frustration in comments, because I'm frustrated. I want to write more fanfic, but I have to write a 2000 word assignment about James Joyce instead!
“Your roommate’s cousin may be a brilliant inventor, Commander, but we did not meet a pleasant person that day.”

Spock felt how the emotional tone of Tiavro’s memory changed, became tense. And as the action continued to play out in his own mind he was also moved, in an all too familiar way.

Because it was this, again. It was always this.

While his mother changed clothes behind the screen, Akonev rolled up the bolts of fabric on his bench and returned them to the cabinets which lined the walls of his workshop. Throughout, he muttered to himself. Perhaps the sound carried more than he realised, or perhaps (Spock was inclined to think) the Andorian cared little if he was overheard.

“Vulcan pum pink skin, roozh! I warn Bovial over and over, we are pure. Do not do like this, do not insult your family to satisfy lust and do not insult your intelligence by making alien friends. It is not right. We do not mix. It will create chaos, chaos. Andorians will become uncertain of what they are, what to call themselves, if this happens. If Bovial brings more of his Terran ‘friends’ for a fitting I will tell him that this must be stopped at once. I will ask him to imagine the future, the barren future, if we all behave like this. Or if not barren, I say think of the hideous offspring, the zaav kut, walking in our streets... But I know I will not be thanked for my advice. This is the bad influence of Starfleet, because they have forced him to share accommodation with this corruption of two species, and yes, it has undermined his better judgement. It must be – otherwise why would he show favour to such a mutant and force me to attend on his cursed mother?”

Spock felt what the Betazoid sensed -- a surge of anger after those words. Then, on his part, there was embarrassment as his mother strode out from behind the screen, carrying the new robe. She was barefoot, wearing nothing but her white tvitaya, and no ash’ai to cover her legs below the knees. Akonev glanced in her direction, frowned, and drew up the bolt of fabric he held like a shield.

“I will inform Bovial that you look upon blood loyalty as a burden,” she said. “Allow me to demonstrate mine.”

She threw the robe in the Andorian’s face.

“Ensign Dre,” she called to the Dean’s aide as she marched back to the screen, “We will leave as soon as I have dressed.”
Bovial had insisted upon waiting in the car, an action which had puzzled Tiavro until that moment. Their journey back to the Academy was painful. Spock's roommate made repeated apologies, seeking pardon from the VIP passenger in the back seat. Tiavro expected Amanda to exercise some restraint, to take back her Vulcan habits like she took back her Vulcan clothes. But throughout the drive her anger burned as hot as the moment it erupted.

Tiavro resigned himself to the inevitable argument. He gauged Bovial’s desperation and Amanda’s fury and guessed that this confrontation would likely happen in the parking lot as they walked back to Administration building. But Spock, having access to the same sensations the Betazoid had, made his own analysis. He did not believe Mother would say anything in a public space. Bovial was intimidated into silence himself as they entered the building, and said nothing during the journey in the elevator.

When they reached the top floor, Amanda invited both men to take tea in her apartment.

“She is going to explode behind closed doors,” Tiavro thought. He gave the Andorian a severe look.

Bovial took the warning seriously. Once they were inside, he got down on his knees in front of the Vulcan ambassador’s wife. Tiavro thought humour might help the situation – that and the force of numbers. So he also kneeled.

This strategy succeeded. Amanda gave her supplicants a nod, and Tiavro sensed her acceptance of their contrition. But she waggled a disapproving finger at Bovial when he tried to stand up.

“I will say one thing, Mister Ch’ziaqis, if you please.”

“Speak your mind freely,” Bovial replied.

“If your cousin had confined himself to insulting me, I would have ignored him and purchased his clothing.”
Spock felt Tiavro’s telepathic reach gradually recede, like a tide going out. The clear features of his mother became less distinct. Tiavro finished the story with her sitting, once again, on the sofa in the Academy’s VIP suite, her teacup in her lap. This image stilled. Then it faded, as if the colours had been woven into an *Aba’Kur* tapestry and exposed for a year to the Vulcan sun.

Unique, the quality of light which came from that sun. New Vulcan could not be the same.

Thin as gauze, the remnant of Ensign Dre’s memory became permeable, allowing reality to bleed through. Spock could identify the edge of his mattress and the curled fingers of his own hand resting close by. Beyond that, there was a human face with grey eyes. Spock rarely saw those eyes at rest, without an unspoken question communicated by a narrowing of their lids or a line appearing between the grey brows.

He wanted to address his Captain. His lips parted, but his soft palette would not peel away from his tongue. He tried to swallow, which seemed to cut off his throat from air. He made some kind of noise.

“As easy, Commander,” he heard Pike say.

Tiavro’s connection returned, urging Spock to concentrate on breathing through his nose. It also assured him Doctor Chapel was on her way. She arrived with one of the small oblong sponges, which she would dip into a glass of water and hold out so that Spock could bite down on the end.

“Better?” she asked, when he was able to move his tongue.

He said ‘yes’ but could not make the palatal approximant sound of the first letter.

“If you to sat up, you could have a cup of water,” the doctor suggested. “That would help your voice.”

Pike’s grey eyes questioned him. Tiavro’s telepathic link told him that the Captain had a story about Amanda Graydon he wanted to share.

“Yes,” Spock said again, with greater success.

Doctor Chapel called Cadet McCoy and three duty nurses to his room. They combined their strength to lift him off the biobed. While Captain Pike showed Ensign Dre how to adjust the mattress, Spock lay helpless, cradled in five pairs of arms. He experienced peace, which lingered several minutes after he was set back down. It tempted him with a strange desire to ask if he could sleep that way, held by humans with their faces close and their warm concern streaming through their hands.
The risotto had been cooked, cooled, rolled into a dozen arancini the size of apricots and baked until they were the same colour. Hikaru marinated and chargrilled filets of green Deltan spearfruit. The salad ingredients had all been grown in the garage Ben rented on Bewicke Avenue. He parked a hydroponic unit there, instead of a car.

Uhura was getting forks and knives from the cutlery drawer when the call from the Enterprise came through on Sulu’s PADD.

“Lieutenant Sulu,” Scotty said, “I’m beaming down your two guests.”

“Gotcha,” he replied, “we’re ready.”

Uhura laid the cutlery on Ben’s tray, beside the napkins he had folded. She hung her apron on its hook, walked through to the lounge and waited near the silicon Christmas tree with her hands clasped behind her back.

The first illuminations of molecular transfer stirred the air behind the sofa.

In her mind, Uhura considered the words she had rehearsed for this evening. There were contrite ones and complaining ones. She still felt they were a fair balance of courtesy with candour.

Beaming nearly done – she could identify the faces now. She kept herself from scowling at one of them, but only just.

“Ambassador,” she greeted the elder Spock when transport was complete. Then she looked at Kirk.

“Has Doctor Chapel sent you in her place?”

“Eh?” said Kirk.

Uhura had to suppress her second scowl.

“Lieutenant,” the Ambassador started to explain, “Cadet Kirk felt obliged to accompany--,”

“He’s not well,” Jim interrupted.

“I am functioning adequately.”

“I came to make sure Doctor Chapel knew about his symptoms.”

Sulu came out of the kitchen.

“Thought I recognised that voice,” he said. “Stay for dinner, Jim.”

“Oh, well ....,”

“Plenty of food. Ben likes to cook for the world.”

Ben, Uhura knew, did not like Jim Kirk right now. When Hikaru went back to the kitchen he would need to persuade his husband to make peace with their unexpected arrival.

She also knew Jim was telling the truth. Both versions of Spock were alike in this way -- they could
not hide the truth about themselves. The Ambassador’s eyes lacked the animated light she could remember, particularly after the meeting with the Arcturian delegation, when he asked her to dinner. Now they seemed dull. They did not shift when Sulu came in, or take interest in any other part of the new surroundings. They held her gaze, doggedly, as though that was a burden they must bear.

What was this illness? At no point did the New Vulcan High Council indicate that Vi’mashaya P’pil’lai’ai was contagious. But that didn't mean it wasn't. Vulcans would need the evidence to be extensive before they stated anything as fact. Uhura considered the words she had rehearsed again.

She would not change them, but she might alter their timing. From the kitchen, she could hear Scotty’s voice again.

“Lieutenant Sulu? Doctor Chapel apologises for running late. She’ll be ready to beam down shortly.”

Inspiration flashed. “Scotty,” Uhura ran to the kitchen doorway so she wouldn’t need to shout. “Ask her to wait a few minutes more.”

She caught a glimpse of Ben and Hikaru together, arms round each other, having an intense, whispered conversation. Then she turned back to their guests.

“Ambassador, may I have a word with you in private?”

“We need to get Doctor Chapel down here,” Kirk insisted.

Uhura ignored him. “We can go upstairs.”

“Down here now. With her tricorder.”

“I’ve never seen her go anywhere without one,” Nyota said frostily, and then warmed up her tone of voice to ask the Ambassador if he would prefer to be beamed to the next floor.

“Bones’ll come if I ask him.”

“Scotty will beam you out of here if I tell him you invited yourself.”

“Sulu said I could --,”

“Jim,” Ambassador Spock interrupted gently. “It is unlikely that I will require medical attention in the next few minutes. I am going upstairs.”

***

She did not comment on how slowly he climbed the stairs, or the fact his breathing was audible as they walked along the first floor landing and turned into the second door on the right. In spite the pain building behind his eyes, he noted the suitcase tucked under the bed, the Betazoid verb dictionary displayed on the PADD which lay on the grey comforter and the pair of earrings on the dresser. This was her room.

“I realise we do not need walls to speak privately,” she said in High Vulcan. “I acted on a presumption. Spock – my Spock – prefers to interact with human doctors on his own terms.”

“In this regard we are the same,” the Ambassador replied.

Uhura lifted her PADD from the bed. “I can have you beamed back to San Francisco,” she offered.
“If I agree, how will I accomplish what I came to do?”

“What was that?”

“To achieve a reconciliation. The last time you and I met, we did not part on good terms.”

Uhura sighed. There was everything in that gesture, both resignation and unflinching will.

“I seem to have reached a threshold for the tolerance of pain, where my Spock is concerned,” she admitted.

“And I have underestimated the quality of your upbringing and your psi ability,” he said. “But I am confident that Commander Spock will recover.”

“On what basis?”

“The number of people who consider themselves his friends,” he replied. “This is the disadvantage on New Vulcan. Few of the survivors know each other well, and Vulcans establish new friendships slowly. Severed bonds will heal provided there are other, equally strong bonds which remain. Spock has these bonds with his Starfleet and Academy colleagues, and particularly with you.”

After two point seven seconds of silent consideration, Uhura threw the PADD back on the bed and moved towards him so quickly he wondered if she intended to strike him again.

“Ambassador, I need you to tell me --,”

“Tell me --,” her lapse from Vulcan into Standard coincided with her loss of control. She clasped her throat with both hands, as if that were the source of emotion and she hoped to stem the flood. He believed there was more pain behind her eyes than his.

“Does he still love me?”
Chapter Notes

Sudata7, I felt so sorry for ending the last chapter on that cliffhanger, and I couldn't keep you waiting another two weeks without knowing how Ambassador Spock answered Nyota Uhura's question. And you know, I like this version of Chapter 38 better than the one I had planned to write. Reader feedback is the best form of inspiration -- I don't think I could go back to the old-fashioned business of creating a whole novel in isolation. Nope, never.

Uhura waited. The Ambassador’s breathing had improved, but could not be called normal. He exhaled in stages, the last breath always escaping with a faint wheeze.

“Vulcans,” he said at last, “are not fickle with affection.”

“That does not answer my question.”

He made a quiet grunt of acknowledgement. “You want to know whether I perceived anything during our mind meld.”

“Yes.”

“The Commander's thoughts were incoherently structured then, and his emotions exclusively negative and extreme. I did not detect any thoughts about you.”

“What might that mean?”

“I do not know.”

Nyota turned away, because she had betrayed enough of her own feelings already.

“However,” the Ambassador paused for a full breath in and out. “If I imagine myself in Commander Spock’s situation, I find that my overriding concern is whether anyone who had loved me would or should continue to do so, in case I proved incapable of reciprocating.”

She was about to ask him whether loving or being loved was something he could only imagine. But she heard someone running up the stairs.

“Okay?”

She turned when she recognised Kirk’s voice. He had placed himself between her and Spock, and there was a human hand pressed against the sleeve of the Vulcan’s robe.

“I am fine, Jim,” the Ambassador replied. “Do our hosts wish us to come down to dinner?”

“No, no – uh, I just thought you should know that Doctor Chapel says she’ll beam down in ten minutes. Says there was a little mess she needed to clear up.”

***
At the end of Ensign Dre’s visit, Christine followed him out of Spock’s room. The Dean’s aide had stayed well beyond his allotted time, but shook his head at her spoken (and unspoken) gratitude.

“It was a gamble that worked,” Tiavro said. “The anecdotes you and I shared with Spock about his mother seem to have had the effect of standing in for the bond he lost with her.”

Christine’s story had not been much. She met Spock’s mother before she met him. At her Academy graduation dinner in 2247 Ambassador Sarek and his wife attended as guests, and sat at her table. She admitted it mystified her why any Vulcan would marry a human, since the former intimidated her (“your father did, honestly”). Sarek seemed so much stronger, wiser, self-assured.

“And I could hardly make conversation,” Christine said, “because she had me in awe. All I could think was, if she can command a Vulcan’s attention, she must be a phenomenal woman.”

She bulked out this sparse vignette with her impressions. Amanda Grayson did try to put the young graduate at ease, admiring her dress, asking the medical cadet questions until she found something they had in common – a love of cats. They could only talk about pets fondly remembered. Amanda believed it would be cruel to force a Terran feline to cope with Vulcan heat and desert predators. Christine had similar feelings about bringing pets on board starships.

Now Pike was telling his story. After Tiavro left, Christine took a break in Spock’s sitting room, sat at the table and switched on her PADD to watch her captain and his first officer via the ship’s surveillance system. Spock was improving by the hour, sitting up and taking water. It would help him even more if he could start eating solid food.

What kind of food? That’s what she needed to decide.

Pike’s story made her smile. During even numbered Stardate years, a month long convention was organised with the aim to bring as many senior officers as possible in contact with diplomatic and academic specialists from several worlds for an intensive xenocultural refresher course. In 2256 it was held in Yorktown.

“Spock, your father was not on the lecture programme,” the Captain said, “or on the guest list. In fact, I never did find out why he happened to be visiting the Federation’s newest space station that year.”

Christine bit her bottom lip and watched the Commander’s expression carefully. In the three years they served together aboard the USS Farragut, Spock mentioned his parents once. He was suffering those moody, early symptoms of pon Farr, but only spoke about his mother. Since his father had notoriety enough in Starfleet circles, Christine had been unsure whether Spock was simply protecting what privacy he could, or whether his relationship with the Vulcan side of his family was difficult.

It worried her that Pike’s story might start the Commander thinking about Sarek, and then there was a risk he might ask questions. She did not know how to tell him what they knew.

Then, in that mysterious way the brain works, recalling a certain characteristic of Vulcan biology reminded Christine of plomeek soup. Which might just do the trick.

She went to the replicator, while Pike’s voice continued to transmit from her PADD.

“But whatever was keeping your dad busy, it left your mother with a lot of free time. Yorktown didn’t advertise the convention, for security reasons. But she used her rank and did her research -- believe me -- right down to my schedule of lectures and apartment address. Imagine me answering the hail from my front door and there she is.”
Before taking the tray, with its baby-sized bowl of smooth, red broth, into Spock’s room, Christine checked the time on the replicator display. No rush. She might even get to change clothes for dinner. It would be great to wear something civilian for a change.

As she set the tray on his table and wheeled that towards the bed, the Commander watched, evidently curious. Pike paused his story while Christine took three spoonfuls, blew on each one to cool it, and fed her patient.

The warmth brought a little colour into Spock’s face.

“Lieutenant Uhura will be pleased when I tell her about this.”

She pretended to make the remark to Pike, but with a sidelong glance at Spock to gauge his reaction. The Commander stared intently at the empty spoon, as if willing it to keep going. The last two mouthfuls went down more slowly, perhaps, but he finished the bowl.

As Pike settled himself to resume his story, Christine checked the time on her PADD again. She could change clothes now, or forget about that and stay to hear the rest.

“I can’t imagine Amanda Grayson would intimidate you,” she said to her former captain, as she moved the overbed table to a corner of the room. She returned to her seat.

“Well …,” Pike began.

Spock’s mother was as fierce with her son’s commanding officer as she had been with Bovial’s cousin.

Of course, 2256 was the year her offspring suddenly stopped sending his regular transmissions from the USS Farragut, and Christine knew the reason. She and Pike had agonised over their decision. The ship was in orbit round Gosis, ensuring another ceasefire between the government and the Alliance in a conflict over the Eastern Perimeter. Spock did not want anything to disrupt that mission. Until his fever became so intense it overcame his sensibilities, the Commander had insisted they keep his illness a secret from his family.

His mother came to Pike for an explanation. He admitted he was cornered, with no choice but to invite the Ambassador’s wife to take tea in his apartment and hope he could explain. Christine listened with her elbows planted on Spock’s mattress and her chin cupped in both hands. She was thrilled when Pike said Amanda remembered her. How long did they talk at graduation dinner? Couldn’t have been more than twenty minutes.

She was so pleased she forgot where she was, for a moment. The story was reviving memories, making her feel transported back in time, which was strangely nostalgic, even in those circumstances.

But if she’d stayed in the present, with one eye on the Commander, she would have noticed how his eyes lost their focus, became downcast and introspective, and how the colour in his complexion disappeared. She would have spotted how his right hand, under the covers, was moving back and forth across his stomach. She wouldn’t have stayed where she was, too close to be missed when Spock wasn’t able to hold back his body’s reaction. He lurched forward and vomited over the bed.
Nyota tapped Jim on the shoulder.

“Uh, excuse me, Mr. Kirk? The Ambassador and I haven't finished yet. Could you please go back downstairs?”

“You shouldn't tire him,” Kirk protested, without bothering to look at her.

“I do not find the conversation tiring, Jim,” Spock insisted.

Uhura switched to High Vulcan, to make her point that little bit clearer. “And he is capable of informing me himself, should the --,”

Kirk turned on her, gave her an unapologetic sneer.

“Look, haven't you already got a boyfriend?”

“What the hell are you implying?” she said.

“Me? You're the one who's invited him into your bedroom--”

“Jim.”

That single, softly spoken syllable from the Ambassador was enough to stop Kirk talking. But his blue eyes blazed like gas flames.

“You cannot be serious,” Uhura said.

For a split second, Jim looked confused, like a man who had lost the thread of the conversation. Then just as suddenly, his defiance in his expression reappeared.

“As soon as Doctor Chapel beams down ...,” he warned.

“She can come straight here,” Uhura promised.

The Ambassador held the bedroom door open, by way of encouragement. He and Jim held each other’s gaze a few seconds before the Kirk finally chose to leave. The door was closed behind him.

“His approach leaves something to be desired,” Spock admitted as he returned to the place where he had been standing and talking with her. “But his concern is merely for my well-being.”

“No,” she said, "it is not. Ambassador, there is nothing merely about the way Kirk reacts to you."

Cue one of her planned speeches. Nyota folded her arms and began the recitation.

"Let me present examples. Six months ago, I overheard Kirk argue with Captain Pike about diverting the Enterprise to Delta Vega, when we had over two hundred Vulcan refugees on board and no warp core. I also know that he could not get permission to use the Enterprise after that -- a small matter of helping with an erupting volcano. I understand he pestered the Admiralty until they diverted the second test flight of the USS Centurion to bring you to Earth. He was the first human to set foot on New Vulcan. I'm not sure how many visits he has made, but it is uncanny how he always seems to have the latest news on the colony’s progress. And I could not help but notice, Ambassador, when we finished the meeting with the Arcturian aid mission, how many unanswered
messages from Kirk were waiting on your PADD.”

She paused, to see if the older Spock would give her an explanation for these things. Five seconds, counted mentally, was sufficient time for him to interject. When he didn’t, she concluded her speech.

“Why do you think I contacted you, when we could not convince Jim Kirk to volunteer for the visiting rota? Because it seemed clear to me that the two of you have a thing.”

“A thing?” The Ambassador raised an eyebrow at her, as Vulcans do when Terrans use their peculiar Standard idioms, whose meaning cannot be logically deduced.

“I believe you are attracted to each other.”
Conversation: Before Dinner, Part 2

The Ambassador’s prolonged silence condemned him.

Nyota waited it out. It gave her a weird form of comfort, to sense that she was closer to understanding at least one version of Spock.

As if to put her off, the elder Vulcan replied, “The best answer to your supposition would not be the shortest one.”

“Fine,” she said, “the longer the better. I need to know why you kept your existence a secret from my Spock --,”

“--I believed he stood to gain from an improved relationship with Cadet Kirk--,”

“Improved? Can you elaborate? What kind of improvement were you seeking?”

“Lieutenant, at the time it would have been premature to assume --.”

“--Kirk invented some nonsense reason why Commander Spock needed to find time between his classes to hurry over to Hangar One and meet the shuttlecraft coming down from the USS Centurion. But that was just a ruse. The real aim was to stage an ‘accidental’ meeting between the two of you, during which you could take advantage of him.”

“Take advantage?” the Ambassador said. “That is a serious accusation. I fail to understand--,”

“No,” Nyota unfolded her arms and stepped forward, “you understood. You, more than anyone, would understand what Spock had lost. You could gauge just how unstable, how vulnerable he would be, how open to suggestion.”

“Did Spock share the details of our conversation with you?”

“Does that matter? Whatever was said, it made him worse. Much worse. And then, after you had done your work there, you requested a translator for your meeting with the Arcturians. You wasted my time for an entire day. And if that wasn’t bad enough, you wasted my evening trying to work out what kind of person you were dealing with.”

“Dealing with?”

“I’m the woman you need to get out of the way. Am I right?”

“I would not--,”

“I am the love rival. You need to know me because you need to get Spock away from me, get him closer to Cadet Kirk.”

“Lieutenant, why would I do this?”

“I’m hoping you will tell me. I presumed you were satisfying some personal need to bring your past into our present. Because that’s how it was, wasn’t it, in your timeline? It was you and Jim Kirk.”

The Ambassador closed his eyes, and there was a second silence.

Nyota found this one less beneficial to her than the first. She could not think of any flaw with her
It seemed clear that the older Spock wanted his younger counterpart to fall in love with Kirk instead of her. Nevertheless, she felt less convinced by her own arguments than she had been when she formulated them.

In the quiet, it was possible to hear the senior Vulcan’s faint, constricted breaths. Nyota watched his face. Twice the procerus muscle between his eyes tensed, formed two hard knuckles that pulled his brows together.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I am forgetting that you are not well.”

“Do not …,”

It seemed the Ambassador opened his eyes and kept them open with effort.

“You must not let my condition dissuade you from speaking your mind.”

Then he sighed.

“But I would be grateful for your permission to rest, briefly.”

She stood aside and let him choose a place to sit down on her bed. Spock kept his head upright and still as he bent at the knees, and once he had transferred his weight onto the mattress his shoulders relaxed noticeably. His lips parted and he breathed through his mouth for several seconds. Nyota glanced at her closed door, wondering how soon Christine Chapel would arrive.

“It is true,” Spock said, “that in my timeline Jim Kirk and I were very close.”

His words came out with more air than sound.

“We did not complete a bonding ritual. But we shared experiences which, by their intensity, served the same purpose. From what I have been told about the development of your relationship with Commander Spock, I suspect your situation may be similar.”

When he paused to clear his throat, Nyota said, “The mattress can be adjusted to recline, Ambassador.”

He turned his head slowly and regarded her pillows. Ben had changed the sheets that morning; the white pillow cases were clean and pressed.

“Given what you appear to have suffered because of me,” he said weakly, “I would not wish to impose.”

She stepped round his feet and accessed the controls fitted within the headboard. Spock made no more protests. He watched the hydraulic bedframe lift and tilt and lock into its new configuration. Nyota helped him remove his boots, then held the pillows in place while he turned and brought his legs up onto the mattress. She left the room and came back with one of Ben and Hikaru’s wedding gifts, the beautiful Hudson’s Bay Company blanket they had draped over a chair on the landing.

“I am curious,” the Ambassador said as she laid the cover over him, “why you would show kindness to an individual you believe has conspired against you.”

Before replying, Nyota went out to the landing again and fetched the chair. She carried it back and put it down near the head of the bed.

“If your best answer will be a long one,” she said, settling herself, “it is logical to ensure you are
comfortable.”
Nyota watched the Ambassador fold his hands neatly across his chest. He sucked a little air into his mouth through his closed lips and gave Uhura a long, considered look.

“I begin to understand why my younger self sought your companionship,” he said.

In best Vulcan fashion, she did not smile or thank him, but returned his look.

“Perhaps you will also begin to understand the situation which faced me,” he ventured, “after Nero transported me to Delta Vega. He chose that location deliberately. He knew the planet’s orbit would position it close to Vulcan, so that I would see my home world destroyed. And as I stood watching, I knew I had little chance of returning to my own timeline. Nero had informed me of the star date in my new reality, but it would have been foolish to assume he told me the truth. And so I could not be sure whether I had arrived in the future or the past. I did not know whether I had any chance of rescue, or whether I would find anyone or anything I recognised.”

He closed his eyes. Nyota heard the faint sound of voices downstairs; she half wanted someone to hurry up and bring help and half wanted everyone to leave them alone a few moments more.

Spock swallowed once. With difficulty, he said, “Nero ensured that I had shelter – he chose coordinates close to the Saumur ice tunnels. I was preparing to make those caves my last home, and my tomb.”

Nyota shut her eyes then.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured.

“Imagine,” the Ambassador went on, “what it meant … in such a hopeless position. I was given hope when I heard noise, and discovered that someone had run into the caves to escape the clutches of an angry hengrauggi. But then, to come face to face with this chance visitor, and recognise them as the dearest …,”

“I’m so sorry—,”

The Ambassador was slowly shaking his head.

“In my timeline, James Kirk had been dead for sixteen years.”

Neither of them spoke for several seconds, as if observing a silence in memory of the deceased. Nyota could identify Christine Chapel’s voice now; it had a carrying quality.

“And I will admit to a lapse, when I chose to mind meld with Cadet Kirk. I tried to justify my actions as the most efficient way to explain my predicament. But I cannot deny how much I desired
that connection with him, and how much I needed a friend.”

A keen regret and a resolute desire to earn her pardon -- the Ambassador did the most efficient thing, and proved that these were his true intentions by resting his hand over Uhura’s bare forearm. Their discussion concluded wordlessly, and just in time.

“He’s in here,” Nyota could hear Kirk speaking as footsteps came up the stairs.

While the door still remained closed, she and the older Spock worried about the same thing at the same time -- how Jim might react to discovering them in communication like this. They both opened their eyes. Nyota got out of the chair.

***

“Let me run that scan again,” Christine said.

Ambassador Spock did not protest. Kirk and Uhura did not hear her; they were bickering about which of them was most concerned about the Vulcan’s wellbeing.

“Bedridden,” Jim railed at the Lieutenant, “because of you.”

“Don’t be melodramatic,” Uhura retorted. “The Ambassador isn’t helpless; he knows his limitations.”

“Oh, you were planning to take it that far, were you?”

“We had finished talking. He wanted to rest.”

“From the start, you should have considered his needs more important than yours.”

“Oh, Mr. Kirk, what would Gaila say if she could hear you now?”

The end of their argument was sudden and badly timed. Christine had linked her tricorder with the workstation of a colleague at Vancouver General Hospital, a senior virologist, to see if she could get a second opinion on Spock’s readings. As she watched her display, Doctor Bindy Johal was viewing the same results and using a stylus to underline three critical figures from the tricorder data. Then the virologist opened a chat window and started typing. She wrote three questions for Christine to ask her patient.

“Ambassador,” Chapel kept her voice flat and quiet, “when did you first experience the symptoms you have now?”

“Eleven months, twelve days ago,” he replied.

“Do they come and go?”

“Yes.”

“Has the interval between symptoms shortened?”

“Marginally.”

“You were ill before you got here?” Kirk asked.

Everyone ignored his question. Christine typed the answers into her link with Bindy. The virologist replied in seconds, with certainty.
“Kirk, Uhura,” Christine said, “I need to speak with the Ambassador privately.”

And she gave each of the cadets a look that added, ‘don't you dare argue with a CMO’.

“Doctor,” Spock interjected, “That will not be necessary. I received a detailed diagnosis of my condition in my timeline. I would have preferred to keep the matter private, but circumstances being what they are, it may be beneficial to inform a select few.”
The 2259 Gardeners’ Almanac, under the heading “Predicting Frost”, advised its readers to know the microclimate of their own portion of land. Had it been windy during the day? Was it cloudy? How was the garden landscaped? How far were the plants from the ground? Provided you observed the details carefully, you should never be surprised when things got icy.

Hikaru observed a distinct lack of warmth round his dinner table.

He knew why Ben was unhappy. Sulu had hoped that a little food and wine and conversation would achieve a thaw in relations between his husband and Jim Kirk. Ben needed to accept that Jim’s default setting was tactless, and whenever the cadet was rude he probably needed help to realise it. And there was no need for Ben to bottle up or disguise any anger he felt, because Jim could take as good as he gave.

Yet even Hikaru felt that Kirk had graduated to a new level of discourtesy. The spearfruit on Jim's plate had first been cut, then the fibres drawn apart with the tines of a fork before those pieces were mashed and smeared into his salad. The carrots Ben had painstakingly carved into palm fronds had been pushed onto the tablecloth. Not deliberately – Jim simply wasn’t looking at his own food. He was watching every mouthful the Ambassador ate.

The Ambassador, according to Kirk, had been too ill, far too ill to eat.

"He needs to be beamed up to MedBay," Jim insisted, after he'd been upstairs to check (pry) into what was going on between the older Vulcan and Uhura.

Sulu thought he was joking. Going along with it, he'd asked, “What – did Nyota knock him out this time?”

Didn’t know Jim’s blue eyes could look so cold. The instant Doctor Chapel arrived Kirk dragged her away.

That started Ben complaining, because the arancini would not be as nice if they got cold. Hikaru put them back in the oven. Fifteen minutes later he took them out again because everyone filed downstairs, found their place cards round the dining table and took their seats.

He could only guess that Christine Chapel must have worked some medical miracle. The elderly Vulcan seemed fine, possessed a reasonable appetite and an interest in his hosts. Ben fielded all the questions about the food and basked in the warmth of several compliments. Hikaru was asked about the younger Spock’s garden at Messier Cluster 20, plant by plant.

The doctor listened, sometimes smiled. Considering how adept she had proved to be – both manifestations of Spock had miraculously revived because of her efforts -- it was weird how her mood seemed subdued, her smiles a bit artificial.

And Nyota … hmm.

While Doctor Chapel had been upstairs treating the Ambassador, Uhura used her PADD to send Hikaru a message.

Peace treaty signed. Honest words exchanged.

So why did she look on the verge of tears?
Man, oh man, if he didn’t do something, the lull in conversation would become a chasm of awful silence. What was it the Almanac said every year? Warm up a space by covering it.

“Um, speaking of gardens,” Hikaru cleared his throat, “I’ve been meaning to ask Captain Pike if we could set aside space in the G Deck biomes to design a garden for the Enterprise.”
The Guests Disperse

Nobody wanted dessert. Nyota didn’t think she could force herself to swallow one more time. The Ambassador seemed to have grown tired again, and a toddler could have managed to leave a cleaner plate and table cloth than Jim Kirk.

So Uhura knew what Hikaru was getting at. He said he needed her 'help' to programme the rented android that would clear up their dishes. She followed him into the kitchen. Together, they used the display and keypad on the flat head of the robot to type a conversation that a Vulcan’s sensitive ears would not over hear.

"What happened when the doctor went upstairs?" Hikaru wrote.

“I can’t tell you,” Uhura replied.

“Not even a clue?”

She shook her head. But she also typed, “Best thing would be to find a way to give everyone the chance to leave without seeming rude.”

“Hey Communications track,” Hikaru pounded the keys, “can I delegate that?”

It amazed Nyota how he could break through her worst moods and make her smile. She took that expression back to the dining room, and suggested to everyone that they have coffee on board the Enterprise.

“Hikaru wants to measure up the G Deck biome, now that you’ve given him ideas for the garden. You could join him there, or …,”

But she didn’t finish the sentence. She let everyone to imagine his or her own ending. When they had all gathered into a group she hailed the ship from her PADD and asked Scotty to lock onto six life signs.

Once they materialised on the platform of Transporter Room One, the group split three ways. The newlyweds went hand in hand to the nearest turbolift that would take them to G Deck. Doctor Chapel called for a wheelchair and gave the Ambassador a firm suggestion that he should sit down again. Kirk pushed him.

Nyota went ahead, since she knew their destination. Gradually, her pace increased. By the time she reached MedBay, and the door to Chapel’s office, she was alone. She could keep on walking without needing to explain where she really wanted to be.

***

Nurse Bristow stopped Christine as they neared her office door, and pointed to the ward across the corridor.

“Biobed is made up in Room 4, Doctor, and environmental settings adjusted as you instructed.”

Jim stared at the sign over the ward entrance. Palliative Care.

Better that he deal with it, Christine thought, with all of it, as soon as possible.

“Thank you, Rowena," she said. "Would you show Cadet Kirk the way? I won’t be a moment.”
Uhura entered the wrong security code into the entrance keypad.

The Med Bay computer asked her to try again. She shook out her typing hand, took a couple of breaths. Illogical, to be this tense. Her mind was confusing one Spock for the other, the one who could recover versus the one ….

The second time she typed the right numbers and was allowed inside. She ran through the sitting area. In Spock’s bedroom, Leonard McCoy stood at the foot of the mattress, one hand crawling through his dishevelled brown hair, the other holding a hypo in its white knuckled grip. He turned to face her.

“Lieutenant! Maybe you can help the Commander recognise good sense when he hears it.”

As she made her way round McCoy to get to the other side of the bed, he went on.

“Been in pain a couple of hours now. But will he let me give him anything? Will he hell.”

The visitor’s chair by the bed retained the imprint of the last person who sat in it. Spock’s gaze seemed intent on the piece of furniture, but his eyes were glassy and opened a little too wide. Underneath the biobed insulation, she could tell his hands rested over his stomach. Nyota grabbed both arms of the chair and lifted it, carried the seat a few feet away and set it down near the hygiene station.

“Len,” she said as she pushed the backrest against the wall, “where can I get a heating pad?”

“On your replicator menu,” he replied.

Returning to the bed, she sat down gently on the mattress. This minute disturbance was enough to make Spock murmur, and one of his hands shifted. Nyota ran a finger along the surface of the insulation until she found the intervention seam, and worked it open.

“Could I ask a favour?” she turned her head, saw McCoy walking away.

“I’ve second guessed you,” he said, and left the room.

***

With the office door closed and her privacy settings adjusted to prevent any disturbance, Christine gave herself time to react. She wasn’t free to do anything she wanted. Tears would leave makeup smudges, which there would not be time to fix.

A hypo banished her headache. She checked the live security feed from Commander Spock’s room, saw Uhura sitting with him -- a good decision. Christine took off her shoes, and the dress she had put on for dinner. She threw them in her laundry pod and put on the clean med uniform that hung inside her locker. She recalled, as she always did in these situations, words from the surgeon who taught her third year Terran Oncology.

"Starfleet Med officers start half their working days at the end of their shifts. Get used to it."

Nurse Bristow was probably preparing the Ambassador's tests now, if she wasn't trying to help Jim Kirk adjust to the new reality. Before she left the office, Christine replicated a change of clothes for him. He wouldn’t think to, otherwise.
Nyota’s voice. She was close.

If he moved, he might be able to see her. But if he moved, pain would burn. Spock was defeated, did not have the mental resources to battle against his body or Cadet McCoy any longer.

Then the mattress dipped. A minute disturbance, but he seemed to become like the trees in the Washington forest as the magma from Mount St. Helens engulfed them. Thoughts and emotions and senses stopped -- there was only fire.

Yet he must have changed position during the blaze. As the pain reduced to a level that allowed awareness to return, he saw her. He felt her hands press softly on the biobed insulation, and her expression seemed intent.

Why had she come back? Logic was not a function he could exercise right now, and anything he did logically was merely the memory of a habit. But Nyota could and did think rationally. Surely she knew there were better things she could do with her time. When her hand came inside the bed cover and found his, Spock watched helplessly as the touch betrayed his anguish and confusion, how much he wanted her and how ashamed he was for the wanting. He could hold back nothing.

Worse than that, her touch brought relief. Pain did not disappear, yet the degree of reduction felt so liberating that his response was involuntary.

“…ota…,”

***

When McCoy came back with the heating pad, Nyota asked him for a cup of water and a sponge. She coated Spock’s mouth with a little moisture and watched his tongue poke out from between his lips to drink.

His hands bled emotions. Instead of the chaotic gush that hit her, she tried to respond with simplicity. She chose one of her many feelings – the joy of having connection restored. She let a steady stream of it flow back to him, and even Len, unaware of what was happening, noticed a change.

“You’re not a bad pain-killer yourself,” he remarked.

McCoy reminded her of the emergency call function on Spock’s wristband. And then he left.

For the next half hour, Uhura didn’t do anything more or less. She let Spock feel whatever he wished to feel. Whatever he expressed that she could echo, the ache for their many absent – his mother, her mother, Gaila, Tonev/Karimu, Chibuzo – she gave that back. It healed. The emotional bleeding gradually reduced and Spock relaxed, breathed more deeply. She did scold him, but then only gently, when she could see he was trying to resist falling asleep.
Sitting on the Porch

“No,” Ambassador Spock told Nurse Bristow. “I would prefer a Terran setting.”

The nurse nodded earnestly, though her expression brought to mind many similar human encounters which, over the years, had been stopped short simply because the human in question assumed they could understand him simply by checking the shape of his ears.

“Would --,” she began again, “—would you have any particular preference?”

She closed down the Vulcan settings she had selected without consulting him, and asked the palliative holosuite to display its main simulation menu again. Spock called out his choices.

“By geopolitical boundaries …,”

“United States…,”

“Midwest Region…,”

“Iowa…,”

A pause.

“Colonial style farmhouse…,”

“Back porch, west facing aspect, July, sunset.”

The default parameters were pleasing. Porch floorboards and woodwork had been painted white, but the programme included a weathering factor which left a film of golden dust over the surfaces, accumulated chaff and grass seed in the seams between the railings and suspended a spider’s web in the corner where one upright post met the canopy roof. The distant sun floated atop a horizon of wheat. A grasshopper appeared on the middle step.

Spock’s wheelchair became a high backed rocker and a checkered blanket materialised to cover his lower body. A second, identical chair appeared on his left side.

“Jim…,”

Spock gestured with a nod of his head in the direction of the empty seat.

Then he said to the nurse, “Please set up a provisional modification for a bedroom setting. We will activate that later.”

“Yes, Ambassador.”

A dun coloured *Helicoverpa zea*, a corn earworm moth, lighted on Spock’s blanket. It turned itself in a circle four times, spread its wings to show two dark grey reniform spots. It seemed to be searching with its proboscis for a source of food, as if it had mistaken the blanket for a flower.

“Is this for my benefit?” Kirk demanded.

Reluctantly, Spock took his eyes off the moth. Nurse Bristow had left them alone. Cadet Kirk stood at the porch railing, squinting into the low sun, which gave him an expression of distaste.

“You’ve been to Iowa?”

“On several occasions. Jim, are you displeased with your chair?”

“No,” Kirk replied, but turned and gave the rocker a wary look. After a few seconds, he left the railing. The moth, disturbed by the sound and motion, flew up in the air between them. Jim swatted it away as he lowered himself into his seat.

The programme gradually introduced sounds. Their chairs creaked as they moved, and a canine bark happened twice, the volume faint as if the creature were some distance away.

Jim -- the Jim from his timeline -- bought himself a farmhouse near Riverside and shortly afterwards acquired a dog -- a Labrador retriever with a glossy, black coat. It proved an inordinately demonstrative animal with a propensity to show affection with its tongue. It could be transported into an ecstasy of licking and tail movements by the mere repetition of its name, which was Bones.

“I miss Len,” Jim had told Spock, by way of explanation. It did not explain very much.

But as they sat together on that other back porch, and Spock tried to understand the appeal of his glass filled with cold peach tea, bourbon and mint, he did experience a nostalgia for the Enterprise and those times when the presence of his captain in a nearby chair was part of a regular routine. During that hot summer of 2367 in Iowa, their last summer, neither of them knew that they would never see each other again. Nonetheless, they behaved accordingly.

Then the younger version of Kirk spoke, and brought Spock’s attention back to his new reality.

“This isn't working for me.”

Spock raised one eyebrow. “I had hoped these surroundings might facilitate an honest discussion about difficult subjects.”

“You mean, like how much time you have left?”

“This simulation closely resembles the location where I said farewell to another James T Kirk.”

It was difficult to watch the cadet struggle with his emotions. But any attempt to help him control them would only reinforce their bond.

“Early stages,” Jim protested, “isn't that what Doctor Chapel said?”

Spock nodded.

“The prognosis for Tholin ohreth disease varies. I was advised by Romulan specialists that I might survive for as little as eighteen months or as long as five years. That is why I agreed to pilot the craft which carried the red matter.”

Jim glanced at him. The holosuite sunlight illuminated one side of his face.

“There was a chance something would go wrong?” he asked.

“A considerable risk. It seemed logical, therefore, to put my life in jeopardy, since it was nearing its end.”

Kirk sat forward and covered his face with both hands. He remained in that position for one minute
and twenty-three seconds, while along the road that appeared to run past the south side of the simulated farmhouse a red pickup truck drove past, and the dust raised in a long plume behind it gradually settled. The corn earworm moth remained airborne. It flew close to a number of suitable resting places but seemed unable to decide on one.

“Jim…,”

“No,” Kirk said, without moving.

“Since I have not made a request, I cannot interpret your response.”

Jim lifted his face and let Spock see the tears.

“You said,” Kirk forced out the words, “you said the bond diminishes over time.”

“That is correct.”

“How much time? How much time before I stop hurting for you? For both versions of you?”

“I can solve the problem, insofar as one Spock is concerned. I can end the connection between us.”

Cadet Kirk swallowed, sniffed, attempted to groom his hair with his fingers but the result could not be considered an improvement. His blue eyes shifted as though he searched for something he had dropped on the floorboards. His expression suggested this imaginary item was greatly valued.

“No,” he said, still searching.

“This emotional attachment will hinder your Starfleet career. I must insist that we --,”

“Not yet,” Jim interrupted.

The dog began to bark again. The light on Kirk’s face had changed colour in harmony with the angle of the setting sun. And there was a noise that Spock alone could hear, almost certainly coming from outside the room.

Jim Kirk reached across the gap between them, and held on to the back of Spock's chair until the Vulcan stopped his gentle rocking.

“I just need to know that there will be someone else. Someone who will look after you.”

At that moment the holosuite opened the screen door of its simulated farmhouse, and Christine Chapel stepped out onto the porch.
Early in the Day

Gavin Evans arrived in Med Bay at 06:23 ship’s time.

“Morning, Lieutenant Commander,” Nurse Gajra Anand looked up from the main desk. She got out of her chair and pointed at it, as an invitation for him to sit down and sign in to the systems hub.

“Thanks,” he said as he took the seat.

Gajra stood on her toes, stretched her arms over her head and took a few steps across the office, yawning.

“Ugh,” she dropped her hands back to her sides. “… needed that.”

“Long shift?” Gavin asked as the workstation scanned his face and booked him onto the rota for the start of his.

“Covered for Silvanus. He now knows that Thermistan spray brings him out in a rash, so he’ll wear gloves next time.”

Gavin clicked his tongue in sympathy. “Anything new?”

“Patient in Room 4, Palliative --”

“Wait a second,” he interrupted, and pointed at the duty roster. “Has Doctor Chapel been up all night?”

Nurse Anand opened her locker and took out her PADD.

“Like I said, Room 4. We are looking after two versions of Spock now. See you Friday, Evans.”

***

Long, long ago (so it seemed) Nyota could remember a time when she did not sleep alone. Occasionally, she used to wake up and find that during the night she had turned over in bed and used Spock’s stomach as her pillow. Probably his heartbeat was soothing.

As it was now.

Somehow she had also pushed the heating pad away from his body. Through the intervention seam she could see how it had become a grey lump under the bed insulation.

Carefully, she lifted her right hand, intending to slip it inside the seam and adjust the pad.

“--yota.”

Spock’s voice was thin. Uhura used her hand to lift herself off his body instead, and sweep the hair away her face.

“Hey,” she said, “how long have you been awake?”

“--o--,”

Spock paused, swallowed.
“I’ll fetch you some water,” Nyota got up on her knees and crawled backwards off the biobed. She checked the floor for the boots she had discarded last night, placed her feet correctly so she didn’t step on them. Then she smoothed down her replicated pajama shirt.

“Did you want anything else,” she asked, “maybe?”

In spite the plomeek soup mishap, and subsequent abdominal pain, Spock seemed improved. When she moved, he decided to try sitting a little more upright than the angle of his mattress, so he carried the weight of his own head and shoulders.

But his swallows could not properly lubricate his throat. “—m unsure,” he said.

“Okay.”

While she waited for the replicator to produce a small bottle of water, Uhura noticed that Jim Kirk had saved a favourite on the main menu display -- Cornish Catimor medium roast. She requested that, half and half with scalded milk, in a thermos.

***

Spock held both drinks and watched her climb back onto his mattress and settle beside him. Her left shoulder pressed against his right.

They had no skin to skin contact, but from what he could see Nyota appeared content. Until he had taken several sips of water, he could not articulate the question which had troubled him since she arrived yesterday evening.

“You are not reconsidering the viability of our relationship,” he asked, “in the context of recent events?”

His voice broke, rasped and lost strength throughout that sentence. He drank more water, to help him talk and to resist the urge to glance at her face and see the answer before he heard it.

Nyota replied with another question. “Do you think I should?”

“I have done little thinking,” he said, “I have not been capable.”

“I have,” she said.

He did look at her then, curious. She had tipped the thermos to swallow the last of its contents.

“Umm,” she replaced the lid on the flask and tightened it. “Kirk has good taste in coffee.”

She turned her body and reached across him, placed the empty container on his overbed table. She let herself lean into him and her head tilted so their noses would not collide.

He received a warm, coffee flavoured kiss.

This confused him. He could not comprehend how his mouth, or any other part of him in his present state, could inspire in her a desire for physical contact.

“I no longer understand who I am,” he confessed, “or who I can be.”

Nyota nodded. Her free hand slipped around the back of his neck and he felt her fingernails gently scratch up to his hairline and into it, tracing the bulge where the capitis muscles met the base of his skull.
“I would not tolerate being a hindrance to you …,”

He wanted to finish the sentence, but without control he could not defer or conceal a response to her touch. Yesterday he wept until his eyes ached, but that did not discourage tears from forming now.

Her hand cupped his head and pulled him forward. He felt her mouth move against his ear.

“I believe you will find your way,” she murmured.

Then she released him, let him rest against his pillows again. He could see how her lower eyelids brimmed to the point of overflow.

“It is so easy,” she sniffed, “too easy, to be afraid. I was. Do you remember when we first came back to Earth after the battle of Vulcan?”

He nodded.

“For those three days we didn’t talk. We hardly touched and we didn’t meld.”

Sharp pain seemed to pulse from his skull, from the bone that surrounded his eyes. It forced them shut. In those first few days he could not talk. All his strength was needed to meditate to a point of tenuous equilibrium, so that he could appear to function. He was, of course, aware that Nyota had her own losses. But he could not give more thought to them than that.

And still, six months on, he could give nothing.

“Nyota, I…, this is inexcuseable --,”

“No, Spock, wait. This was not just you. I was afraid to talk or touch you. I thought, if I got too close, I would be dragged down to a place I could not escape. And…, oh god…,”

Her forehead pressed against his, and he realised how much her pain matched his.

“I thought … this is so selfish … I thought it was unfair. I lost my parents, I lost T’Shin and I lost Emmanuel. I – we – lost Gaila. It isn’t logical to feel cursed, but I did. I let myself believe that I couldn’t afford to get close to you or to anyone else, because then I’d lose them. I even thought, if you had bonded with Lelar, maybe Vulcan would not have been destroyed.”

“Nyota --,”

“I know…,” her voice wavered, as did his, with the intensity of their sadness. “It’s stupid, I know.”

The traffic of emotion travelling between them meant that, for several minutes, they yielded to the rush and fell silent. They wet each other’s faces, kissed clumsily because their breathing patterns became erratic. Spock had no basis to judge, since he had always been taught that emotional display was a failing. And yet …

When they grew calmer – not calm, but able to keep their eyes open and exchange reassurances as well as regrets, Spock let out a long sigh. And he believed, for the first time since Nero took his revenge, that there could be such a thing as the future.

***

Christine decided, before she signed off, to check the live surveillance from Commander Spock’s room. And she saw them together, nose to nose. Sleep deprivation tipped her in the direction of sentimentality. She watched longer than her professional conscience considered proper, and even
defended herself out loud.

“Yes, yes, it's a private moment, I know. But they look so --.”

Then Nurse Evans asked permission to enter her office, and gave her an entirely different kind of telling off.
Christine berated herself, all the way along the MedBay corridor. Just when things were improving ...

Ambassador Spock’s symptoms had gone into remission. That was a temporary situation, they all knew, but he was determined to use whatever time he had. His holosuite settings were reconfigured to present as an office. A subspace connection allowed him to continue his project to reconstruct and enhance New Vulcan’s science archives.

With additional pressure from Chris Pike, this change was enough to ensure that Cadet Kirk beamed down to San Francisco when classes resumed after the Christmas break.

“Visiting rights on Sundays,” Kirk insisted.

“Good,” Christine said, with a mischievous smirk. “Hikaru and Ben need volunteers to help with the garden.”

The Academy gave Lieutenant Uhura special dispensation (also the result of pressure from Pike). She was permitted to watch her lectures and complete practical work remotely, using the console inside Commander Spock’s private suite. Spock requested and received a motorised wheelchair. For three consecutive mornings Nurse Evans helped him out of the biobed, steered him out of the sleeping area and parked him alongside Uhura.

Her proximity had become restorative. Spock still needed more than his usual amount of sleep, but he went seventy-two hours without any physical discomfort.

And then Christine ruined all that, by suggesting he try plomeek soup again.

It upset her more than she expected. So she let the nurses clean him up, and went to take refuge in Palliative Care. The Ambassador greeted her when she entered his room, but in his usual fashion he waited for her to indicate whether she wished to make conversation. She watched the data stream across his workstation for a minute or two before she told him what had just happened to his younger self.

“Could it be an allergy?” she asked him.

“The recipe has regional and familial variations,” Spock replied, “but there was no record of adverse reaction in my timeline.”

“Psychosomatic?”

He took longer to consider this.

“Possible,” was all he would concede.

“He must be hungry,” Christine said. “Intravenous feeding is not enough, and won’t be enough to get him back on his feet.”

The Ambassador suggested she try replicating some other food. But what?

Nurse Evans ambushed her when she tried to return to her office, and nagged her again about the length of her working days.
“We’ve come through the worst. Now is the time to recoup,” he argued.

He convinced her this time. That and her mood, which was not improving. Christine signed out and left MedBay. She walked slowly to her quarters. Once inside, she took off her boots and lay down on her bed. An hour, maybe two, that’s what she told herself. Cat nap.

Nine hours later, she woke up.

It felt like no sleep at all. Her sinuses were blocked and no amount of blinking could completely clear her vision. She showered, changed into fresh clothes. She looked longingly at the soft soled wool slippers inside her wardrobe – a Christmas gift from Melanie.

She put on her boots, but took the slippers with her.

***

“Think of it as an evening’s conversation during which a card game also happens.”

That was how Chris managed to sell the idea to Lieutenant Uhura.

And, as he predicted, it piqued Spock’s interest when Lieutenant Commander Scott and Keenser arrived, and arranged the telescopic table and chairs in a familiar configuration around his biobed. Chris let his first officer open the wooden box that held the playing deck, and try to shuffle the cards.

Doctor Chapel arrived in the middle of their third round.

“Christine,” Chris greeted her, “join us?”

He couldn’t figure out whether she was on duty or not. Her uniform looked fresh. She was carrying a pair of slippers in one hand, and her trademark teacup and saucer in the other.

“Oh,” she said, and her face lit up. Scotty got her a chair. She used it as a resting place for her tea while she pulled off her uniform boots.

“What are you playing?” she asked.

“Rummy,” Pike replied. “Lieutenant Uhura might be hoping you’ll take her place.”

“Hah,” Uhura said, “they fear my beginner’s luck.”

Slippers on, the doctor picked up her drink and perched herself on her seat, as if she didn’t plan to stay. “You all finish your game first,” she insisted, “I’ll watch.”

Sixes were wild, but not turning up when they were helpful. Keenser floated for a couple of turns. Uhura put down her first three card run. Then sure enough Chapel got out of her chair, and placed her cup and saucer on it again.

Chris had to fight off a smile. He wondered what the others would make of the ritual Christine unfailingly performed when, like now, she had her favourite Abernathy biscuits with tea. First she broke the rounds into halves, and then each half in half. And the pieces had to form an orderly line around the rim of her saucer. Made a mess of crumbs. The only good thing Chris could say about the whole palaver was that it left a pleasant scent of sugar and caraway seed in the air.

Spock would be very familiar with her routine. Which was why it seemed odd when the Commander ignored the rummy and fixed his attention on Chapel as she picked up the first biscuit and snapped it in two.
Chris saw the Commander’s nostrils flare.

And when the doctor moved her teaspoon off the saucer to make space for the arrangement of bite-sized pieces, Spock swallowed.

“Christine?”

“Um-hum?”

“Got any more of those?”

She glanced up from her biscuit breaking. “Captain, since when did you start liking --,“

“Not me,” Chris said, and pointed at his first officer.

At that point, Lieutenant Uhura lost interest in cards. The game stalled. Spock seemed momentarily subdued, being scrutinised by so many pairs of concerned eyes.

“Could we try?” Uhura asked the doctor.

Chapel sighed.

“It might spoil your little party,” she said.

“Aye, so we’ll have an intermission in the other room,” Scotty suggested. “Keenser, help me shift the table. We don’t want the Commander to feel, you know, hemmed in."

Christine took the unprecedented step of breaking her second biscuit into smaller portions. Pike replicated another saucer and brought it to her. It was a long intermission. Spock took half an hour to eat a single Abernathy round, each piece placed on Chapel’s spoon and dipped into her cup of tea before she fed him.

There was a ten minute extension to intermission, just to be on the safe side. And then Pike told Scotty and Keenser to come through, and they played another four rounds. Christine took over the Lieutenant’s cards. Uhura wanted to keep her hands underneath the bed covers, as an aid to digestion.
Nutmeg Room

“Doctor, please do not consider this a judgement of your personal tastes …;”

But Spock doubted that she would. He had reconfigured his room in Palliative Care a third time. The holosuite menu, he noted, contained an intriguing option. Under Western Europe, there was a selection for “England/Staffordshire/Wood Eaton/Chapel House/Nutmeg Room, set for afternoon tea”.

When he chose it, he found himself inside an hexagonal chamber where the walls and floor were clad with Terran wood panelling, varnished to highlight their grain and colour. It did bring to mind the seeds of Myristica fragrans, after which the room had been named.

Tall, south facing windows ensured good light. They looked out over a landscape of gentle, green hills, with a single neighbouring property visible, perhaps a half kilometre away.

The interior was neither large nor ornate. Three small watercolour paintings, framed to match the wall panels, provided the only decoration. The tea table was the focal point. With three chairs round it, there was little additional floorspace. Spock could clearly see it was a room into which one would invite only trusted, companionable guests.

When Doctor Chapel requested a meeting with him, this was what she saw when she entered. She stopped in the doorway, pressed the palm of her hand against the base of her throat, smiled and then disengaged the smile.

“Well.”

That was her only comment. She walked all the way round the table, brushing the tips of her fingers over the white cloth. She stopped behind one of the chairs and shook her head.

“Is there a problem, Doctor?” he asked.

Her head continued to shake.

“Remembrance of things past,” she said.

“You are referring to the Standard translation of the work originally published in French by the Terran writer Marcel Proust?”

“Yes, that too,” Chapel replied. “Ambassador, the Nutmeg Room and Chapel House were destroyed during the Third World War. The property my family rebuilt in peacetime did not use wood; it was too scarce.”

She pulled out the chair she had been facing and sat down.

“But we had data files with old photographs and video. I browsed them as a child, and this room always appealed to me. And I gave Starfleet Medical access to that data, so I knew they had created this simulation. But I have never seen it running.”

She reached out to touch the teapot.

“Hot,” she said, “lovely.”

Spock chose a seat for himself, and copied the doctor as she lifted and shook out her napkin, draped
it over her lap. Then she reached across the table, where there was a covered plate, and removed the lid.

She laughed out loud.

“Well,” she said again, “somebody else must have told Starfleet Medical about my favourite biscuits.”

She lifted the plate and moved it in his direction.

“Would you like to try one?”

Spock tilted his head thoughtfully.

“Would these be the same biscuits which recently provided my counterpart with the first solid food he could digest?”

“Yes,” Chapel said, “unbelievably. I can’t recall the number of times he was offered one when we served together on the Farragut. He always declined.”

Spock selected one, and lifted it using his index finger and thumb. Immediately, he could see why they would not normally appeal to Vulcans. Their high fat content left a greasy residue on his skin, and the sweet smell of the biscuit was cloying. The scent of caraway compensated somewhat. But he would have preferred to taste the seeds by themselves.

“Did he say,” Spock asked, “what made them more appetising now?”

“He said that, while he was unconscious, he believed he could smell them. I told him that was reality, more likely, because I drank multiple cups of tea at his bedside. I practically lived on Abernathy biscuits, especially when his temperature ran so high.”

“Curious,” Spock replied.

The doctor removed the lid from the teapot and inserted a silver spoon, to stir the contents.

“Going by your reaction,” she said, “which is more a non-reaction, by the way, I’d say there is no danger that you will be wanting your own supply.”

That was when he asked her not to regard his lack of enthusiasm as a judgement against her.

“Of course not,” she said. “Tea?”

They drank a cup in silence together, which was not uncomfortable. He eventually asked her what she wished to discuss.

“I wanted to assure you, Ambassador, that while I am CMO of the USS Enterprise, you are welcome to remain as long as you wish.”

He thanked her by saying, "In my timeline, I served on board the Enterprise for forty-three years. The surroundings are familiar and therefore conducive to my work. I am also grateful to be able to observe Commander Spock as he recovers.”

“Good,” Christine said. He watched as she took one of the biscuits and broke it carefully into four pieces. He copied this procedure, thinking it might be a matter of etiquette unique to English afternoon tea. He wondered whether the doctor would be interested to know that the Christine Chapel he remembered grew up in Michigan state, because her ancestors chose to emigrate after the
“However,” her voice dropped a tone lower, “my commission ends once Leonard McCoy graduates and the Enterprise is ready for its first mission, which should be the end of July.”

“I see.”

“If the Starfleet command bulletins are anything to go by, it will take another two to three years to replace the vessels and crew expertise lost during the battle of Vulcan.”

Christine paused to eat a portion of her biscuit. Spock deferred a little longer. Her statement had led him inevitably to ask a question.

“What will you do while you wait?”

“What will you do,” Chapel turned the question on him, “when you can no longer stay here?”

“Return to New Vulcan,” he said.

The doctor nodded.

“Of course,” she replied. “You live alone there?”

“Ambassador Sarek and I share accommodation.”

“Umm.”

The pause was significant.

“More tea?” Chapel asked suddenly.

“I would prefer more clarity about the direction of our conversation.”

The doctor made a fricative hiss through her teeth, and gave him a sidelong glance.

“I was trying to avoid what might be a sensitive subject,” she said.

“Unnecessary,” he insisted.

She toyed with the spoon on her saucer.

“All right then. It’s about Ambassador Sarek. When you first came aboard, you told me that Sarek did not respond to my messages because he was off planet on diplomatic business.”

Now he, in turn, failed to respond and betrayed his own uneasiness.

“More tea,” he said, “please.”

She showed her exasperation with a sigh, but picked up the pot.

“When I communicated this to Lieutenant Uhura,” Chapel continued, “she informed me that Sarek was no longer an Ambassador. On the day before Vulcan was destroyed, he was forced to resign his position as well as his seat on the High Council. She also told me that, to her knowledge, he has not been reinstated.”

She refilled his cup. He accepted it, but remained silent.
“Can you see the direction of this conversation now?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“And you aren’t concerned?”

“I see no reason for --,”

“Let me help you, then,” she interrupted him. “I am about to accuse you of lying to me, Ambassador.”
I remain unconcerned, Doctor,” Spock replied.

Christine refrained from telling him that he was just as evasive and infuriating as another half-Vulcan she knew. He had the audacity to maintain his gaze on her with those eyes that, having paled with age, seemed brighter, and to her mind a little mischievous.

“So,” she asked, “did you tell me the truth?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

She dropped her piece of biscuit on the tablecloth and sputtered.

“Oh, I see, we’re only talking about a semantic falsehood, then?”

“Of the seven elders who belonged to the Vulcan High Council,” the Ambassador explained, “only two were required to witness and record Sarek’s resignation. Neither of them survived.”

“What about the official record?”

“It was preserved as a restricted access file on all six of Starfleet’s master data platforms. The intention of the witnesses was to lift restrictions once they had informed the rest of the Council.”

“And did they inform the others?”

“No.”

“Is there anyone else who can access the file?”

Spock nodded, sipped his tea.

Christine sighed. “Fine, I’ll have a guess. Probably Sarek was given access.”

“Correct.”

“Anyone else?”

“No.”

Christine needed to finish her second cup, after learning all that. Outside the windows, the simulation had clouded the sky, and sent a sharp shower and a wind that shook the heads of the wildflowers dotted over the lawn. You could even hear the sound of raindrops striking the glass panes.

Lovely, lovely place. And deliberately chosen. Good to know.
Spock was finally putting a piece of Abernathy biscuit into his mouth, and carefully compressing it between his teeth. She need to stay angry with him, so the expression on his face would not have her burst out laughing.

“This is all very well,” she said, “but I have a patient who is going to ask, at some stage, about his father.”

“In view of the Commander’s state of mind,” Spock said, after he had swallowed his mouthful, “and my present intelligence, I urge a pragmatic approach. We should reveal nothing unless or until we are asked.”


“There are a number of risks, loss of life being but one,” was all the Ambassador would reveal.

Christine put her cup down on its saucer with a decisive, crisp contact.

“Fine.”

She finished off the last of her biscuit and brushed the crumbs off her hands. “Fine. If you think it would be better to wait, we will wait.”

“I did not expect you to be amenable to that request,” he remarked.

“It just so happens that I need a good bargaining position,” she said, “for the request I wish to make.”

What a silly thing, to feel such a triumphant rush because she succeeded in getting both those Vulcan eyebrows to lift.

“When you return to New Vulcan,” she said, “I want to go with you.”

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He considered her reasoning. The symptoms of his illness would gradually become worse. They would warrant expert care which, he agreed, he would be reluctant to demand from the limited resources of the new colony. And the psi bond with Jim Kirk needed to be weakened, by distance and time. More likely the cadet would pursue a future in Starfleet if he knew ‘his’ Spock was in good hands.

And, the doctor had added, was there not some part of him that needed human company? The same part of him that chose to sit on Iowa farmhouse porches, and at English tea tables?

He pronounced her conclusions logical. And like a human, Doctor Chapel made an expression of inordinate pleasure at this achievement.
Loss of Balance

Twenty-three days, one hour and sixteen minutes.

It was necessary to go back that far in time for Spock to recall the last occasion he had shaved his own face or cleaned his own teeth.

As he manipulated the sonic dentabit with one hand, to reach behind his molars, his other hand remained clamped to the edge of the basin countertop. Standing up without human assistance had been yesterday’s achievement. It still felt novel and risky.

The dentabit dislodged minute particles of the fruit from tree species *Juglans regia* – walnuts. They were an essential ingredient, according to Captain Pike, in the preparation of his grandmother’s recipe for banana bread. Spock enjoyed the texture contrast, the soft cake which required little chewing interspersed with broken nut meats that needed mastication. He had added an option for banana bread to his replicator menu, along with Doctor Chapel’s Abernathy biscuits and Nyota’s sweet potato pudding.

The two adverse reactions to plomeek soup now governed his food choices. Vulcan cuisine, even the smell or recollection of dishes familiar to his childhood, triggered severe digestive discomfort and nausea. Christine’s biscuits, by contrast, never appealed to him before his illness. His logical deduction was that in order to get nourishment, he should seek out other things he had never eaten before, foods he would not have considered eating.

When he finished cleaning his teeth, he rinsed his mouth with a small cup of water and replaced the dentabit in its dock. He called out to Nyota, told her he was ready to shower.

She entered the hygiene station with a smile on her face. “You’re doing really well. Did you want me to help you take off your pajamas?”

An understandable enquiry, since he had not removed his supporting hand from the countertop.

“I will attempt to undress myself, initially,” he suggested.

“Sure.”

She asked the computer to increase the temperature inside the station by another five degrees centigrade, and closed the door.

“So,” she said, “I wonder what your newly developed sweet tooth might want for lunch?”

Spock found he could use his feet to step on the hem of his pajama pants and pull them down without needing his hands at all.

“Regarding my present diet, I am somewhat concerned about the long-term health implications connected with such a high consumption of simple carbohydrates.”

He took a deep breath and let go of the counter. After five point six seconds without loss of balance, Spock deemed it safe to lift the bottom of his t-shirt and pull the garment over his head. While blinded by the cloth stretched over his face, he did feel himself sway. Nyota’s hands landed against his chest and his back, to steady him.

She continued to hold him after his shirt was successfully removed and dropped on the floor. The
hand she had placed on his chest stroked him gently along the line of his ribs. Through their skin connection it was clear she was displeased with the visibility of his skeletal structure.

“I think,” she said aloud, “those concerns are premature. You have lost nearly thirty kilos since your discharge medical check in August. I think your body is asking for what it needs most urgently, which is calories.”

A feeling occurred. Two feelings – the second was frustration because Spock had gained no emotional control in recent days, to accompany his improved physical condition. And the first was a petty selfishness, quite inappropriate given the remote possibility of sexual activity in his current state. Yet he experienced a stab of anxiety specifically because she did not find his body attractive.

Mortified, he could not look her in the eyes.

Her skin thrummed with surprise. She increased the pressure and frequency of her stroking.

“Hey…,” she said.

And then her hand moved from his ribs to his jawline, and her thumb found the buccinator muscle on the left side of his face. The tactile sensation was overstimulating, ‘ticklish’ as Terrans would say. Spock wanted to keep still and move away at the same time.

Her hand moved down and cupped his chin.

“Come closer,” she pulled, to bring his face nearer to hers.

He was gifted a soft, undemanding kiss, with their mouths cleaving and nearly motionless. Their warm breathing, combined with the increased temperature inside the hygiene station, created humidity that condensed over their upper lips, noses and cheeks. His anxieties evaporated.

Until his mouth was invaded by the cupric taste of his own blood.

He made an involuntary expression of disgust and pulled away. Droplets of blood flew in the air between them; his blood painted Nyota’s lips.

***

A split second, and then Nyota reacted. The arm she had pressed against Spock’s back turned him in the direction of the counter, while the other hand holding his chin lowered his head over the basin.

“Stay just like that and breathe through your mouth,” she said.

She fetched his bathrobe, laid it over his shoulders, helped each of his arms to find their way through the sleeves.

“I’ll get Doctor McCoy.”

Len arrived, gave Spock a bioscan, could not find anything but a rise in blood pressure.

“Might be the cause,” he said, “or the reaction. How long has he been standing up?”

“Suppose … half an hour …,”

Spock would know the exact time. But he was preoccupied with breathing and holding onto the counter.
“Hmm,” McCoy said, “then I recommend a rest.”

***

Anger was not helpful. Its only contribution was to maintain his abnormal blood pressure readings and confine Spock to the chair by his bed, with a bowl on his lap. He failed to refrain from verbal expression. When Doctor McCoy knelt down and began to explain where he could pinch his nose to staunch the bleeding, he shouted back.

“Not now!”

It made him dizzy. McCoy cleared his throat and stood up slowly.

“All right,” the doctor said, as his feet shuffled backwards. Spock heard him whisper to Uhura, operating on ill-informed assumptions about Vulcan aural sensitivity.

“Call me in twenty minutes if nothing changes.”

Anger changed to shame, immediately after that. Spock let out a long breath.

He heard Nyota leave the room with McCoy. That left him with nothing to do except count the seconds which passed between one drop of blood falling in the bowl and the next. At first he refused; he wanted his agony. Of course, this was irrationality on top of irrationality. It became a procession he witnessed like a bystander, disgust with himself followed by sadness overridden by fury and dissolving into a feeling he could not describe. He would need new vocabulary.

In spite himself, he was counting. Four hundred and eighteen seconds passed before Nyota returned. The same drop of blood had remained suspended from his septum for twenty-seven seconds.

She knelt down in front of his chair, the way McCoy had done. She smiled. This opened hairline cracks in the blood which had dried on her face. Spock reached out, touched the stain, and grimaced.

***

“What?” Nyota asked. She touched the same place herself, and realised. “Oh yeah. Later.”

Spock regarded her with what looked like suspicion. He probably didn't understand how it gave her a sense of solidarity with him.

“You ….” he replied thickly, “that is not characteristic of you.”

“So two of us, then,” she replied.

The expression on his face did not change.

“He says don’t attribute much to the nosebleed. All Vi’mashaya P’pil’lai’ai patients suffer an assortment of psychosomatic symptoms.”

Still nothing.

“What is it?” she asked. “Can you put it in words?”

“No!!”
The force of the reply started fresh bleeding, just when it looked as though it might stop. Nyota closed her mouth and sighed inside her mind.

***

Why?

Nyota had folded her arms after his outburst, looked at the floor. She did not seem angry with him, though he had been unforgivably rude and was enduring his own remorse while she was deep in thought. Then she glanced at him, and made her preposterous suggestion.

“Ambassador Spock is on board. He has been asking how soon he could see you. I think now would be a good time.”
When Spock entered the Commander’s suite, Lieutenant Uhura was waiting. She gave him a debriefing of sorts, standing to attention and matter-of-fact, as though defying him to ask for clarification about the dried green bloodstain across her upper lip.

But he received information sufficient for his purposes.

In the next room, his younger self sat in a bedside chair with his shoulders stooped forward, the only option to keep his nasal passages clear. Erratic, audible breathing betrayed the Commander’s state of mind. Spock closed the door behind him, but could think of no reason to speak immediately. Instead he observed the bleeding, timed the intervals between the drops which landed in the basin placed to collect them and determined that there was improvement, however slight.

During one of those intervals, the Commander tilted his head, just enough to confirm the identity of his visitor.

“I did not request your presence,” his younger self said. His voice was flat, distorted by congestion.

“So the lieutenant has warned me,” Spock replied.

“I wish --,”

The Commander tried to bite back his emotional outburst, but it would not be contained.

“I wish you had never come here,” he said bitterly. “Never entered this timeline.”

For the next thirty-three seconds, his rate of breathing increased, indicative of a continued struggle. With great reluctance, Spock took these words to heart and considered again the circumstances which had transferred him from one reality to another. It was an exercise he had conducted repeatedly, but for the sake of his younger self he would review all his decisions as if for the first time.

“Briefly,” he said, “I did entertain the same plan you carried out against Nero. When I emerged from the black hole, I set my ship on a collision course with the Narada, intending to let the red matter explode and destroy us together.”

The Commander had no comment.

“What changed my mind was the memory of the Romulan homeworld, and its tragic end. Nero believed I had murdered his people, that I was capable of such thoughtless killing. I had to show him otherwise. I decided to face him with evidence from my databanks which would prove that this was not the case.”

Evidence, downloaded to a subcutaneous chip, a recording of the debates he attended in the Romulan senate and subsequent meetings with the Ministry of Science.

“But what I learned,” Spock went on, “when I presented myself to Nero and obeyed his order to get down on my knees, was how many years his desire for revenge had deepened and festered. Evidence meant nothing to him. The only thing on my vessel which interested him was the red matter.”

He wanted to tell the Commander how the horror of hearing Nero’s intentions, and the realisation
that he, Spock, had unwittingly provided the weapon by which Vulcan would be destroyed, was the reason he had to pause his explanation again. Undeniably, there were now two Spocks in the room with their heads bowed, concentrated on the regulation of their emotions.

The younger one spoke before the older one could.

“How … how did you …,”


As if they had agreed, both of them lifted their heads at the same moment and looked at each other.

“It seemed,” Spock continued, “as if the only appropriate reaction was to remain on the spot where I had watched our homeworld implode, and let the harsh environment of Delta Vega decide how I would perish, whether I would freeze to death or provide one of its predatory species with nourishment.”

“But you did not,” the Commander said.

Spock shrugged. “I do not remember returning to the ice caves. Gradually I regained connection with reality, and came to realise that hastening my death might be a further loss to Vulcan. I possessed knowledge which might have been lost. At that point I created a fire with the supplies Nero had given me, and allowed myself to take water.”

With an emphasis he knew the Commander would understand, Spock added, “But I could not eat without experiencing physical discomfort.”

His younger self nodded carefully, a precaution in view of his nosebleed, though that appeared to have stopped.

“A few hours later Cadet Kirk arrived in the caves, and I found out that there was another Spock coming to terms with this same immense loss. And so, as you rightly reminded me when I entered this room, I have become my own worst enemy. And I would end my life now, Commander, if I could be convinced that doing so would alleviate your suffering.”

“I …,” the Commander protested, “I would ask that you forgive —,”

“No,” Spock interrupted, letting his anger colour the tone of that word and ensure he had silence. Then he approached the bedside chair, and got down on his knees in front of the younger half Vulcan.

“I am the one who must beg your forgiveness. I am the invader of your timeline, and the destroyer of your world. I am at your mercy.”
Kirk returned to the captain’s chair. “Yellow Alert,” he announced.

From her station, Uhura broadcast the signal throughout the ship, and got her transmission settings ready in case they needed to hail the Andorian battle cruiser which had accompanied the Enterprise to 37 Khomi.

“Lieutenant Dempsey,” Kirk asked, “can we get the weapons status of the Xindi craft on screen?”

The acting Science Officer had commenced scans before being asked. Uhura watched the deft movements of zir hands on the console. Pike had promoted Cottran Dempsey to Lieutenant quickly, a few minutes after the distress call was received. But there was a very level head resting on Dempsey’s shoulders, one that had passed exams with distinction in spite losing a sibling at the battle of Vulcan.

“The smaller Xindi vessels have phaser cannons fore and aft,” Cottran reported, “and their mother ship has full torpedo array.”

“As we figured,” Kirk said. “But do they want a fight?”

“Captain,” Chekov pointed at their visuals, and the way the smaller craft had arrayed themselves. “I think their mobility matters more than weapons. The mother ship may order them to spread out and create diversionary fire to separate us from the Andorians.”

Kirk acknowledged the point with a nod.

Suddenly, Lieutenant Dempsey hunched over zir console, intent. “Sir, there is also a suspicious installation on the surface of the planetoid.”


“I’m working to strip the scan down and get a look at what’s inside.”

Most definitely, Cottran was a good choice. Uhura went on telling herself that while she went to work translating a message just received from the Andorian captain and uploading the Xindi transmissions they were able to intercept. From the corner of her eye, she could still see Dempsey’s hands. They were so elegant in their movements, she could almost think they were Spock’s. Or wish.

***

Today’s psychosomatic symptom was vertigo.

Gavin Evans fitted a foam brace around Spock’s head and neck, to keep both as steady as possible while his wheelchair was in motion.

“You may change your mind any time, Commander,” the nurse told him, "if you feel unwell.”

“Understood,” he replied.

But he had no intention of staying in his suite. There had been no symptoms before the distress call. The bridge crew were summoned; Nyota gave him a kiss on the cheek before she left to change into uniform. Spock practised the techniques Ambassador Spock taught him, to restore his self-control,
while he listened to the shipwide announcement. 37 Khomi, formerly a planetoid in the Vulcan system, was being claimed by the Andorian Empire and the Xindi simultaneously. It seemed the Xindi had begun unauthorised activity on its surface.

He thought he was doing well. He contacted Pike and was invited to his Captain’s ‘latest ready room’ in the G Deck observation lounge. When Nurse Evans arrived to relieve Uhura, Spock stood out of his chair with the intention of asking for an escort.

He nearly fainted instead.

***

What a dynamic trio, Chris thought, the three of us. One Spock had just pulled up on his left. The older Vulcan's silver hair looked less than immaculate, and he was there in spite Doctor Chapel's reservations.

The other Spock sat on his right. His face protruded from a block of white foam that gave off a peculiar odour, reminding Chris of liquorice. He couldn’t stand liquorice.

As the man in the middle, he wasn’t much better. His bad knee was playing up, shaking like flagpole in a gale. He disguised it by draping a quilt over his lap.

With their three wheelchairs in a row, they faced the observation screen like they were going to assess a goddamn Academy training video.

***

The last one to arrive in the observation lounge, Spock noted how the Commander was immobilised from the shoulders up, and accompanied by a nurse. Spock drove his own wheelchair and stopped it alongside Christopher Pike's, just as the Enterprise dropped out of warp near 37 Khomi and faced the Xindi.

Lieutenant Uhura had provided them with an open channel to the bridge.

"Spock --," Kirk called down, and then he clarified, "I mean Commander Spock, what’s so attractive about this lump of rock?"

"The surface of Khomi was surveyed in 2228," the Commander replied in a constricted voice. "But recorded no significant quantity of useful minerals."

"Strategic advantage?"

"None known."

"Ambassador," Jim asked, "anything to add?"

"In my timeline, core samples from the planetoid taken in 2301 suggested a pyroxene content between seven point seven and nine point four percent, enough to make extraction viable with advanced technology. I doubt the Xindi have this capability."

"Well, what the hell --,"

"Jim," Spock interrupted, "may I offer a speculation?"

For three point three seconds, there was complete silence. Captain Pike turned in Spock’s direction and stared open mouthed. Spock knew his younger self would doubtless have done the same, if he
could move his head.

“Sure…,” Kirk said eventually, “… sure. Go ahead.”

“I have not familiarised myself with the details of Xindi politics in this universe, but I suspect they are just as subject to internal conflict. The seizure of Khomi may be a show of strength on the part of one or more Xindi species intended to influence the opinion of the others.”

“And for that they’d risk a war?”

“Has the captain of the Andorian battle cruiser indicated a willingness to fight?”

Pike interrupted. “Without Federation backing to tip the balance, neither side would be stronger. War would bring prolonged destabilisation to this part of the Beta Quadrant, and that could interest the Romulans.”

“So what’s your recommendation?” Kirk asked.

“Don’t insist the Xindi leave,” Pike said. “Present the facts and offer mediation.”

“Right,” the acting Captain said. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck, Jim,” Spock replied.

In the observation lounge there was a second silence, while they studied the bleak and blistered surface of 37 Khomi. Unexpectedly, the Commander was first to speak.

“Captain Pike,” he said, “in the event mediation is agreed, my father has established contacts with both Andorian and Xindi diplomats. He may be an ideal arbiter of their negotiations.”
Negotiating the Future, Part 2

“Well,” Pike said, and paused to clear his throat. “Early stages yet. I don’t imagine things will get that far today.”

Trapped by foam, Spock could not turn to see his Captain’s face. When the bridge hailed the commander of the Xindi vessel, and General Garela began to speak, he heard Pike shift in his seat.

“Lieutenant Uhura, can you still read me?” the Captain asked.

Nyota replied, “I can, sir.”

“However you can, get a message to Kirk. Garela and I have history. It’s not pretty, but I believe we developed a mutual respect. Let me talk with him.”

“Yes, sir,” Spock heard Pike reply.

And then Spock could hear Pike release the brake on his wheelchair.

“Evans, if I could borrow your arms, it would get me up to the bridge a lot faster.”

After the Captain left, Spock and the Ambassador sat in silence, listening to the audio feed. Captain Pike contacted Nyota again when he reached his ready room, and said that he would take the Xindi General’s transmission from behind the desk, in order to conceal his injuries.


“Accessing,” the mechanoid voice responded.

“Diplomatic sub-files. Indicate number of times Ambassador S’chn T’gai Sarek has met Xindi General Garela.”

“Four occasions.”

He heard the Ambassador clear his throat softly.

“Give date and details of the last occasion.”

“Stardate 2256.4, renegotiation of coordinate system borders and access rights as per 2196 Treaty of Kul’va.”

“Commander?”

The inflection in the Ambassador’s voice suggested he would ask a question. Spock allowed a few seconds to pass in silence, but when nothing was added, he gave his last instruction to the ship’s computer.

“Please forward this data to Lieutenant Uhura and ask her to present it to Captain Pike at a suitable juncture in his discussions with the General.”

Then he heard a faint hum, recognisably a thirty-six volt electric motor. The sound passed behind him and came around to his right side. Presently he could see the Ambassador, manoeuvring his body in a wheelchair so that they would face each other.
The previous day the two of them arranged to meet in Spock’s sitting room to meditate together. The Ambassador had arrived on foot, and seemed in good health. But today he was not walking. And the bone ridges of his eye sockets seemed more prominent, the skin covering them sallow.

Before Spock could formulate the obvious enquiry, a signal came from the bridge.

“Commander?”

“Lieutenant Uhura,” Spock acknowledged her.

“About the data you transferred – Captain Pike sends his thanks. Is the Ambassador still with you?”

“He is.”

“The Captain suggests you ask his opinion regarding available negotiators.”

***

As it was, the foam binding that held the Commander’s head in place gave his protruding face a swollen appearance and severe expression. Whether his younger self was simply looking in his direction, or looking with irritation, Spock could not be certain until the Commander spoke.

“There is something else you have kept secret?”

“A diplomat’s duty,” Spock replied.

Short, sudden exhalations of breath could indicate derision, frustration or recognition of irony. Had it mattered which of these the Commander was expressing, Spock would have asked for clarification. In the circumstances, any of the three reactions were justified.

“It is a duty which we will now share, since what I am about to say I have told no one else. I am obedient to Sarek’s last instructions, which stipulated that only you should be informed.”

In spite his limited mobility, the Commander managed a nod and addressed the ship’s computer.

“Please cut all communication links and data recording in this room, and allow access on my order only. Authorisation Commander Spock, identification number 53.03.217.”


Along the ceiling, Spock watched the surveillance systems disengage, one by one, capping their lenses and powering down.

“Please proceed, Ambassador,” the Commander said.

“By coincidence, your father is already on the Xindi homeworld.”

“For what purpose?”

“Responding to a personal request from the leader of the Aquatics. In the days following Vulcan’s destruction, Xindi patrols apprehended a number of vulture craft belonging to criminal elements from the Primates, who had been looting the battle wreckage. On one of these craft, they found a Terran female sealed in an escape pod. She was unconscious and in need of medical attention. When she was examined by their doctors, they confirmed she was pregnant with a hybrid foetus – half human, half Vulcan.”
Negotiating the Future, Part 3

By the time he reached the age of three, Spock perceived that he was not entirely accepted as a citizen of his home world. Certain children would not interact with him, and told him frankly that their parents forbade or strongly discouraged it. He overheard certain adults when they referred to him as ‘the Terran boy’. When he reached the age of three years, five months and a day, Spock asked his mother to introduce him to another individual who was half Vulcan, half Human. She informed him that there were no others.

When he began institutional education, his learning pod was reconfigured by a well-meaning teacher who assumed his development would be sub-normal. His father’s intervention was required to correct the mistake.

When he reached the age of five years, eight months and four days, Spock asked his parents whether they would consider providing him with a sibling. The resulting conversation was hesitant and uncomfortable; his father left the room and allowed his mother to field most of his questions.

Twenty-seven days later, he was provided with a pet sehlat. The creature’s company proved valuable, while its sheer bulk and protective instincts reduced the amount of harassment he faced from some of his peers.

Pausing from this recollection, Spock asked the Ambassador, “Has the child been born yet?”

“I have not received an update with that information,” the older Vulcan replied. "But sufficient time has elapsed."

Spock imagined his father holding a second half-human infant in his arms. "What will happen after that?” he asked.

“Uncertain. As you know, Sarek holds no diplomatic authority on New Vulcan. He cannot give the mother and child permission to resettle there. And as to obtaining agreement from the High Council ....”

To hear the Ambassador sigh was disconcerting.

“I was able to persuade the surviving Councillors not to annul Lieutenant Uhura’s kae-kwul challenge or her claim over you.”

To hear him sigh again was disturbing.

“Their understanding, based on my own life’s experience, was that you would not contaminate the human gene pool by producing offspring. On that basis, they agreed to my request.”

The Ambassador moved his chair closer.

Another action for which I owe you an apology,” he added. When it seemed he would attempt to stand, Spock lifted a forbidding hand.

“No,” he said. “I forgave all that must be forgiven.”

“Yet I have circumscribed your future.”

“You have protected Lieutenant Uhura.”
After five seconds of consideration, the Ambassador conceded the argument with a nod. He moved his chair back to its original position. Then there was no talking for a further three minutes and forty-two seconds. Spock considered making a comment about the unknown child and the difficult universe into which it had arrived, the difficult situation into which his father had willingly placed himself. But these matters could go without saying.

“Does my father require anything from me?” he asked.

“Only that, for the sake of your species, you make a full recovery.”

_Your species._ A new concept, energising, albeit one that already required correction.

“_Our species,_” Spock said.

“For the time being,” the Ambassador replied.

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General Garela agreed to negotiations, and representatives from the Xindi and Andorian sides were transported onto the Enterprise. The ship began its return journey to Earth spacedock.

Lieutenant Commander Evans came back to the observation lounge. Spock made a request to have his foam brace removed, which was accepted. Then he and the Ambassador left together, driving their wheelchairs side by side along G Deck corridor.

The turbo lift doors opened as they halted in front of them. The passenger inside was Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu’s husband Ben, and he carried an object that, like Ben himself, was both familiar and out of place.

“Engineer Song,” Spock noted, “I presume you have been commissioned to work with Mr. Scott during this mission. Why are you carrying a rare Vulcan succulent?”

The engineer stepped out into the corridor with a shifting gaze and alarmed expression.

“Commander Spock,” he said, as if the sight of an officer confined to a wheelchair was terrifying.

Then the Ambassador drove his chair right up to the engineer’s knees, and put out a hand to touch one of the plant’s spiny stalks.

“A perfect specimen,” he enthused. “Please express my gratitude to Lieutenant Sulu when you see him.”

“Sir …,” Song stammered, “I will, sir.”

The engineer saluted and strode rapidly away. Further along the corridor, Spock saw the doors of the main Biome open as if the facility had anticipated Ben’s arrival. Another crew member stepped out into the corridor, but Ben Song grabbed that person by the shirt sleeve and pulled them back inside.

The Ambassador clarified his actions while they rode in the lift.

“Lieutenant Sulu made me aware that a private garden in Vancouver keeps a contained environment for the cultivation of Vulcan botany. The owner agreed to sell me that mature _kastik wa’mafin._”

“Understood.”
But in truth, Spock had doubts about this explanation. It dealt only with the potted plant.

“‘The crewman who tried to exit the biome,’” he said, “‘bore a remarkable resemblance to my maternal uncle Andrew.’”

In response, the Ambassador would only raise his eyebrows.

“Curious. I am afraid I could not offer comment. In my timeline, my mother’s brother died before I was born.”
Hi Readers, we are nearing the end of this story. If you know anyone who is waiting to read this as a complete work, I am aiming to finish "Night is Not Yours Alone" by this time next week. The "Soul Possessions" series will have a Part 6 - please stay tuned for further details.

***

Doctor McCoy examined the rash on Spock’s upper arms: two nearly identical patches of dark green, itchy skin. He said he didn’t think they were any cause for concern.

“No evidence of bacterial or viral infection,” McCoy assured him, “nothing you could pass on. Your temperature, blood pressure and heart rate are normal.”

The doctor turned aside briefly to set his tricorder down on the counter near the replicator. Spock reached for the clean shirt he had waiting, draped over a chair. He saw the light on his entrance panel flash twice to indicate authorised access to his suite. Nyota came inside.

“Beaming down to your apartment,” she had explained forty-three minutes earlier. “I need something to wear.”

He recognised her chosen apparel. Nyota purchased the garments in Dar-es-Salaam the previous January. The skirt captured the turquoise colour of the Indian Ocean, overlaid with a hand painted pattern of waves in shades of green and ochre. The bias cut fabric fell below her knees and flared into a hemline that moved like wind-stirred water.

She had not wanted the matching blouse. Too much blue, she insisted, and the layered, ruffled collar would obscure the vokaya pendant he had given her. Instead, she chose a collarless white shirt with long, straight sleeves and a single hook that fastened the front bodice panels at her waist.

“No reason why you can’t be discharged today as planned,” McCoy said, and then he checked to see who had come inside.

“Been invited to a party, Lieutenant?”

Nyota smiled but did not answer. Nor did the doctor press her for one. He completed the examination notes on his PADD, submitted them, locked the device so that he could pack it with the tricorder into his med kit.

“Well, I guess that goes for me too,” he said. “Commander Spock, you are now a free man.”

Spock put on a sweater over his shirt and made a brief tour of inspection through the rooms he was about vacate. Droids had visited earlier to clean and transfer his belongings to his quarters – everything except the potted saintpaulias. Nyota allowed him to carry that. As they walked through the corridors in Medical, several nurses waved good-bye and called after them, ‘have a lovely time’ as if they were embarking on a period of recreational shore leave.
Curiously, none of the nurses were dressed in uniform.

When he remarked on this, Nyota asked, “Could we make a detour?”

He welcomed the suggestion, hoping it might involve a reasonable amount of walking. He had energy, after so long, and wanted to make use of it.

The child had been born. Two weeks after Spock was informed about his father’s secret mission, the Ambassador received another encrypted update. There were no details, except that baby and mother were in good health. Realisation came with a weighty sense of responsibility – he thought the words ‘older brother’ and this concept would not be dislodged. But the heaviness of that thought was counterbalanced with lightness, the relief that he was no longer alone.

And that relief accelerated his recovery. Like the baby, he seemed to be someone new – not quite the person he had been before the illness or during it.

Nyota led the way to the turbolift, and when they were inside she programmed it to take them down to G Deck.

“I was explaining to Hikaru why your apartment has so many African violets,” she said, sidling closer and smiling up at him.

“I would be interested to hear your explanation.”

Interesting also was this new angle of observation. When Uhura invited him with her smile to look down, he could see a bare slice of brown skin with its widest part at her collarbone, narrowing to a point near her navel. He had, he remembered, been generous with praise when she wore that white shirt the first time.

The turbolift did not allow them enough privacy to share a kiss. The doors opened at F deck, where they were joined by Engineer Scott and Keenser. Both were wearing Kaleidos, shirts knitted from fine, photonic fibres that changed colour wherever the fabric stretched. Perhaps they were taking shore leave.

“Sir,” Scott said solemnly. Keenser bowed. For the rest of the journey they were both silent, Scott staring at the top of Keenser’s head and Keenser staring at the floor.

The turbolift emptied at G Deck. The Chief Engineer and the Roylan went ahead of them along the curved corridor. Nyota continued the conversation that had been interrupted.

“Sulu loves what you’ve done, and he wants to copy you. He wants a cutting from your plant; that’s why we are going to the biome.”

As they followed the bend of the corridor, and could see the biome entrance, Spock was struck by the sight of two familiar objects flanking the doors.

“Nyota …?”

“My decision,” she said. “I thought, when the Enterprise launches and we are both out in space, the bay trees would be a nice reminder of Earth. Of home.”

He wanted to ask her the purpose for adorning each of his potted laurus nobilis with strands of tiny, white lights.

“But I can take them back to the apartment, if --,” she began.
“No,” he interjected, “I see no reason.”

There were more lights temporarily adhered to the sides of the recessed biome entrance. Nyota pressed the intercom. When the channel opened and Lieutenant Sulu’s voice asked who was there, Spock could hear the faintest strains of music, played on a *ka’athyra*.

And then the doors opened.
A wave of intense heat rushed forward, the first thing to greet them. Then came the sight and scent of roses. Climbing roses – a dense coil of branches, leaves and flowers filled out a simple silicon frame and made a fragrant arch overhead as the two of them stepped inside the biome.

Spock recognised the blooms in the same instant he identified the music he could hear. And he stopped where he was. He was oddly grateful that Lieutenant Sulu and Ben Song stood on the other side of the archway and obstructed his view. They anchored him in the present; everything else he saw came from another time.

In 2229, while she was carrying him, his mother took spores from the pods of *ch’aal* and applied them to the stigmata of her own roses, a Terran variety named “Soaring Spirits”.

His father told her this was not only an illogical action, but a potentially dangerous one. He doubted there was any reproductive compatibility between the hardy Vulcan creeper and the angiosperm her brother Andrew had given them as a wedding gift. There was greater probability that this cross-pollination would damage the “Soaring Spirits”.

Mother asked for Sarek’s indulgence. Pregnancy kept her confined, with symptoms that Vulcan medics documented because they were unique and occasionally debilitating. She had little time or energy for her usual pastimes. But in the same way she succeeded in carrying her child to term, her botanical experiment also proved successful. She created a new hybrid: a fast growing, tough climber whose green leaves were edged with *ch’aal* purple and produced flowers all year round. She set the young plant in a corner of the breakfast room terrace and within three years it had curled itself up the nearby pillar and colonised every space across the trellis roof. Spock remembered the perpetual litter of fuchsia and white petals on the terrace floor, and the perfume they gave off when they were crushed underfoot.

There were petals on the biome floor. Without thought, he got down on one knee to retrieve one, roll it between his fingers, bring his hand closer to his face and close his eyes.

Memory took him back. He had been walking, without the support of adult hands or furniture, for several days. He wore new brown boots. His father had taken him to be fitted with these, telling him that his feet were growing more quickly than estimated. He had asked whether he should attempt to control this, as he was learning how to control his pulse. His father said no, this was something to be accommodated, not restricted.

And he was considering this response, as he stood on his mother’s terrace watching how the Vulcan starshine changed the configuration of light and shadows in the garden. How much of him needed to be accommodated, and how much controlled? He did not answer that question to his satisfaction. But it kept him quiet and still for so long that his mother came up behind him and smoothed his hair with her hand.

He felt that hand.

“Spock?”
Stone Trees and Tomatoes

Spock opened his eyes. The hand stroking his head was Nyota’s. She was bent forward, and her hair fell like a veil and concealed their faces.

“Are you all right?”

From somewhere inside the biome, the music changed key, rising a semi-tone and by that seeming more expansive, accommodating. It opened his throat.

“I am well,” he said. He let the rose petal fall, accepted Nyota’s outstretched hand and stood.

Then the ka’athyra player created bubbling crescendos by dragging fingers over the strings from the pillar of the instrument to its shoulder. The notes felt like a caress across his ribs; they drew him through the flowering arch.

Spock knew he was being watched as he stopped again where Engineer Song stood, and scanned what he could see.

In his mother’s garden there had also been five pyramidal stone spires, what she referred to as her ‘trees’. They lined the sloping path from her terrace. Of necessity, Lieutenant Sulu had to improvise the same effect on the biome’s level floor, but he nevertheless replicated the curve of the path, and the varying heights of the stones.

“Commander,” Lieutenant Sulu came closer.

“I hope …,” he said, looking at Nyota, “you know …, the effect, even with the differences …,”

And after the stones, the path continued as it would have done, going around the larger patio at the back of the house, where they often ate meals, and between two raised cultivation beds. The source of the music was still an unanswered question. Spock began walking.

He heard Nyota say, “He’s fine, Hikaru. I think he likes it.”

His father had purchased cut igneous bureki from the Churut clan quarries to build the sides of the cultivation beds, stacking them to a level half his mother’s height. Spock was curious to know what mineral Sulu had used instead, and asked.

“Obsidian,” the Lieutenant replied.

Spock saw his reflection in the black mirror surface of the stones. “A logical substitute,” he said.

He heard Sulu exhale as he examined the plants. His mother called the beds her ‘kitchen garden’ because what she grew there they ate. Spock recognised plomeek and sage, prickly pear cacti and n’gaan, shallots and the three fruiting shrubs – tolik, soltar and tomato.

The smell of the tomato plants reminded him that he and Nyota had agreed to eat lunch in his quarters. He turned to her.

“I am having doubts that the reason for our detour was merely to provide Lieutenant Sulu with a cutting.”

She smiled, came closer and took the African violet from him.
“Keep walking,” she said.
Beyond the cultivation beds, Spock noted with approval that the path turned eighty-four degrees to the right and passed through another rose covered arch. The music became louder as he approached.

He also saw something out of place. Keenser, or rather Keenser’s left arm from the shoulder to the elbow, was visible when Spock stood facing the archway, as if the Roylan were attempting to conceal himself behind the flowers and foliage.

Speculatively, Spock called out, “Engineer Scott? Are you here as well as your companion?”

Keenser’s arm moved; Spock could see the hand. After a few moments the Chief Engineer of the Enterprise stepped into the archway and pulled the Roylan backwards by that arm.

“D’you not get it?” Scott said to Keenser. “Hiding – it means make it so that you can’t be seen, not just so that you can’t see.”

Spock felt Nyota’s body brush against him as she drew alongside.

“Scotty,” she said, “aren’t you going to let us see the rest?”

“No, no – come through, come through,” he said, steering himself and the Roylan to one side.

It was truly noteworthy, Spock thought, how faithfully Lieutenant Sulu had attempted to recreate the garden at Shi’Kahr. On the other side of the arch, as expected, the path turned ninety degrees left and split in two to make a generous circle, four hundred centimetres in diameter, around the ‘fountain’. Just as the ‘trees’ had not been trees, because such plants could not thrive on Vulcan, so the ‘fountain’ could not be a wasteful display of moving water. Where a Terran fountain would have had an expansive, shallow pool, his mother had created a circle of benches alternating with potted succulents. Instead of water, a cluster of copper kinetic sculptures stood in the middle of that circle, moving and changing shape according to the direction of the desert winds.

During diplomatic occasions, when his parents entertained, guests sat on the benches at starset and made conversation as they enjoyed the refractions of light from the ever-shifting copper plates.

The music paused as Spock registered the number of people who were sitting on the biome benches, keeping silent.

There was Captain Pike and Ensign Tiavro Dre. On the next bench Doctor McCoy sat with the nurses who had been inappropriately dressed for duty. Ensign Chekov and Lieutenant Cotran Dempsey stood behind a bench occupied by Skamania County Sheriff Lucy Honua and her deputy Tres Zucas. Though they were partly obscured by the fountain, Spock could also see Genzo Mori, owner of the Hotel Sugureta, with his daughter Kyoko. Doctor Chapel shared a bench with Doctor Khauri and Professor Abdulov. Bovial Ch’ziaqis stood between Deans Santiago and Rousseau.

And furthest away, Cadet Kirk sat alongside the *ka’athyra*. The instrument, of course, required a place of its own to rest while Ambassador Spock, who had been playing, stood up and came to stand face to face with his younger self.

“I had presumed,” Spock said to him, “that your request to borrow my harp was for your benefit solely, to keep in practice.”

“That,” the Ambassador admitted, “and time to rehearse.”
“Yet I suspect your involvement in this project extends beyond providing ambient music.”

“I have advised whenever my advice was sought, as has Lieutenant Uhura. However, there is someone else whose knowledge of your mother’s garden was our principle source of information. I believe Engineer Scott is bringing another person out of hiding.”

The Ambassador indicated that Spock should look behind him. When he turned, his uncle Andrew was standing in the archway.
Dedication

This was the only moment in proceedings that worried Nyota. Andrew Grayson did not look as bad as she had first seen him, though after coming aboard two weeks ago Doctor Chapel had asserted her authority over his wellbeing, as only a Starfleet CMO could do. Medically speaking, there was no Terran equivalent for *Vi’mashaya P’pil’lai’ai*, only common knowledge that some humans found some losses harder.

So Spock faced a man who had grown thinner (Andrew was slender to begin with), greyer and more tired. Uncle approached nephew cautiously.

Andrew raised his right hand. He held it up with the fingers straight and concentrated his attention on the correct realignment to present Spock with the *ta’al*. His ring finger would not cooperate; it stood on its own.

He had always been clumsy with the gesture, he’d admitted that. But he insisted he must try, when the two of them met. “I won’t demand anything from Spock, but …,”

He had never completed the thought.

As he stood there, fingers twitching and still out of place, Nyota glanced behind her at Tiavro Dre. The Betazoid aide had his eyes fixed on uncle and nephew but his shoulders were relaxed and his head listed to one side.

Then she felt Spock shift away from her.

She turned back and saw him reach up, clasp Andrew’s wrist and pull his hand down. Nyota counted the seconds – one thousand and one, one thousand and two, one thousand and three, one thousand and four – during which Spock maintained their skin contact. After that he released the hold, extended the same arm around his uncle’s back and pulled him into an embrace.

It shocked the breath out of Andrew, and he behaved more like a Vulcan himself, holding his body stiff and keeping his head up. Tiavro Dre did speak then.

“Mr. Grayson,” he said, “he means what you hope he means.”

That was enough. Andrew clapped Spock on the back and gripped his sweater. Nyota looked down at the biome floor and blinked over and over.

Just when it seemed the atmosphere could not get more emotional, Scotty did that thing he was always good at and brought everyone down to earth.

“Uh, Commander, sir, I’m afraid your uncle thinks the garden is missing something.”

You could almost hear the collective sigh of relief. Spock and Andrew released each other. Scotty came forward carrying a black cube, evidently heavy and delicate because he asked Kirk to help him set it on the floor. There was some adjustment needed to the top of it – Keenser had got involved and Nyota could not quite see.

At last they backed away and the cube had become the base for a simple inscription plaque.
Nyota thought it a bit anticlimactic after everything else. But she smiled and said, “It’s lovely.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Scotty said, banging an imaginary surface with one hand, “you’ve not seen it working yet.”

He pressed a spot near the stardate, and stood back again. The black cube emitted a faint noise, like ticking. Nyota raised her eyebrows and tried not to think of explosions.

Suddenly, a breeze began to blow through the biome. It grew noticeably stronger, and set the kinetic sculptures spinning. Above the black cube, there seemed to be a column of misty light curling upwards, up over Nyota’s head.

And then there she was. In the hologram vid, Spock’s mother wore that distinctive Vulcan style of gown with bodice panels that stood up from the shoulders, and the breeze which stirred Nyota’s hair seemed to make the sash round Amanda’s head billow and ripple. Behind her were the distinctive yellow and black shuttleport signs. Nyota guessed that Andrew must have filmed his sister as she left Seattle for Shi-Kahr.

Amanda wore that self-conscious expression of a person who knew they were being filmed. After half a minute of smiling, giving the camera shy waves, she said something. But sound was not part of the hologram.

Amanda took two steps backwards, spoke again. Then she raised her hand in a perfect ta’al, smiled, and turned to walk away. Several times she looked back over her shoulder – once to speak, once to wave, and once to blow a kiss. All the while her figure grew smaller, and fainter. Finally she disappeared into the mist that made her, and the mist itself appeared to return to the black cube.
“It would not be possible to recreate the gazebo,” Spock said. “If you recall, it was accessed by descending a series of steps, because the elevation of the garden decreased sharply.”

Nyota had her arm around his waist because he had his around hers, and had done since they left the party.

“Seems a shame, though,” she replied, “not to fill the space.”

“Ny,” he said, and did not seem to notice how she stared at him openmouthed. He never, never shortened her name, except when in shok.

“I fully intend to utilise the biome area Lieutenant Sulu left unfinished for me. It was a thoughtful gesture and ought to be reciprocated. But I believe my mother would prefer that I create something new. And yet not a complete departure – I often used the gazebo for meditation, and I would plan to utilise this space with the same purpose in mind.”

She was about to speak, thinking he had finished. But Spock merely caught his breath and went on.

“Firstly, there must be an object on which to concentrate the mind. The gazebo had a fire pot, but a naked flame would constitute a safety hazard in the biome. I spoke with Engineer Scott about the creation of another hologram generator. A more complex mechanism, capable of multiple settings, visual and audible. There is scope to have recorded phrases from the teachings of Surak or music or ambient noise. Ny, you mentioned to me on the day after your final exams that you found the sound of Terran birdsong conducive to relaxation and focus on your studies. I would want to include that -- ,”

He stopped in the middle of the empty B deck corridor. Her wide-eyed look must have got wider.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No,” she said, squeezing his hip, “I always liked it when you called me Ny.”

His own eyes widened then, and after considering a few moments, he said, “I am having doubts about the wisdom of extending a party invitation to Thilulla Jadillu.”

“Why?”

“I fear some decorum was lost from the time Gaila’s older sister arrived.”

Thilulla had arrived with her three girls: Baby, Zsa Zsa and Lulu. They all read the mood in the room, and decided to perfume it into happiness. But it could not be said they spoiled the occasion. Nobody did anything stupid, though admittedly it had surprised Nyota when Captain Pike allowed Lulu to sit in his lap.

“I say thank goodness they showed up,” Nyota answered. “What with the roses, the music and Andrew needing a hug, it was all getting a bit … heavy. Everyone needed cheering up.”

“Including me?” Spock asked.

“Particularly you,” Nyota replied. “After the hologram, you looked a little vacant.”

“I was able to maintain emotional control.”
“I know,” she pressed her cheek against his sweater sleeve.

“I suffered no psychosomatic reactions.”

“Certainly not where food was concerned. I think that was the most I have ever seen you eat.”

“Engineer Song persistently replenished my plate. It seemed impolite to refuse him.”

“Ben is a feeder. You’ll need to work out a kind way to say no, so that he learns when to stop.”

“I see,” he said. “And when Thilulla advised you to feed me some of your chocolate mousse, should I have refused?”

They had reached the entrance to his quarters. She didn’t reply, but let him activate the doors while she recalled how Thilulla came alongside her at the buffet table and asked some very personal questions. Nyota had been at the point of warning her off.

“Oh uh,” the Orion wagged a finger at her, “you can get as angry with me as you like, Lieutenant. Gaila made me take the vow, and I am going to do what I promised.”

“Vow?”

“Did she never explain?”

Nyota shrugged.

“Translate the Orion word ‘menessu’, Thilulla demanded.

Uhura made a face. “Locksmith?”

Gaila’s sister made her own face. “Never mind. She must have said something. She brought you and Commander together, yes?”

Nyota nodded. “In spite of us, I think.”

“And what did you think? That she was amusing herself?”

“Well --,”

“Yes, another one,” the Orion said in frustration. “That’s what all Terrans think of us -- that we are just here for fun, nothing else.”

“No, Thilulla, we don’t think that.”

“What, then?”

Nyota believed this was probably the toughest conversation she had ever conducted while choosing what to have for dessert.

“I think…I think it mattered to her that people understood who they truly were. Understood and acted on the understanding.”

Thilulla nodded in approval. “Yes, mattered. More than you realise. When an Orion brings someone to that self-understanding, brings individuals together on the basis of that understanding, it is a … what is the correct Standard word? Pinnacle – a supreme achievement. And so precious that nothing must be allowed to interrupt the process. Not even death.”
“So,” Nyota tried to guess from what she’d just been told, “Gaila made you promise to take her place?”

Thilulla threw her arms around Uhura and pinched her backside with both hands. “Yes! You understand.”

“Ow! I think she forgot to tell you our rule about ass-grabbing,” Nyota said. But she was smiling.

“Gaila was your ‘menessu’, Nyota, yours and Spock’s,” Thilulla whispered in her ear. “And so you can stop giving me dirty looks when I ask you how long it’s been since he last grabbed your ass. I am assuming a sacred duty bestowed on me, and I owe this to my little sister. I will not let her down.”

The Orion moved her hands away from the forbidden zone, and gave her human a fierce bear hug. It squeezed tears from Nyota’s eyes. And then they let each other go. Uhura wiped her face while Thilulla reviewed the dessert table with a sweeping glance. She picked up a shot glass of dark chocolate mousse and two spoons.

“No more than half of this,” she advised. “And don’t ask me how I know.”
Inside his quarters it was warm. Spock caught the faded scent of his meditation incense, mixed with the more concentrated perfume from an arrangement of cut flowers that someone had placed on his table. That someone would have needed security clearance.

One glance at Nyota’s face sufficed. He felt a sudden heat from the centre of his body, a giddy disorientation that caused him to make an involuntary sound, “Um!” He tightened his grip on her waist.

In response, Nyota curled herself into him, pressed her chest against his, and hooked her fingers inside the collar of his sweater. In the seconds that passed, pleasantly, they managed to synchronise their breathing.

“So,” Nyota asked, “have you answered your own question?”

Spock raised a quizzical eyebrow. “My question?”

“Don’t you remember?”

Of course he would, had there been anything to recall. He did not particularly want to argue now. Nyota seemed to give him a certain length of time, after which she shook her head and freed her left hand from his clothing. She placed her fingers against his meld points.

He was presented with their conversation from the time they left the turbolift on B Deck until they reached his quarters. The review perturbed him. Had he talked so much, so quickly? Left her name unfinished, as if he could not manage the final syllables? Nyota herself found it surprising, and just as often amusing. And then, directly from his mouth, there it was. The question.

He certainly intended to answer it now.

“I shall refuse any future offers of chocolate, regardless of quantity,” his mind informed hers. “I am clearly impaired.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she countered.

“You may not be in a position to judge. I believe I recall correctly that during the party you consumed a glass of champagne.”

“Spock, you are able to walk, enunciate your words and hold a discussion. That’s not impaired.”

“We would be unfit for duty.”

“You are still on medical suspension from duty. I will not be recommissioned before my final exams, and I have no classes for the next two days.”

In response to his continued misgivings, she let her fingers slip from their positions and slide down to his mouth. She traced the edge of his upper and lower lips.

And she sighed.
“You’re fine,” she said out loud. “It’s only made you more relaxed, a little more talkative …,”

She smiled.

“… and affectionate.”

That sudden heat, surging again, up to his head and elsewhere. He found his tongue protruded and licked her index finger. She pushed it inside his mouth. With his free hand, he initiated a mind meld with her, and replayed three minutes and seventeen seconds from the previous January, when he first discovered the sublime tactile experience of caressing the curve of her coi’ā while it was snugly encased inside a certain silk skirt.

He repeated the action, using the arm that had been round her waist. Nyota hummed. Their meld lost structure, filled with vivid colours and sharp invitations of desire.

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Afterwards, they shared one pillow. The other had gone missing -- neither of them could say for sure when or by what specific action they had moved it off the bed.

Spock lay on his back. Nyota was the source of heat all down his left side, and his jawbone was humid from her breathing. His right hand searched the mattress, entrusted with the task of finding the edge of his quilt.

With so much bare skin connected, he felt every second of her building discontent.

“You are cold,” he said, lifting the cover over their bodies.

“Not quite,” she said. “I’m thinking about how cold it will be in San Francisco.”

Now that he had been discharged, Nyota’s special dispensation must end. The Academy would require her presence on the ground. He should return with her to North Axis apartment, but there was little appeal in leaving the warm ship, where the flowers in the biome bloomed, to face the bleakness of January.

And yet he found himself inclined to a change of scenery.

He lifted himself up just enough to tuck the quilt behind Nyota’s head. “You are studying Supply Logistics, Warp Theory and Core Maintenance, XenoPhysiology and Advanced Phonology.”

“Um.”

She wriggled against him, as if she could get closer than she was already. Her skin said he had piqued her curiosity. Spock hailed the ship’s computer and asked it whether classes covering these same subjects were being taught at the African campus in Dar-es-Salaam.

“Affirmative,” it replied.

Nyota’s skin thrummed with joy.

“There will be administrative documentation to complete,” Spock cautioned her, “and we may need to face the cold weather briefly, in order to pack our belongings.”

“I’ll contact Zuri,” Nyota said. “She’ll get us a place to stay.”

“You will need to meet with your teachers, and establish whether your coursework so far is
concurrent with their schedules.”

“We can get our groceries at Msasani Road Market,” she said, “no replicated food.”

“We will not have the use of a car.”

“We can walk,” she said. “I can’t wait to walk on the beach.”

She planted eleven kisses and a grateful nip on his neck. Then she adjusted herself to fit more of her head on the pillow, heaved a vast and relieved sigh, and went very still.

Spock said nothing more, since he could sense her conscious mind slipping towards sleep. He gazed up at the ceiling tiles, their whiteness and granular surface texture bringing to mind the hot sand on the shores of the Indian Ocean.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all the helpful people whose comments made improvements to "Night Is Not Yours Alone" or who were just great company during the journey. Thank you for the crazy number of hits and kudos -- I check the figures every day and find it hard to believe that so many people are actually reading my weird stories.

I plan to begin Part 6 of "Soul Possessions" shortly. This will pick up Spock and Uhura's story when the Enterprise is sent on her first mission and undertakes the survey of Nibiru from the opening scenes of 'Star Trek - Into Darkness'.

Expect some surprises -- my aim is to reveal the real reason Nyota gave Spock the silent treatment, and to go in search of Sarek.

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